Communications School Communities Deserve: Principles and Practice for the COVID-19 Era and Beyond

November 18, 2020
Dear Colleagues:

This past summer, as we prepared to safely reopen our Brooklyn LAB campus for in-person learning, we invited our school community to a virtual town hall to share insights from an 80-page document outlining our new COVID-19 health and safety protocols. Our team had devoted months to preparing and fine-tuning the work, and we were proud of our effort. But we didn’t get the reception we hoped for: The negative feedback from our families demonstrated we had missed the mark, and the reason was a failure in communications.

We had asked for and incorporated feedback from parents, staff, students, and experts on technical issues such as how to arrange furniture for a socially distanced classroom. But in subsequent, sometimes painful conversations, these same people revealed that we had failed to understand the more human aspects of a safe and healthy return, including what it would feel like to wear masks, maintain social distance, and prioritize hand hygiene.

We share this humbling experience because it contains an important lesson: As school leaders, we have too often failed to communicate well and collaborate with our communities. Our educators, students, and families deserve better. This is especially true this year, as we see the harm that multiple overlapping challenges—the COVID-19 outbreak, an economic downturn, and ongoing systemic racism—are inflicting on our students’ health, well-being, and educational progress.

We know we are not alone in our failure fully to honor the values and needs of our school communities through effective communications. National conversations about how to safely and effectively educate students during the pandemic have been polarized and unproductive. Moreover, the health crisis and the nationwide reckoning with racial injustice and police brutality have laid bare a longstanding truth about the U.S. education system: It continues to fail our most vulnerable students.
The problems are complex. But we believe that ineffective communication between school leadership and families is at the root. Even before the pandemic, school approaches to communications have been top-down, one-way, and narrowly focused on the “average” students and families who are generally doing just fine. Schools and their leaders lack both the structures and the skills to listen deeply, converse constructively, and problem-solve collaboratively. As a result, we do not know, nor can we fulfill, the needs of those who have been marginalized by our system of education—especially Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities, people who experience economic hardship, and people who live with disabilities. Without seeking and including their input in the process, we perpetuate a system that is designed to fail and exclude them.

To move forward together, we need to reimagine how school leaders and school communities engage with each other. At Brooklyn LAB, our efforts to safeguard the health and well-being of our students and their families have taught us hard-earned lessons about the communication that school communities deserve. To encapsulate these lessons, we’ve gathered insights from our own school community, from inspiring educators who are part of the Educating All Learners Alliance (EALA), and from advocates around the country to create a resource that establishes new communication norms for school communities.

This toolkit outlines five core principles and provides practical advice on how to improve school-community communication to improve schools. As school leaders, we need to embrace collaborative, empathetic, transparent and truthful, accessible and inclusive, and resilient communications. Getting it right will not be easy, and we’re sure to make mistakes along the way, but with this model, everyone has a voice. And school leaders, educators, students, and families can hold each other accountable to the communications that our communities deserve.

Sincerely,

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Executive Director
Educators, students, and families have made tremendous sacrifices and done an incredible job during this extraordinary year. However, schools throughout the country, including Brooklyn LAB, have still fallen short on promises to communicate effectively with our communities on issues from the COVID-19 pandemic to the ongoing fight against racism.

To address this challenge, Brooklyn LAB partnered with McPherson Strategies, a communications consultancy, to seek guidance from communications experts, child development experts, learning science specialists, school leaders, teachers, and school community members from the Educating All Learners Alliance (EALA) to find out what matters, what works, and what doesn’t work in school communications.

We received input from over 50 individuals from over 25 organizations in the form of video interviews, phone calls, and written responses. Together, we created a toolkit organized around five core principles that represent the communications our school communities deserve. We have also outlined dozens of ways school leaders and educators can put these principles into practice to transform how they communicate with their communities. This guide includes practical recommendations you can apply now to communicate better during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as ways to use communications to address ongoing, deeply ingrained systemic challenges like racism and ableism. Together, these principles and practices will help you establish new norms and a school culture centered around equity so that every student at your school can learn and thrive.

As we move toward 2021, we will continue to adapt our communication with school communities to the demands of COVID-19, while clarifying and responding to the needs of individual students and their families. Our school community, and our country, deserve the chance to turn over a new leaf and begin a new approach to communication during the pandemic. We invite you to join us.
How to use this toolkit

This toolkit is organized around five core principles that we believe are critical in school-community transformation. Within each principle, we include a set of central practices that will help your school embody the principle, as well as recommendations you can use to put these principles into practice. We have also included examples and links for further resources.

