

April 15, 2021

The Honorable Dr. Miguel Cardona
Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW.
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Mr. Secretary:

Among the pandemic's biggest lessons is this: Parents, guardians, and families, who have been at the front lines of student learning this school year, are an essential part of their child's learning. According to [a survey from the National PTA and Learning Heroes](#), two-thirds of parents report that they are more connected with their child's day-to-day education than they have ever been before.

Now, the U.S. Department of Education has an unprecedented opportunity to elevate the importance of authentic family engagement as part of the Biden Administration's education recovery and renewal efforts. As members of the Collective Action Coalition for Families—made up of more than 50 national and local parent, education, civil rights, and advocacy organizations—we applaud the recent passage of the American Rescue Plan and the Administration's efforts to ensure all students in the United States have access to an equitable education.

The following recommendations are designed to help the Administration's efforts to address education equity as schools reopen and to be of further support and service to families as part of your efforts to address unfinished instruction, close the digital divide, and reinvigorate federal agencies.

1. Effective Family Communication and Support

As states and districts plan for school reopening and to address the unfinished instruction that has occurred as a result of the pandemic, we believe it is crucial that they provide families with clear, actionable, and culturally responsive information in their home languages utilizing communication modes that foster two way conversations and is accessible to parents, and team up with them to set goals to accelerate their children's learning.

The U.S. Department of Education can support more authentic home-school engagement in this pivotal moment by providing guidance to districts and schools on best practices to support and engage families in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and school reopening.

In particular, the guidance could focus on:

- How to have two-way communication between families and schools about student expectations, goal setting, student progress, and school improvement
- How to include families in shaping district and school reopening and recovery plans
- How to provide information, resources, and referrals to families that support family well-being and in-school learning (such as access to health, housing, food, and the internet)

Districts can prioritize these activities by using part of the 20% set-aside for unfinished instruction under the American Rescue Plan to prioritize time and training for educators to have linguistically and culturally responsive two-way communications with families around goal setting for their children.

Districts and schools can also use Title II funding under ESSA for educator professional development related to family engagement.

Schools identified for Comprehensive and Targeted Support and Improvement are already required to involve parents and the rest of their community in the creation of their school improvement plan, which includes academic goal setting for the school. A logical next step is to use their school improvement funds to ensure that families are provided multiple opportunities through various linguistically and culturally responsive strategies to be involved in the ongoing monitoring of progress against those goals, including how each child is doing relative to them.

2. Data and Information for Families

As schools adjust and respond to the changed environment created by the pandemic and the growing movement for racial justice, they must provide families with the types of information they need to make informed decisions about the health, safety, social and emotional well-being, and academic progress of their children, in a language and format that is accessible to them.

Specifically:

- School safety is a priority for families as they consider whether to send their children back to in-person schooling. Yet parents have no consistent way of knowing whether schools are following the guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and the U.S. Department of Education on school safety practices. The Department should require and facilitate reporting on school safety at the district and school level through multiple communications modes accessible to parents that is linguistically and culturally responsive and reflective of the school community.
- Other data also need to be readily available and presented in respectful, culturally and linguistically reflective and responsive and disaggregated ways with contextual language, to track the equitable rollout of recovery plans and ensure that all children have the opportunities to recover and thrive. These include: data on performance against grade-level expectations in reading, math, and other core subjects; student participation and attendance in virtual and in-person instruction; amount of synchronous instruction, home language supports, access to digital devices, reliable, high-speed internet and technology support for families; school and district disciplinary instances; mental health supports available in the district; data on how federal funding is being spent in the district; and measures of the learning environment.

3. Closing the Digital Divide Between Home and School

The American Rescue Plan included funding to help close the digital divide (also known as the “homework gap”). The Department of Education can use the policy tools at its disposal to help close the digital divide and keep it closed.

The Department, in coordination with the FCC, NTIA, and BIE, should ensure that states, districts, and schools receive clear, coordinated guidance on how to collect and maintain key data needed to assess the digital divide for students and teachers

- The Department should encourage data collection on: broadband service availability, broadband service speeds, quality of broadband service, service providers available, needs for IT support (for students, caregivers, and teachers), needs for digital literacy support (for students, caregivers, and teachers), location information (while remaining FERPA compliant), demographic information, and primarily languages spoken, types of technology used, and number of people in a household.

