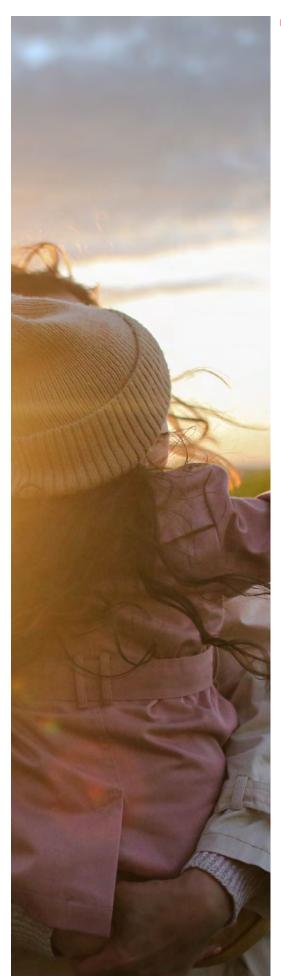# 20-21 EDUCATOR TOOLKIT

BEST PRACTICES FOR ENGAGING FAMILIES

Actionable Strategies in the
20-21 School Year

Prepared By:
The West Virginia
Family Engagement Center
www.wvfec.org

WV FEC

Family Engagement Center

TABLE OF CONTENTS

WVFEC's SEAMless approach to family engagement helps schools & families:

- SUPPORT their students' learning & development
- ENCOURAGE positive self image and a "can do" spirit
- ADVOCATE for improved learning opportunities
- MODEL lifelong learning & enthusiasm for education

INTRODUCTION

This Family Engagement guide has been developed by the West Virginia Family Engagement Center in partnership with the West Virginia Department of Education to support student learning and family engagement during the upcoming academic year as we navigate this unprecedented time together.

Although there may be challenges to overcome within the academic year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we strive to serve as a resource to help you, and your school's students and families to have a successful and engaging academic year. Use this guide within school and district leadership, as well as among educators and school staff to strengthen family, school, and community engagement.

THIS TOOLKIT WILL PROVIDE:

- High impact core practices for family engagement
- Actionable strategies and tips to strengthen family engagement
- Professional development opportunities
- Relevant research and statistics on core practices
- Templates and implementation resources
- Information on the West Virginia Family Engagement Center

CORE PRACTICES

WELCOMING VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS

As schools open for in-person, virtual or blended instruction, there will be a noticeable absence of visitors in the schools. Parent volunteers, in-person school events, and large group gatherings are prohibited in most schools for the 2020-2021 school year. Some schools are providing all instruction virtually while other schools are creating "No Visitor" policies to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spread.

Schools, which have worked tirelessly to create welcoming environments for students and families, are now faced with the challenge of creating these same positive feelings and relationships with students and families virtually.

> **"No meaningful family engagement can be established until relationships of trust and respect are established between home and school."**
>
> SEDL, Partners Education in A Dual Capacity Building Framework for Family–School Partnerships, 2007

Previous efforts to increase welcoming environments called for schools to "Assess your school surroundings." When students feel unsafe, they begin to close themselves off from others and their lessons. Learning, for these students, stops and behavior issues arise. (Mayer, 2007) As we look towards this school year, the challenges are great, but so are the opportunities to find innovative ways to create welcoming environments for students and families. Welcoming Environments are shown to; promote student achievement, increase school attendance, and build relationships between schools and families as they work towards the common goal of helping students succeed.

While common sense tells us that individuals are more likely to be involved where they feel welcome, the data confirms also that students of engaged families are more successful academically, have better school attendance and develop a love of learning that lasts a lifetime.

Check out our Welcoming Virtual Environments strategies and Information Audit Checklist on the following pages.

Strategy 1: Conduct an Information Audit.

Strategy 2: It's not what you say, it's how you say it.

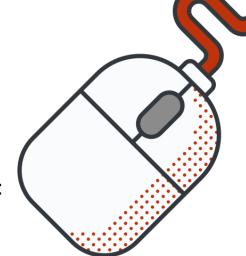**Strategy 3:** Relationships don't have to be built IN a building.

WELCOMING VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS

The **West Virginia Family Engagement Center** offers the 3 tips/strategies below to help you create a positive environment VIRTUALLY, leading to continued success for students, families, and teachers.