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The idea that “we’re better together” has helped schools prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable people during the pandemic. Schools can extend this ethos by communicating with their community, not just to their community. To keep everyone safe, it’s tempting to respond by decree. But getting everyone to do what matters requires a shared sense of purpose. Collaborative communications can also build long-term trust and deepen the school’s commitment to equity by including all voices.

Seek input and buy-in.
Create multiple channels of open communication.
Collaborate with external experts for counsel and accountability.
“93% of families believe they should be partners in the school reopening planning process, yet only 64% felt that the leaders of their school system valued the role that families play in their children’s success.”

- NAFSCE
Seek input and buy-in.

You can build shared investment and deepen your understanding of challenges by soliciting input starting on day one. This means reaching out to diverse groups of parents, teachers, and students, and listening to people’s concerns, questions, and input before you form an institutional response.

Try this:

- **Check for representation of perspectives:** Conduct an audit to ensure you’re considering the perspectives of all people in your communications: Are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) community members represented? What about families of students with disabilities?

- **Invite those who are most marginalized into the conversation:** Engage a team of representative advisors who are most likely to be marginalized by potential solutions. Who are the five students who most need you to get this decision right? Which teachers work closely with those students? Which families have given you input on relevant challenges in the past? Which families have not been engaged in the past, and why?

- **Use open-ended questions and listen:** Ask your school community broad, open-ended questions about their experiences and ideas for solutions. Questions might include: What would you like to see happen in the classroom to support students who have experienced trauma? What are some challenges you might experience if the school schedule changes to accommodate public health guidance?

- **Report back, including to system leaders:** Be sure to reconnect with your community to report how you integrated their ideas. Also avoid blindsiding administrators by regularly updating them as conversations evolve.
Collaborative

Create multiple channels of open communication.

During challenging times, people in the school community will have more questions and concerns, and it’s important to create open channels for parents, students, educators, and others to safely express themselves, ask questions, and share proposals. No matter how difficult or confronting the feedback is, commit to listening and integrating their feedback. Over the long term, this can build a sense of community that encourages people to share their concerns and bright spots regularly.

Try this:

- **Create multiple channels that are easy to access**: Create multiple entry points for conversations by connecting with people where they are already gathering, such as social media, and creating easy-to-use channels that everyone can access. These can include virtual meetings, Facebook Live, online Zoom forums and crowdsourcing tools, and student-only town halls. Also use personal outreach, inviting families to reach out to teachers, counselors, or other staff members.

- **Invite participation and questions**: Encourage participation across platforms by enabling Q&A on webinars, meetings, and Facebook Live. Ask students to send questions in advance for town halls. Prompt the community multiple times to ask and share questions, concerns, and reactions. Specify that you welcome questions about anything and everything, and ensure families have the option to submit questions anonymously where possible. Take note of who isn’t attending or asking questions, and designate a staff member to follow up with them personally. Seek to understand barriers they may be encountering.

- **Answer all the questions**: Don’t leave questions or concerns unanswered; families should always know there’s someone listening. Address concerns in real time or afterward, ideally within 48 hours. While protecting the anonymity of the people sharing concerns, answer common questions on public platforms so that more people can benefit from your response.
”I never had to wait more than a day for a response—not from a teacher, case manager, even the principal. In a school of 1,000+ students, the teachers and special ed. staff knew who my child was, and how he was doing. We truly felt supported and like part of a community.”

- Parent of student at Sumner County Schools
Collaborate with external experts for counsel and credibility.

Not every school has expertise in issues like public health, mental health, racial injustice, inclusion, or trauma. You can partner with local officials and seek input from multiple sources to test assumptions, cultivate deeper discussions, inform decisions and communications, strengthen your credibility, and help combat the spread of misinformation.

Try this:

- **Invite experts to engage your school community**: Invite experts to join you for an open forum to address parent and student questions. They could provide updates on local public health trends, or they could facilitate a deeper conversation with your community on mental health, racial injustice, or trauma. By partnering with specialists in areas where you lack expertise, you can better understand and support the needs of people in your school community.

