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## How Can Local Parents and Teachers Be Meaningfully Engaged During Times of Crisis?

A Joint Project by the American Federation of Teachers  
and the National Parent Teacher Association

September 2020

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### Overview

The recent crisis, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, has revealed that we need to do better at effectively and meaningfully engaging key stakeholders, such as teachers and parents. Whether it is business as usual, or our new normal, students cannot realize their full potential unless public school leaders meaningfully engage families and staff when making decisions.<sup>1</sup> This failure to engage is especially problematic during a set of collective crises (health, economics and social injustices) when the stakes are so high for students and those closest to them. Without meaningful engagement, families and staff cannot influence the decisions that impact them directly.

At its core, meaningful engagement increases knowledge, provides room to acquire new knowledge, uses the knowledge to address the identified crisis, and creates pathways for future two-way communications. In summer 2020, as news of this failure to meaningfully engage folks locally came to the attention of the American Federation of Teachers and the National Parent Teacher Association, the two organizations came together to address a common question: *How can parents and teachers be meaningfully engaged during times of crisis?*

Although many studies have examined the experiences, perspectives and impacts of the current COVID-19 pandemic on parents or teachers, few studies have sought to identify how both families and educators are—and aspire to be—engaged during times of crisis.

Based on qualitative data from more than 50 parents and teachers across the country, the AFT and PTA focused this project on the findings connected to the engagement practices around the closing and reopening of schools related to the coronavirus pandemic. However, the implications of this project reach beyond the current crisis. Therefore, the AFT and PTA offer this report, providing parent and teacher leaders, school principals, district administrators and community partner groups with a synopsis of our process, findings, and additional guidance to improve family and teacher engagement in times of crisis in your respective communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Student voice—especially secondary school students—must also be part of a crisis discussion. Given that other national organizations address student representation during a school crisis, we limited our focus for this project to educators and families. Here, participants mentioned that some districts surveyed students, too.

## Project

Our project began after the AFT and PTA heard anecdotally from members expressing frustrations about decisions made concerning school closings and reopenings during the COVID-19 pandemic. We recognize the extraordinary circumstances facing school and district leaders given the outbreak of the pandemic. Reasonable minds may differ on whether schools and districts should have been prepared for a public health emergency like the COVID-19 outbreak. After all, our communities have experienced and prepared for health and other crises in the past (e.g., H1N1 flu, natural disasters, online bullying, school shootings, site closures). However, we also recognize a window of opportunity to learn from the experience. Therefore, the AFT and PTA developed a joint process where families and educators could weigh in on their engagement experiences during recent events. Specifically, individual interviews and virtual focus groups were conducted with PTA and AFT members to answer these questions:

1. Were you engaged in the spring closure decisions and, if so, how?
2. Were you engaged regarding fall 2020 reopening plans and, if so, how?
3. What do you want to happen differently moving forward?
4. What, if anything, is missing or not covered with our questions?

Over the course of a month, 10 diverse AFT and PTA members were individually interviewed. They then referred us to colleagues and community members in their networks, which resulted in 43 people participating in the ethnically and geographically diverse focus groups. The AFT and PTA intentionally chose to have teachers and parents in the same focus groups to hear from one another and to build empathy for both perspectives. Twenty-one of the participants identified as AFT members and 22 of the participants identified as PTA members. All together, they represented 12 states/territories: California, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Maryland, Minnesota, North Carolina, New Hampshire, Ohio, Texas, Utah, Virginia and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Of the 43 focus group members, 38 percent identified as parents, 27 percent identified as educators, and 36 percent identified as both. Additionally, focus group participants' self-identified as 49 percent white, 30 percent African American, 23 percent Latino or Hispanic, and 4 percent other. All together, 56 percent have a graduate degree.<sup>2</sup>

The outreach structure we relied upon was relationship-based and influenced by community organizing principles of leadership development. The principles value individual conversations from which we are able to learn about what is important to key stakeholders, their direct experiences and circumstances, and what success looks like to each person. The process we developed has four key steps, is user-friendly, and can be adapted locally and utilized during any local crisis. Once established, this process can be used in *advance* of a crisis to inform policy and practice.

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<sup>2</sup> Due to the ability for respondents to choose more than one racial/ethnic identity, the numbers for racial/ethnic demographics exceed 100 percent.

# Findings

The aforementioned process revealed five key findings about the communication with families and educators in the spring and summer of 2020.

## 1. Family and educator experiences regarding closure communications during the crisis were more similar than different.

- Parents and teachers usually received information about school closures *in the same way and at the same time* via robotic calls, texts, emails and media announcements.
- Most participants were surprised that a more detailed plan or protocol did not exist when the pandemic hit. Most were sent home immediately with little or no access to the school or classrooms for materials they needed for the rest of the year.
- Information came from the top and was pushed out or came in “one-off” meetings—some participants found that information to be helpful, but many reported it was overwhelming, duplicative and varied in helpfulness.
- Information was not always accessible in the languages spoken throughout the community, leaving some non-English speaking parents feeling disconnected and tasking certain teachers with the role of being translators for families in their school/district.