Strategy 1: Conduct an Information Audit.

Information for families/caregivers who are only able to connect with their child's school and teacher virtually needs to be readily available and easy to find. When caregivers and families have to search, frustration sets in. This is especially true for those individuals for whom technology skills do not come naturally. The **Information Audit Checklist** (Page 6) provided can be used to ensure your families and caregivers can easily locate the information needed, without issue.

Strategy 2: It's not what you say, it's how you say it.

We've heard this saying hundreds of times. While electronic communications such as email and text messages (Remind, ClassDojo, etc) have many benefits, without attention to tone, electronic messages can come across blunt, short, unprofessional or even rude. Without the ability to see the speaker's face or hear the "tone" of their voice, many attempts at sarcasm and humor are mistaken for criticism. Keep email/text correspondence calm, short and to the point, using bullets, lists, and bold text for emphasis. If your communication is regarding a sensitive or difficult conversation, or requires a lot of back and forth, defer to a phone call or face to face (virtual) meeting.

Strategy 3: Relationships don't have to be built IN a building.

Many students and families are easy to get to know and connect with, whether you're connecting with them face to face or virtually. Others are not. While it may be more challenging, it's certainly not impossible, and in fact building relationships with both students and families is vital. The good news is, the foundational elements of relationship building including respect, trust and support are the same virtually and in-person. Strategies such as Student Interest Inventories and Empathy Interviews for students and Family Partnership Questionnaires will facilitate relationship building while developing respect, trust and support for one another.
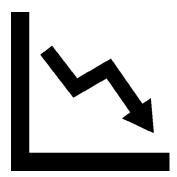
INFORMATION AUDIT CHECKLIST

Use the following checklist to ensure your school website is creating a welcoming virtual environment for your students, families, and community.

Our school website includes:

- ☐ Functionality on both desktop and mobile devices
- ☐ A simple, easy to navigate design
- ☐ A welcome video or message from the principal
- ☐ Administrator, teacher, and staff photos
- ☐ Contact information including the main office number and physical address (Note: If your school has a novelty address that may not be recognized by apps such as Google Maps, include one that is.)
- ☐ A staff contact list including name, role, and email address
- ☐ An events calendar that is updated regularly
- ☐ School/county forms that can be completed electronically
- ☐ A FAQ page (consider surveying families on what to include)
- ☐ Policies, procedures, and information related to COVID-19 and other timely needs
- ☐ A list of online learning expectations (see OneDrive example)

For additional and resources, check out the 2020 Educator Toolkit Folder via WVDE's Family Engagement OneDrive.
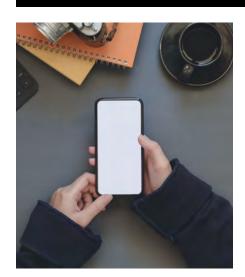
TWO-WAY VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION

Two-way communication is a vital component of family engagement. In COVID-19, two-way virtual communication is more important than ever. Two-way communication improves grades for at-risk students, leads to higher homework completion rates, more classroom participation, fewer absences, and increased feelings of positivity towards school.

It also results in less classroom disciplinary issues, failures, and lower stress levels. Further, when parents and teachers communicate, parents are more likely to trust teachers and appreciate their impact. Conversely, teachers report feeling happier and more competent.

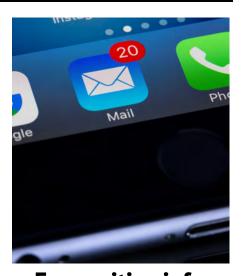**Less than half of parents report being satisfied by their parent-teacher communication.**

What's the data say on preference?

For general info, families prefer computer-mediated communication like texts and voicemails.

For negative info, families prefer personalized communication like a video conference.

For positive info, families prefer digital communication like an email, text, or phone call.

Check out our two-way virtual communication tips on Page 8.

Tips for Two-Way Virtual Communication

1. Avoid educational jargon.

   Families don't understand terms like "scaffolding", nor do they need to. Engage in a common language.