- **Partner with experts on announcements**: Ground your messages in public health guidelines and science by holding a joint press conference with public health officials and citing health guidelines that you are using to make decisions. This builds credibility for your message and helps combat misinformation.
This year has been challenging. Many people have buried loved ones. BIPOC families have grappled with disproportionate loss and ongoing systemic racism. Some parents have lost jobs, while others struggle with remote school and work. Children, especially those with disabilities, find it onerous to adapt. Recovery will take years after the pandemic ends, but by consciously cultivating empathy, we can better understand and respond to the needs of our community. Over the long term, this will help people heal.

Know your people.
Be human.
Hold space for racial justice.
“A recent study found heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among parents of school age children during COVID-19 closures.”
Empathetic

Know your people.

By building a better understanding of the complexities, challenges, and risks families are facing, you can deepen your empathy and respond more effectively and efficiently to the individual and collective needs of your students and their families.

Try this:

- **Develop a deeper understanding of each student’s journey:** Every student experiences school differently, particularly during the pandemic. Imagine what the experience would be like for a student with a disability, who might not be able to easily adapt to a virtual classroom and is losing the one-on-one, in-person support they’ve come to depend on. Or for a student whose parents are both working during the day and is now in charge of babysitting a younger sibling. To deepen your understanding of your students’ day-to-day experiences, you can also use student personas and develop student user journeys that capture some of the nuance of COVID-19 resurgence. You can use this tool for other challenges and changes to your school even after the pandemic ends.

- **Get to know individual families and students:** Regular 1:1 check-ins will help you connect with students day to day to address challenges before they grow and celebrate successes to build resilience. Brooklyn LAB’s Success Coach model is an example. If you haven’t heard from a family in weeks, check in. In check-ins and advisories with students and families, also ask questions about their experiences beyond school: How are things with your family? Are you able to stay connected to friends?

- **Understand your community’s collective experiences:** Survey families and students regularly on changes in their circumstances and any challenges they face so you can learn more about overarching trends to address school-wide. Circumstances change quickly in a COVID-19 world, so commit to doing this monthly. Here are some sample questions to include in surveys.
**Empathetic**

**Be human.**

Schools are inherently bureaucratic, but we can transform them into humane institutions by practicing human communication. This means tapping into your own emotions and experiences to show empathy, and reevaluating how systems can better serve students and families. Instead of blaming individuals, you can reflect on how school systems are failing people. Being human shows students that you care about their well-being, especially their mental health. Practicing human communication also helps students overcome feelings of isolation.

**Try this:**

- **Use human language:** Replace bureaucratic jargon with language that builds connections. You can rephrase common sentiments. For instance, use “we are here for you” instead of “the school leadership wants to convey that your health and safety is a top priority.” While it’s important to respond to all questions in a reasonable timeframe, you don’t need to fill silences with canned answers or quick solutions. Instead, acknowledge frustration: “I hear you and value your concerns.” This video exchange between a student and writing director exemplifies a human-to-human approach.

- **Draw from shared feelings and experiences:** Many teachers and staff members are also parents and can related to feelings of exhaustion and fear. Be vulnerable by tapping into the shared feeling, but beware of centering yourself in the conversation or equating another person’s experience with your own. Dr. Brené Brown’s RSA video is a helpful reminder of what empathy is—and isn’t.

- **Create space to connect on a human level:** Not every moment has to be productive. There is value in “wasting time together”—carving out unstructured times to come together without a set agenda and build authentic human connections. Phone calls to frustrated parents, rather than emails or mass communications, can also go a long way.
Empathetic

Hold space for racial justice.

Black communities are dealing with multiple pandemics this year, and school leaders and educators need to do the ongoing work of anti-racism to address racism within their walls. Communications can be a powerful tool to open and hold space for racial justice by inviting marginalized people into conversations and decision-making forums. The commitment to racial justice should be on school leaders’ minds daily.

Try this:

• **First and always, do the anti-racist work.** Holding space for racial justice requires the commitment and daily practice of anti-racism. There are numerous resources to help your school shift to an equitable approach that incorporates anti-racism into school culture, discipline, grading, attendance, and more. Consider creating a Black Lives Matter resolution, like this one from Berkeley Unified School District. Tell your community how the school will create accountability for anti-racist commitments, and communicate updates regularly.

• **Create safe spaces for discussion, understanding, justice, and healing:** Hold open forums regularly focused on racism and equity to understand the experiences of your community. Seek input from experts to create a culture of psychological safety to discuss matters of white supremacy, systemic racism, and generational trauma. Invite students to discuss their own experiences and questions. Build empathy through storytelling—the America to Me docu-series is notable. Greg White’s reflections in “We are all tired by not defeated” opens space for authentic, justice-focused discourse.