- The Department should encourage states, districts, and schools to include such data in a public-facing dashboard for broader stakeholder analysis. Schools have already begun to assess the “homework gap” in their own districts and with guidance, and some funding to support administration, could continue this important data collection periodically.

The Department, in partnership with the FCC, NTIA, and BIE, should develop a permanent, one-to-one device cost-support program for student and teachers from PreK-12

- The Department should lead standards-setting discussions for the program by incorporating family and educator stakeholder input to: identify reasonable thresholds for rates of device replacement; identifying curriculum-driven technology specifications to ensure that devices supported by the program meet curriculum requirements; detail models for effective procurement to ensure both the quality of devices and technical assistance and to lower costs.
- The Department should create an educational devices task force, comprising device manufacturers, families and other education stakeholders, to discuss current needs, experienced based feedback on device use in classroom and at home, innovations and new features, and supply-chain management.

The Department, in partnership with the FCC, NTIA, and BIE, should help drive deployment of universal, affordable broadband access and the development of robust digital inclusion support for families.

The Department should support the deployment of universal, affordable, “future proof” networks (capable of at least 100/100 mbps) that can meet the needs of distance learning. Since March, distance learning efforts have revealed that the cost of a monthly broadband subscription is the primary reason why the vast majority of students in the “homework gap” are without home access to broadband service. Also, a number of schools in a variety of communities (rural, tribal, urban, and suburban) have found that students’ homes are underserved by current broadband infrastructure. In particular, these students lack access to a broadband service capable of delivering a synchronous distance learning program (200/10 mbps).

The Department should gather feedback from the schools and families that have participated in programs to support students in the digital divide. Most school based digital divide initiatives include multiple components - cost support for service to the home, curriculum appropriate devices for students and teachers, and training and tech support for educators, students, and their caregivers.

- Through periodic reports based on feedback from families and other educational stakeholders, the Department can provide the FCC, NTIA, Congress, and the White House with information on the current and projected educational uses that depend on universal access to affordable robust broadband networks.
- In particular, the Department should work with families and other education stakeholders and through trusted messengers, in a linguistically and culturally responsive setting to identify: how barriers related to broadband service, access, quality of service, device cost, and lack of technology training impact curriculum decisions and educational experiences; how the digital divide impacts innovations in the education field; current and projected uses for technology in education settings; the specific technical requirements (e.g. broadband speeds, latency, devices) for current and projected uses of technology in education.

4. Department of Education Office of Family and Community Engagement

Family and community engagement cuts across all educational programs. Having an infrastructure that provides dedicated staffing and resources for family and community engagement, breaks down silos across offices, and enhances public understanding is a strategy for success at all educational levels.

The Department should establish an Office of Family and Community Engagement to coordinate across offices and support state and local education agencies in the implementation of linguistically and culturally responsive family and community engagement within federal programs.

- Such an office would further help the Department carry out its statutory responsibility to “monitor parental and public participation . . . and encourage the involvement of parents, students, and the public in the development and implementation of departmental programs.” [20 U.S.C. § 3412(e)(3)].
- The Department should establish a Family Cabinet, comprising diverse family leaders from across the country, to bring the voices and perspectives of diverse families to regularly advise the Department on its educational initiatives, particularly around the re-opening and recovery of schools.
- The Department should support and disseminate research about families’ strengths, definitions of success for their children’s education, expectations, and needs to help inform federal policies and programs.

For far too long, the benefits of a strong public education system haven’t been fully attainable for underserved students and their families. COVID 19 only exacerbated these existing inequities. As the Department supports education recovery and renewal, the Collective Action Coalition for Families is committed to working with you to authentically engage families, particularly those hardest to reach, in order to make our schools work for *all* children. We offer these recommendations about how to leverage federal funds, close the digital divide, and emphasize the importance of family and community engagement across offices within the Department in that spirit.

Sincerely,

Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors
Association of American Educators
Collaborative for Student Success
Common Sense Media
Digital Promise
EdNavigator
The Education Trust
GreatSchools.org
Horizons National
Khan Academy
Kids First Chicago
The Leadership Academy
Learning Heroes

National Association of Family, School, and Community Engagement
National Parents Union
National PTA
National Summer Learning Association
National Urban League
NWEA
Parent Institute for Quality Education
PowerMyLearning
Springboard Collaborative
Teach Plus
TNTP
UnidosUS