2. Create "volunteer" opportunities.

   In virtual environments, this might be a guest speaking opportunity or a parent volunteering to touch base with others.
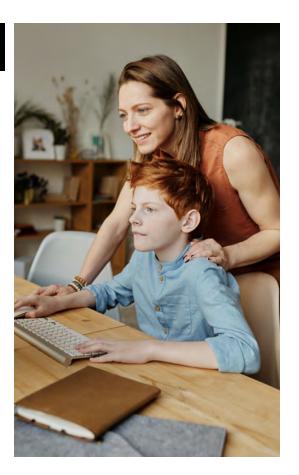
3. Utilize technology.

   Diversify your communication strategy by using a class website, emails, texts, video conferences - even social media.

4. Personalize your outreach.

   It may seem simple, but something as easy as addressing an email or text is proven to increase the likelihood it will be opened.

5. Share positive comments first.

   Before negative communication is required, be sure to provide positive feedback and encouragement to families.

Just getting started? Check out our templates in the [OneDrive folder.](#)

PARENT PREFERENCE SURVEY:
Helps you differentiate your communication methods to uniquely meet families where they are.

FAMILY CONTACT LOG:
Ensures you are equitably interacting with all families and balancing positive/negative comments.

GOAL-SETTING CONFERENCES:
Use SMART goals with families to set powerful intentions and empower their influence on success.

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING & SELF-CARE

The COVID-19 pandemic can make students feel especially anxious. Helping your students cope with their anxiety in healthy ways and encouraging them to talk to you about any concerns that they may be experiencing can help tremendously. It's vital for us to remember that our students look to us, as educators, administrators, and school staff, for guidance on how to react to events that may make them feel uneasy or anxious.

If we seem overly concerned or anxious, our students are likely to react in a similar manner. We should assure our students that both health and school officials are working very hard to ensure that we stay safe and healthy. Let students' actions and questions guide you on what information to share with them. Remind them that you are always available to talk to them about any concerns or stress they may be experiencing during this time.

5 Tips for Social Emotional Learning Success

1 Remain calm and reassuring.

2 Pay attention to what students see and hear.

3 Focus on what your school is doing to stay safe.

4 Conduct a daily check-in to keep talking to your students.

5 Send health and wellness reminders.

The Importance of Self-Care

Now, more than ever, it is important to prioritize the care of both ourselves and others. As we navigate these challenges of COVID-19, care of self and others can help us to remain calm. Self-care isn't something that we should take for granted or fault ourselves for doing. Self-care isn't selfish – it's a necessity, especially in a time of crisis.

Care for Others

Caring for others is also especially important during this time of crisis. Just as our students look to us for care under normal circumstances in the classroom, they, too are looking to us to continue to provide care during COVID-19 as well. Students look to us to model positive behaviors, and our actions heavily affect their reactions. Be mindful of ways in which you speak and actions that you display, as students look to us for guidance and calm.

Care Can Calm a Crisis

Caring for ourselves and others can provide a pivotal change in our attitudes, physical health, emotional health, and cognitive abilities.
We can– and should– model care of self and others to our students.

Let the Calm Be Your Guide

Ultimately, engaging in both care of self and others will create inward and outward senses of calm to help guide your thoughts, emotions, and actions during times of crisis.

WORDS OF AFFIRMATION
Practice these daily.

"I am a person of high integrity and sincere purpose."

"I am a competent and capable teacher."

"I treat myself and my students with kindness and respect."

"I am becoming a better teacher every day."

"I am making a difference in my students' lives."

"The work I do matters."

"I am thankful to have a challenging and fulfilling job."

"I motivate and empower my students."

"I believe in myself and my abilities."

"I am peaceful and calm and greet the day with ease."

Source: Ten Words of Affirmation from Teach for America

Focus on the Positive

It's amazing how focusing on the positive – rather than the negative aspects of a situation can change your entire outlook. We can model this behavior for our students along with a "can do" spirit.

Focus Only on What You Can Control

Choose joy over fear – and focus only on what you can control. Wasting head space or heart space on things you can't control does not contribute positively to caring for yourself and others.

Strategies and Tips to Keep Calm and Teach On

1 Attitude of Gratitude

Tip: Body Scans with Gratitude
Check in with your body each day. Starting at your toes, tense and then release your various muscles, and find gratitude in each. For example, gratitude to your feet for all the places they've carried you.