• **Understand individuals as whole people:** Address your community in an intersectional manner—acknowledge and seek to understand the full context of family, student, and staff experiences—and provide services and resources to counteract perpetual inequities that have been exacerbated during COVID-19.
In a period marked by pain and uncertainty—where truth and science have been denigrated—schools must embrace frequent, open, and fact-based communication. Families, teachers, and staff deserve to know the rationale behind school decisions. Engaging in public health-related conversations is new and uncomfortable territory for educators. Sharing bad news, such as when a student tests positive, can feel like a failure. But avoiding conversations, allowing rumors to go unchecked, and withholding information will ultimately cause harm and erode trust.

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Elevate the facts.
Give insight into the process.
Update in real time.
Elevate the facts.

There’s a lot of misinformation about COVID-19. Schools have a responsibility to ensure that everyone in the community has the information they need to stay safe and make healthy, informed choices. In fact, schools have an obligation to advance a public health-first approach, which means actively combating misinformation to protect the broader community.

Try this:

- **Align on the facts internally**: Use written communication and team meetings to make sure all of your school administrators and educators understand the facts. Provide internal stakeholders with FAQ documents so they can easily reference fact-based responses when asked.

- **Combat the spread of misinformation**: If a national or local leader spreads factually baseless information, equip your school community with the facts, citing official recommendations from the CDC. If a parent complains about school health protocols such as mask requirements and social distancing, be steadfast with your commitment to science and protecting the community, citing public health guidelines. You can also acknowledge steps that schools do not need to take to keep everyone safe.

- **Provide guidance that incorporates the experiences of people with disabilities**: Schools communications often fail to incorporate the needs and experiences of people with disabilities, for whom health guidelines may be nuanced. Communicating clearly and to everyone in a way that accounts for everyone’s experiences can support the needs of people with disabilities and combat misguided assumptions that a singular approach to health protocols works for everyone. [Here are guidelines](#) for working with students with Autism or other disabilities, who may have difficulties wearing masks.
Give insight into the process.

Schools are sorting through tough challenges as they work to keep their communities safe. Families deserve to know the “why” behind decisions so they understand what the future holds. Giving insight into the process—and, wherever possible, involving immediate stakeholders in decisions that affect them—can help schools build trust and secure buy-in when decisions are made.

Try this:

- **Explain the decision-making rationale:** When giving updates, provide a clear rationale, including any unknowns or potential risks. Lead with the announcement, and then provide context about the reasoning, evidence, and factors you weighed in making the decision. Here’s what to include in your rationale:
  - An explanation of how you make decisions based on data.
  - Recommendations from public health officials.
  - Relevant data and links to sources.
  - Risks and considerations you weighed in making the decision.
  - An acknowledgement of risks and unknowns in the decision.
  - Input and feedback from school stakeholders.
  - Stories or examples, where relevant.
  - Instructions on how to ask questions or provide feedback.

- **Collect questions to address when answers are available:** Leave time for questions in any new announcement, and if you don’t yet have an answer, be candid and steadfast about your ongoing commitment to being truthful and forthcoming about the process.
Update in real time.

In the COVID-19 era, it’s critical to quickly communicate important news like a new case in the school community. News and misinformation travels fast during a crisis, and it’s better for families to hear from the school before they hear from the rumor mill. This is central to building trust and accountability.

Try this:

- **Prepare materials in advance**: Keeping safe means acting fast. Be prepared to communicate and respond by preparing templates for various scenarios in advance. LAB worked with the Donovan Group to create templates that exemplify honest, transparent, and public health-informed communication. But also remember the importance of human communication: Tailor your messages if needed and respond to questions with empathy.

- **Create a central place for real-time updates**: You can use a COVID-19 dashboard like [this one](#) to provide updates on new cases, trends over time, and county data.

- **Push out updates using the best channels for your community**: Use what you learned in the input and buy-in process to identify the best mediums to communicate critical information. When you make notable dashboard updates, pair these with real-time updates across those channels.
“Overall, half of parents responding to a survey conducted by the EdWeek Research Center said they had a somewhat-to-very-high level of trust that schools will keep their children healthy. 30% of parents said they had a low-to-nonexistent level of trust in their child’s school. And about 21% said that they were on the fence, with equally high and low levels of trust.”