“We were sent home for a week with nothing and then suddenly thrown into remote learning.”



## 2. Surveys were the main tool for communicating with parents and teachers regarding school reopening decisions.

- Sometimes parent-teacher surveys were identical, but often teacher surveys focused on ability and intentions regarding in-person or virtual teaching, while family surveys focused on willingness and intention of sending students back to the school site, resulting in information that sometimes pitted parents and teachers against one another.
- Surveys were a “snapshot in time” and usually did not allow for additional comments so were not always timely or useable during evolving circumstances.
- Other engagement examples surfaced, including committees or task forces with parent or teacher representatives, although there was some worry that it was token representation or too compartmentalized (focused only on instruction or logistics).
- Parents and teachers alike reported personal focus on meeting students’ social, emotional and

“The district surveyed families, received 55,000 family responses—about a third of total families—but when PTA asked for a ZIP code breakdown, the lack of diversity was revealed, and those without broadband or internet were not even getting the survey while other families were submitting multiple times.”



academic needs, yet were frustrated that time and opportunities for engagement and change might have been squandered over the summer.

### 3. Positive examples of meaningful engagement surfaced in conversations.

- Intentional use of existing parent and teacher resources, especially for families that were harder to reach: for example, nonprofits, YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp groups.
- One district benefited by trusting newly formed parent engagement committees to network and serve as a pathway for two-way communication.
- One district set up a “social distancing” demonstration site this summer and invited staff, families, and communities to tour and offer feedback or ask questions.
- Community and school connections mattered; the pandemic once again revealed that schools offer our most marginalized students access to food, health services and technological connectivity.

“Schools are not islands unto themselves, but are part of a larger community.”



### 4. Moving forward, families and teachers want an ongoing feedback loop with clear understanding on success and accountability for in-person, remote or hybrid learning.

- Families and staff want to better understand how student learning can be measured under these various learning pathways and their part in shaping that process.
- Convening small groups, utilizing existing formal and informal parent networks, and supporting relationships between teachers and caregivers were cited as examples of ways to have two-way communications.
- Flexibility and multiple pathways of communication are necessary to meaningfully engage for challenges connected to poverty, special education needs and language differences.
- Engagement must sufficiently address logistics such as social distancing on campus, but also the greater social and emotional health of students.

“There are things you cannot do virtually with special education students, such as occupational therapy (fine motor skills) and physical therapy (walk, stretching).”



## 5. Uncertain times are creating trauma or bringing it to the surface; there is a lack of adequate supports and resources.

- Feelings of isolation, fear and anxiety for the future emerge, especially what the plan or details would be if someone gets sick; “health guidelines” are vague or unclear.
- Connectivity is still a huge problem for many communities.
- There is a lack of transparency and clarity about who was, and will be, driving decisions in the crisis: education, public health officials, politicians?
- People have doubts about the effectiveness of teaching and learning when bouncing back and forth between remote, hybrid or in-person plans.
- Teachers shared their concerns about trying to teach while their own children are doing remote learning.

“Our district forwarded a survey asking our choice for a virtual academy versus in-person instruction. I appreciated the survey, but it was delivered without the school’s safety plan. This was paramount to help me make the best decision for my child!”



## Recommendation

During a crisis, schools and districts must engage both families and staff with a reliable, ongoing, and established feedback loop to ensure success for *all* students.

## Conclusion

The findings show that during the pandemic, a few schools and districts were able to effectively engage family and staff, at least with reopening decisions. However, more often than not, schools and districts struggled with meaningful engagement. As a result, moving forward, we must be better prepared to more effectively engage families and educators on urgent matters with reliable, ongoing and established feedback loops.

We may not know what the next crisis will be, but we do know there will be one. What’s more, schools and districts don’t have to wait for the crisis to hit to more meaningfully engage educators and families. Appendix A offers a process and set of discussion questions that family, educator, community and school leaders can adapt and use within their own contexts to improve family and teacher engagement during times of crisis.

## Appendices

- A. Step-by-Step Process and Discussion Guide
- B. Sample Invitations and Agendas in English and Spanish
- C. Resources

The AFT and PTA would like to thank our member advisers throughout the country who dedicated their time and attention to this project and to so many efforts to support students, staff and families. Thank you also to the focus group participants for sharing their experiences, reflections and advice. Finally, special thanks to the Carnegie Corporation of New York for making this project possible, thereby creating a process that other schools and districts can use to begin more meaningfully engaging families during a crisis.



The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do. For more information, visit [aft.org](http://aft.org).