2 Make Mindfulness Easy

Tip: Mindful Breathing
This is a simple, yet effective, breathing technique. Breathe in for three seconds, hold, then breathe out for three seconds. Use this time to clear your mind and focus on your intentions for the day.

3 Wellness Wednesdays

Tip: Build weekly routines.
It doesn't actually HAVE to be Wednesday, we just like alliteration. Select a day of the week to set up a weekly ritual of self-care, like reading your favorite book, cooking a favorite meal, or cuddling with your pets. The only requirement is that its something you're doing for YOU.

4 Thankful Thursdays

Tip: Spread the love.
Schedule a day of the week (again, doesn't HAVE to be Thursday) to go out of your way to show others that you are thankful for them. It can be your students, family, friends, co-workers - anybody that you care about.

DIGITAL DIVIDE: COMMUNICATING UNPLUGGED

Many families across West Virginia face various challenges with internet connectivity. Whether unable to afford the expense or lack of reliable access, students and families face a "digital divide" between their learning and connection to school. Some families have chosen virtual learning for their children for personal reasons, but others have been thrust into remote learning due to safety guidelines. As educators, working to support student achievement and increase family engagement regardless of where learning is occurring, we must find ways to build relationships with students and families that are "unplugged".

According to the 2019 West Virginia State Broadband Plan, "Many citizens in West Virginia do not have access to and do not use broadband internet service. The problem is particularly acute in rural parts of the State." While West Virginia has made progress with increasing access in the state, West Virginia continues to fall close to the bottom of the list of broadband connected states. The 2017 Broadband Report states, "When compared to the rest of the country, West Virginia has one of the highest rates of residents who do not have access to broadband. As we look to the immediate future of our schools, there's an undeniable need to ensure ALL students and families feel connected to their teachers, classmates and schools.

West Virginia ranks 47th in broadband connectivity, with 30% of residents not having internet access.

Bridging the Gap: Strategies for Unplugged Communication

STRATEGY 1: PHONE HOME

Remote learning and lack of school-based events can make students and families feel isolated from teachers and peers. Regular phone calls can help to connect students, teachers and families/caregivers in the absence of face-to-face opportunities. Using tools such as Google Voice, can allow calls without revealing your personal phone number.

Register for a free Google Voice account here.

STRATEGY 2: HOTSPOTS

Working together, schools and communities can open their "networks" for access to students and families, outside of the traditional school day. Wifi extenders within schools, community buildings, churches, and local businesses, allow free access from nearby parking lots.

Wifi equipped busses can be sent into communities to allow those without home access a chance to access school correspondence, assignments, and other school information. When applicable, provide regular information to families about the locations and their availability.

Check out WV Broadband Enhancement Council's Interactive Wifi Map to share with the families you serve.

STRATEGY 3: SNAIL MAIL

Never underestimate the power of a handwritten note. Share important information, photos, or just check in. Consider including a self-addressed stamped envelope to encourage the student and/or family to respond.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Think creatively about how you can get families engaged while also keeping them safe and socially distant. Check out this best practice from Johnson Elementary School in Harrison County, West Virginia, who hosted an outdoor PTA meeting in their parking lot.

Additional Outside of the Box Ideas:

- Conduct a front porch visit.
- Host a "Family Picture Day" with local photographers on your athletic fields.
- Meet families at a local park or other community location to ease insecurities.
- Hold "group" meetings in neighborhoods where multiple students live.

Johnson Elementary School
PTA MEETING
Have Your Say

TUESDAY, SEPT 15TH @7PM EST
@JOHNSON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
PARKING LOT NEAR THE PLAYGROUNDS!
BRING YOUR LAWN CHAIR!

FEEL FREE TO BRING YOUR KIDS!
ALL ARE WELCOME!

TOPIC OF CONVERSATION:
PTA MEMBERSHIP - COMMITTEE CHAIR SIGN UPS - FUNDRAISING -
AMAZON SMILES - PTA GOALS AND MORE!!!