- Edweek
There’s no one-size-fits-all approach to communication. Everyone in the school community deserves to receive information in a way that works for them. The message substance, presentation, and method of delivery must be accessible to everyone. Historically, schools assumed that communications were sufficient as long as they reached most students. The alternative—rigorously ensuring every student is reached—requires persistence but pays off by supporting a more equitable community.

Lead with equity and inclusion.

Be consistent.

Make it digestible.

Address systemic racism head-on.
Lead with equity and inclusion.

Building a communication system that supports all students and families requires addressing the needs of the most vulnerable students. That means centering students with disabilities, BIPOC students, non-native English speakers, and students experiencing economic hardship every time you share information and invite your community into conversation. It also means meeting families where they are, using the language they speak, and communicating across every channel to reach everyone.

Try this:

- **Center the needs of the most vulnerable students first:** Consider the broader contexts that families are dealing with when developing communications so you can design for the margins first and develop approaches that prioritize the most vulnerable students. If you have developed student personas, you can use these to think through how the information you are delivering will be received by different families, which communications channels will work best, and what kinds of questions those families might have.

- **Use all the languages spoken by people in your community:** Provide translations for all of the languages spoken by families at your school, and make sure you can accept and translate feedback that you receive in languages other than English. TalkingPoints is a helpful tool for communicating with multilingual families.

- **Mind your medium:** Not all families have the same level of literacy skills or technology access, so it’s helpful to use different mediums to reach everyone. This might include texting, a centralized website, social media, HTML emails, video, closed-captioning for virtual events or meetings, and even WhatsApp groups for audio messages. Broward County Public Schools uses video, and the Singapore American School has a centralized website.
Be consistent.

In a crisis, there’s a lot of uncertainty, which can make people feel afraid and alone. Schools can build trust and cultivate a sense of connection and care by providing accurate information on a consistent basis. Proactive communication reduces the burden on families to look for the information they need, and it reminds everyone of the ongoing need to prioritize health and safety protocols for the sake of the community.

Try this:

- **Plan regular updates on important subjects:** Create a six-month calendar to ensure a regular drumbeat of communication on important subjects. [Research from EAB](https://www.eab.org) suggests sharing COVID-19-related updates through multiple channels frequently. Subjects can include:
  - Reminders on school health and safety protocols.
  - Local infection ratios.
  - Classroom closures and quarantines.
  - Meal service.
  - Anti-racism efforts and guidance.
  - Cleaning and disinfection procedures.
  - New studies or information.
  - Student activities and events.
  - Feedback on specific questions.
  - “Just checking in”.

- **Schedule repeat meetings and update times:** Pick a consistent day, time, and medium for sharing updates and hearing from people in your school community. You could do a couple each week, such as a Friday morning town hall for students and a Monday “week ahead” emails so families know what to expect.
Make it digestible.

Families grappling with the intersecting crises of COVID-19, racial injustice, an economic recession, and severe political division are experiencing tremendous stress, which makes it difficult for people to process and retain information. They are also dealing with information overload. Make your communications easy to access, understand, and retain.

Try this:

- **Distill key points into bite-sized takeaways**: Identify your most important takeaways, and make sure those messages are prominent and clear. Focus on those first, and limit each message to one to two sentences. Don’t overload your communications with more than three takeaways.

- **Provide details and resources for those who want to dig deeper**: Organize information in layers: Summarize what’s most important at the top (consider using bullet points), and provide more detail, context, and links to resources further down. Also organize information using easy-to-navigate structures such as FAQs.

- **Use visuals to reinforce key points and critical information**: Information that’s instructional or process-oriented, such as new health protocols or social-distancing configurations in the classroom, can be reinforced with visuals that show how to do something or where to go. LAB has developed open, free visual resources to clarify aspects of the back-to-school process. Graphics also serve as reminders to help build new habits, like frequently washing hands and always wearing masks.
Address racism and ableism head on.

For too long, schools have shied away from acknowledging that racism and ableism are built into the education system. Put bluntly: Every school has work to do to address racism and ableism within. Transparent, honest, clear, specific, and vulnerable communications can support schools’ deep anti-racism work and COVID-related communications.