**National PTA®** comprises millions of families, students, teachers, administrators, and business and community leaders devoted to the educational success of children and the promotion of family engagement in schools. PTA is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit association that prides itself on being a powerful voice for all children, a relevant resource for families and communities, and a strong advocate for public education. Membership in PTA is open to anyone who wants to be involved and make a difference for the education, health, and welfare of children and youth. For more information, visit [PTA.org](http://PTA.org).

## Appendix A

# Step-by-Step Process and Discussion Guide

### Background Questions for Local Adaptation:

- What is the urgent issue in your community, and who will be most impacted?
- What do you need to share with or know from all families and staff?
- Is there a network already in place that can help reach those who are most impacted?
- Do you need a process for meaningful engagement?

### Step 1: Crisis Committee Formed, Project Leader Chosen, Advisers Identified, Questions Formed

- Form a core committee of four to six, and choose a project leader.
- Clarify presenting crisis and time frame for project (recommend four weeks).
- Committee members identify 10-12 grassroots advisers at local sites who reflect community diversity.
- Sample discussion questions designed to address crisis:
  - How have you been engaged on (this topic) in the past?*
  - How have you been engaged regarding (this topic) most recently?*
  - What, if anything, would you want to happen differently regarding your engagement on (this topic) moving forward?*
  - What, if anything, is missing on (this topic) that we have not yet covered?*

### Step 2: Advisers Interviewed (virtually or in person), Focus Group Participants Identified

- Project leader contacts advisers, explains plan and sets up one-hour interviews.
- Interviews are conducted, questions asked, checked for clarity and individual's experience.
- Adviser identifies five to seven local diverse parents or educators in networks for focus groups addressing same questions.
- Adviser calls are summarized, common themes identified, core committee updated.

### Step 3: Focus Groups Organized, Launched (in person or virtually)

- Project leader sets minimum of four varied focus group dates/times within two weeks.
- Project leader contacts identified participants who are willing to participate and then they can choose a group option—maximum of 10 people.
- Project leader facilitates virtual/in-person groups, language assistance as needed; chat box feature is utilized for virtual groups.
- Focus group share experiences and advice; may use adviser themes as starting point.
- Core committee is updated on preliminary findings.

#### **Step 4: Focus Group Concludes, Committee Reviews, Shares Findings**

- Project leader summarizes and shares findings with core crisis committee.
- Committee presents findings with school and district leaders and the community.
- Findings should be considered and reflected in subsequent decision-making.

## Appendix B

### Sample Invitations and Agendas

#### Sample Email Invitation for Adviser Interviews

Hello. I hope this email finds you healthy and well. I am delighted to have an opportunity to reach out with an **invitation to be an adviser on a time-sensitive project**.

We want to build more meaningful parent and teacher connections regarding [local crisis]. I'm coordinating the project, and if you are interested and willing, here's what would need to happen: (1) I would **interview** you on your personal/local experience on back-to-school realities; (2) You would **review** a set of focus group questions we've drafted; and (3) You would recommend five to seven other parents who might be interested in participating in the focus groups; (we seek a diverse group of caregivers, including one group that will be conducted in Spanish).

Let me know if this works, and I will follow up at the beginning of next week to set an interview time. Thanks!

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#### Ejemplo de Invitación por Correo Electrónico para Entrevistas con Asesores

Buenos días. Espero que este correo electrónico lo encuentre a usted y a todos sus seres queridos bien y sanos. Estoy encantada/o de tener la oportunidad de comunicarme con usted **y proponer una invitación para ser asesora en un proyecto urgente**.

Queremos construir conexiones más significativas entre padres y maestros con respecto a situaciones de crisis. Estoy coordinando el proyecto, y si está interesado / a y dispuesto / a, esto es lo que sucedería en el próximo mes:

1. Te **entrevistaría** sobre tu experiencia personal / local sobre las realidades del regreso a la escuela
2. **Revisaría** un conjunto de preguntas para los grupos focales que hemos redactado.
3. Me conectara con 5-7 padres que podrían estar interesados en participar en los grupos focales (buscamos un grupo diverso de cuidadores, incluso un grupo será facilitado en Español).

Avíseme si esto funciona y haré un seguimiento a principios de la próxima semana para establecer un horario para la entrevista. ¡Gracias!

## Sample Email Invitation for Focus Groups

Hello. I hope this email finds you, and all your loved ones, healthy and well. My name is ... and I am coordinating the effort to lift up family and teacher voices during [fill in local crisis]. We've spoken with a dozen of our most trusted parent and teacher advisers to get their thoughts and to ask who else we should talk to—and it led us to you!