VIRTUAL RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES

Due to the ever-changing atmosphere of our communities during the coronavirus outbreak (COVID-19), we must rethink the ways in which we educate students and families during these challenging times. Our heartfelt thoughts go out to all who have been affected by this disease and we strive to serve as a thought leader alongside schools and communities as we navigate these challenges together. Beginning last spring, as our learning environments transitioned from the classroom to virtual and in-home platforms, the West Virginia Family Engagement Center delivered a series of family-focused webinars to explore educational opportunities for students and families during school closures. Check out the links below to review our extensive list of resources on each webinar topic for your school staff, students, and families.

TOPIC 1:
ARTS-BASED LEARNING
Click Here

TOPIC 5:
PRACTICING MINDFULNESS
Click Here

TOPIC 2:
SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING
Click Here

TOPIC 6:
CREATING A LEARNING SPACE AT HOME
Click Here

TOPIC 3:
PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES
Click Here

TOPIC 7:
MAINTAINING CALM
Click Here

TOPIC 4:
LEARNING VIRTUALLY
Click Here

TOPIC 8:
MAKING MEMORIES
Click Here

WVDE RESOURCES

The West Virginia Department of Education is a vital partner in the West Virginia Family Engagement Center. The department provides a wealth of resources to support educators, students, families, and communities during these difficult times. Check out the resources below and access additional resources via the WVDE OneDrive.

Downloadable Resources from WV Family Engagement Department

WEBSITE GUIDE
Family Engagement Using Your School's Website

PARENT INPUT FORMS
Templates for parent input forms to utilize in your classrooms

CLEAN CLUB PRINT-OUT
Printable recognition cards for students practicing safe hygiene

WV Family Engagement
Family. School. Connections that Work.

Social-Emotional & Trauma Supports: ReClaimWV

COVID-19, racial upheaval, the opioid crisis, and other current events have given rise to an urgent need to address students, staff, and families who face new and ongoing mental health needs. The WVDE, with the support of state mental health experts, local school districts, schools, community agencies, and families established the ReClaimWV Initiative to address the physical, social-emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs of our students, staff, and families.

The website provides a toolkit and WV resources on trauma, substance misuse, and mental that are categorized for teachers, students, and families.

ABOUT THE WV FAMILY ENGAGEMENT CENTER

A Message From Our Directors:

The West Virginia Family Engagement Center's SEAMless approach to family engagement Supports, Encourages, Advocates, and Models collaborative family-school partnerships, building strong families and stronger students in West Virginia schools. We are grateful to work alongside the West Virginia Department of Education, local, state, and national partnering organizations, and 100 schools across the state of West Virginia to enhance family engagement throughout our state.

Thank you to all who have helped our program make such a great impact on West Virginia schools, students, families, and communities. Although this academic year will be different than most— we know that family engagement is more important now than ever before. The West Virginia Family Engagement Center team looks forward to continuing to work alongside our participating schools throughout the upcoming academic year to champion family engagement efforts both inside and outside of the school setting.

Contact Our Directors

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The West Virginia Family Engagement Center is operated and managed by The EdVenture Group, Inc.

The EdVenture Group, Inc. was awarded a $4.8 million grant (#U310A180062) from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Innovation and Improvement to establish the West Virginia Family Engagement Center. The program uses current, evidence-based practices that engage families, educators, and the community in the educational process to enhance student achievement.

Through professional discourse and partnerships, The EdVenture Group provides innovation consulting, evidence-based PD, and pioneering research to empower communities to re-imagine what education can be.

WVFEC COHORTS

COHORT 1 (2019):
Cabell, Lincoln, McDowell, Wayne, Wetzel Counties

COHORT 2 (2020):
Marion, Marshall, Mineral, Kanawha, Raleigh, Summers, Wood Counties

COHORT 3 (2021):
Barbour, Berkeley, Clay, Lewis, Logan, Mason, Mercer, Monroe, Nicholas, Pleasants, Roane Counties

COHORT 4 (2022):
Brooke, Braxton, Doddridge, Fayette, Greenbrier, Hampshire, Mingo, Morgan, Randolph, Ritchie, Preston, Tucker, Upshur Counties

Meet the Team

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WVFEC's Family Engagement Specialists provide customized support to each participating school and county.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Web Links:

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www.theedventuregroup.org
www.wvde.us
WVDE Family Engagement OneDrive

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