Try this:

- **Acknowledge that racism and ableism exist at your school—and commit to dismantling those systems:** This first step in dismantling these systems is acknowledging the ways we have perpetuated racism and ableism within our own school. It's important to recognize that the problems of education are in the design, not the students. Here are three resources to get you started:
  - This guide explains three anti-racist, inclusive mindsets.
  - This guide helps schools cultivate student agency and identity, which can shift power to the students, empowering them to affirm their authentic selves and become agents of change.
  - This guide offers ways for schools to put equity at the core as they prepare for safe school reopening.

- **Be honest and vulnerable and listen to the hard truths:** Listen first, especially when BIPOC and disabled communities are sharing hard truths about their experiences. Be introspective about racism and ableism within your school, professional practice, and relationships, and commit to applying what you learn. Robin Webb’s letter to the Freedom Prep community embodies vulnerability and the commitment to ensure education provides a pathway to freedom.

- **Be specific and direct about racism and ableism:** Too often, schools rely on platitudes and overly optimistic messages about coming together, unity, and color-blindness. These messages feel comfortable for some, but they erase the reality and specificity of anti-Black violence and ableism. Avoid euphemisms and use specific words that validate students’ experiences: Say “racism,” not “racially charged” or “racially divisive”—phrases that gloss over reality and pain. The message that “Black lives matter” can reinforce the culture of anti-racism you are striving for at your school.
“A Speak UP Parents survey found that fewer than half of students with disabilities received required services after campuses closed. A Parents Together survey found that parents from low-income homes are 10 times more likely to say their children are doing little or no remote learning.”
There’s no need to sugarcoat it: School communities are experiencing grim realities. That said, you can use communication to help the community heal, look to the future, and highlight what is working. This means sharing real commitments for improvement and your school’s desire to adapt and learn from past experiences. It can also involve highlighting stories of resilience and talking about the power of the community. Centering communication around resilience can help mitigate families’ feelings of isolation, hopelessness, and distrust.

Focus on what we can do.

Highlight the community’s resiliency and cultivate a culture of mutual support.

Open the door for long-term change.
“Students are resilient! While mental health worsened during the pandemic, an Active Minds survey revealed that students have been getting more information about mental health and coping strategies, which has helped build their resilience. Compared to spring 2020, 78% of students reported feeling optimistic or hopeful about their school-related goals and future job prospects.”
Focus on what we can do.

The pandemic can feel like a never-ending series of restrictions, and there’s a lot of confusion about what people can and can’t do because of a lack of consistent, clear rules across the country. Schools with clear, science- and health-based rules can emphasize what’s possible to give students a sense of agency.

Try this:

- **Collaborate on solutions to expand what’s possible**: It’s possible to find multiple solutions that align with health guidelines. Using the collaborative communications approach, LAB worked with its school community to understand specific pain points about the return to school under COVID-19. Together, they developed solutions such as a front porch that makes the new school arrival process easier, and designated areas where students can take a safe “mask break.” Applying the principles of human-centered design can help your school create solutions that meet the needs of your community.

- **Promote positive solutions and frame communications around what’s allowed**: Actively provide examples of what the community can still do, including, when appropriate, socializing outdoors while maintaining an appropriate distance and wearing a mask. Provide ideas for activities, such as a socially distanced picnic where families each get their own blankets. Also frame communications around what’s possible rather than what’s not. This is sometimes referred to as the “safe-sex model.” Try this: “You can go play with friends outside as long as you have a mask on.” Instead of: “You can’t play with your friends at recess unless you have a mask on.”
Highlight the community’s resiliency and cultivate a culture of mutual support.

Even though some physical buildings have closed and in-classroom instruction looks different, instruction hasn’t stopped, and neither has schools’ commitment to their students. It’s important to let families know how you’re supporting learning and thriving, no matter what situation you face going forward. By celebrating the community’s resilience, this also cultivates mutual support.

Try this:

- **Share stories of student successes:** Bright spots, particularly from those facing hardship, help us feel hopeful about the future and inspire us to get creative in the present. Create space in your communication channels, such as weekly newsletters, to highlight these stories, and invite people in your school community to share them. The stories don’t have to be limited to classroom learning. One teacher told a story of a high school student who moved into the garage because he had a healthcare job and wanted to protect his grandparents, with whom he lived.

- **Invite school community members to support each other:** In her book *How We Show Up: Reclaiming Family, Friendship, and Community*, author and mom Mia Birdsong wrote about how giving and receiving help are instrumental in cultivating well-being for individuals and whole communities. You can proactively use communications tools to cultivate a culture of support by inviting people in the community to volunteer as mentors for students, and by forming small classroom cohorts that meet regularly to share experiences and support one another.
Resilient

Open the door for long-term improvements.