**You are invited to participate in a one-hour Zoom focus group that will include other parents and teachers and be tailored to address the ways in which you would like to give and receive information regarding.** ... If you are willing and interested in participating in the focus group, let me know your availability and preference for the focus group options:

Group 1. Thursday,[date] at noon Pacific time (English)

Group 2. Friday, [date] at 6 p.m. Pacific time (English)

Group 3. Tuesday, [date] at 10 a.m. Eastern time (English)

Group 4. Wednesday, [date] at 6 p.m. Pacific time (Spanish)

***We will do our best to accommodate everyone's schedule, so please let us know what works for you by responding to this email as soon as possible or calling me at.*** ... Ideally, each focus group will have about 10 people. It's first come, first served! Once the group is confirmed, I will email you the Zoom link and access information.

Thank you in advance for your time and attention to this work and for all you do to improve the lives of students, families, teachers and public schools. Feel free to call with any questions or concerns. I look forward to connecting soon.

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## Ejemplo de Invitación por Correo Electrónico para Grupos Focales

Buenos días. Espero que este correo electrónico lo encuentre a usted y a todos sus seres queridos bien y sanos. Mi nombre es ... y estoy coordinando un esfuerzo para levantar las voces de familias y maestros durante (llenar la crisis local). Hemos hablado con una docena de nuestros asesores de padres y maestros más confiables para conocer sus opiniones y preguntar con quién más deberíamos hablar, ¡y eso nos introdujeron a usted!

**Está invitada/o a participar en un grupo de enfoque via Zoom de una hora que incluirá a otros padres y maestros. En la llamada, abordaremos las formas en las que le gustaría dar y recibir información sobre** ... Si está dispuesto y interesada/o en participar en el grupo de enfoque, avíseme su disponibilidad y preferencia por las siguientes opciones:

Grupo # 1 Jueves, fecha a las 12 pm Hora Estándar Del Pacífico (inglés)

Grupo # 2 Viernes, fecha a las 6 pm Hora Estándar Del Pacífico (inglés)

Grupo # 3 Martes, fecha a las 10 am 10 am Hora Hora Estándar Del Este (inglés)

Grupo # 4 Miércoles, fecha a las 6pm Hora Estándar Del Pacífico (español)

**Haremos todo lo posible para adaptarnos al horario de todos, así que háganos saber lo que le funcione lo antes posible respondiendo este correo electrónico o llamándome al....** Idealmente, cada grupo focal tendrá alrededor de 10 personas. ¡Es por orden de llegada! Una vez que se confirma el grupo, le enviaré por correo electrónico el enlace de Zoom y la información de acceso.

Gracias de antemano por su tiempo y atención a este trabajo y por todo lo que hace para mejorar la vida de los estudiantes, familias, maestros y escuelas públicas. No dude en llamarnos si tiene preguntas o inquietudes. Espero conectarme pronto.

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## Sample Agenda for Interviews and Focus Groups

### **Welcome and Introductions**

*(five minutes)*

Who is in the (actual or virtual) room and why

### **Purpose of Interview/Focus Group**

*(five minutes)*

To share information, learn information and create two-way pathways moving forward

### **Background**

*(five minutes)*

Steps and learning to date

### **What We Want to Know**

*(40 minutes)*

- *How have you been engaged on (this topic) in the past?*
- *How have you been engaged regarding (this topic) most recently?*
- *What, if anything, would you want to happen differently regarding your engagement on (this topic) moving forward?*
- *What, if anything, is missing on (this topic) that we have not yet covered?*

### **Next Steps and Thank You**

*(five minutes)*

Plans for wider sharing

For participants' time, attention and commitment to students, staff and families in our public schools

## Appendix C

### Resources

AFT Family Engagement Ideas and Resources

<https://sharemylesson.com/collections/family-engagement>

Community Organizing: Guiding principles of effective community engagement

<https://aese.psu.edu/research/centers/cccd/engagement-toolbox/engagement/guiding-principles-of-effective-community-engagement>

Engaging Families as Partners in Decision-Making

<https://shar.es/abkreH>

National PTA's Center for Family Engagement

[www.pta.org/center-for-family-engagement](http://www.pta.org/center-for-family-engagement)

Reopening and Reinventing Schools in the Time of COVID-19

<https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/press-release/restarting-reinventing-school-covid-press-release>

School Leaders' Perspectives: Including Parents in the Decision-Making Process

[www.isbe.net/Documents/fe-family-decision-making-pres.pdf](http://www.isbe.net/Documents/fe-family-decision-making-pres.pdf)

The Post-Pandemic Schools Our Children Deserve: Principles and Policies Promoting Equity After Disruption

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Ap5SVq3sHNTEJPtIOqKhtB-Gt\\_Qqe9iG52IleMVirQo/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Ap5SVq3sHNTEJPtIOqKhtB-Gt_Qqe9iG52IleMVirQo/edit)

Why Teacher Voice Matters

[www.aft.org/ae/winter2014-2015/kahlenberg\\_potter\\_sb](http://www.aft.org/ae/winter2014-2015/kahlenberg_potter_sb)