The pandemic has underscored that education is collaborative, which brings us back to our first principle. Parents are more engaged, the critical work teachers do is more evident every day, and whole communities have gotten involved to support education. Looking ahead, we can use communications to make our schools better through more collaboration: We can listen more deeply, engage more people, and begin important conversations about what kind of education we need to ensure that all students learn and thrive.

Try this:

- **Start a long-term conversation with your school community:** Engage the students, families, staff, educators, and others in your community by asking:
  - What lessons are we learning during the pandemic that we want to carry forward?
  - What practices do we want to keep? What’s not working that we want to improve?
  - How can we engage students in an ever-changing world by providing opportunities to grow as lifelong learners, original thinkers, and collaborators on tough challenges?
  - How can we ensure that our fiscal planning and board governance prioritize student learning, safety, and development?
  - How can we engage the wider community to help ensure all students learn and thrive?
  - How can we prioritize high-quality learning that closes gaps and empowers students?
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McPherson Strategies: Chloë Barran, Ellen Miller Gilcrest, Isabelle Jetté, Susan McPherson
National Center for Learning Disabilities: Sheldon Horowitz, Lindsay Jones
The National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools: Wendy Brehm, Lindsay Coker, Rachel Hastings, Lauren Krempecki, Lauren Morando Rhim, Wendy Tucker
National Public Education Support Fund: Jennifer Kotting
New Tech Network: Lydia Dobyns

Next Generation Learning Challenges: Stefanie Blouin, Andy Calkins
Patrick B. Jenkins & Associates: Dwayne Andrews
RALLY: Alisha Qiu, René Verma
SERP Institute: Suzanne Donovan
Special Education Leader Fellowship: A’Seret Dokubo, Nicole Mayeux, Aqua Stovall
Turnaround for Children: Brigid Ahern, Pamela Cantor, Nora Gomperts, Tami Hill-Washington, Jeremy Koren, MenSa Maa, Joel Scott, Christina Theokas, Elizabeth Tijerina
UNIDOS US: Ingrid Colon, Maria Moser
Weber Shandwick: Melanie Janin
Whiteboard Advisors: Evo Popoff, Ben Wallerstein
Writing Support: Eva Dienel, Mareesa Nicosia, Katelyn Silva
**Resources**

**Pathos Labs:** 19-Tips to Message COVID-19  
**CCSSO:** COVID-19 Parent and Community Engagement Resources  
**Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation:** School and District Communications During COVID-19  
**UNICEF:** Tips for schools on how to strengthen communication with parents/caregivers  
**National School Public Relations Association:** The Coronavirus Communications Crisis for Public Schools  
**Michigan School Public Relations Association:** Toolkit for Communicating about Coronavirus  
**UnidosUS:** UnidosUS Guiding Questions and Critical Action Items for School Reopenings  
**Parabola Project:** Practitioner Toolkit: Communicating About Reopening Measures with Families  
**Educating All Learners Alliance:** How to Break Down Communication Barriers Between Teachers and Families  
**Always Ready for Learning:** Early Lessons in “Productive Overcommunication”

**National Center for Learning Disabilities:** Resources & Tools: COVID-19  
**Aurora Institute:** Competency-Based District Leaders on Managing Change During the Pandemic  
**Institute for Educational Leadership and Attendance Works:** Community-driven, equity-focused leadership, education, and workforce transformation  
**Next Gen Learning:** When Humans, Not Systems, Run Schools  
**The Ability Challenge:** Planning for Student Transitions during COVID-19: A Roadmap for Schools  
**The Education Trust:** A P-12 Education Agenda in Response to COVID-19  
**Learning Heroes:** Parents 2020 | COVID-19 Closures A Redefining Moment for Students, Parents & Schools

**The Education Trust:** Listening to Educators of Color  
**American Federation of Teachers:** Confronting Racism and in Support of Black Lives  
**Tolerance.org:** Resolution Regarding Black Lives Matter at School  
**Getting Smart:** High School Student's Bill of Rights  
**Getting Smart:** 21st Century Education Student Bill of Rights  
**SERP Institute:** Engaging Students with Civics Units on Social Justice
For more resources related to safe and equitable education during COVID-19, please visit equitybydesign.org.