

# GUIDE TO HOSTING A VIRTUAL TOWN HALL



This is a critical time for school leaders to engage with parents, families and teachers and answer questions about how school closures could affect their child and school. Unfortunately, it may not be possible to have traditional PTA meetings or in-person conversations. A great alternative is to host a virtual town hall with your school leader(s). This gives parents in your school the opportunity to ask their most pressing questions, and your school the opportunity to share important information.

The tips below will help you plan for and host a virtual town hall.

## Technology

- **Select a platform.** There are a lot of user-friendly platforms to choose from. One of the most popular is Zoom, which has a low monthly fee and allows you to hold hour-long sessions for up to 100 audience members. You can also consider using Facebook Live as well. Check out more resources and other platforms in “How to Sustain Your PTA” under PTA Leaders resources at [PTA.org/COVID-19](https://www.pta.org/COVID-19).
- **Designate a technology manager from your team.** This person will ensure the settings are correct and will control the platform features during the town hall. Hold a test run of the virtual town hall with a few volunteers to test out the settings and features.
- **Use the platform’s settings.** You’ll want to make sure the following settings are in place to minimize distractions and allow for a valuable conversation:
  - Disable the chat box, or only allow chats directly to the host.
  - Mute all participants. You can unmute later if anyone has a question.
  - Require participants to register for the event.
  - Decide in advance if you would like to record the conversation (with permission from the school leader).

## Logistics

- **Advertise it.** Leverage multiple channels to share the registration link. You can use Twitter, Facebook, the school website and email communications that come from the school.
- **Let the participants’ questions drive the discussion.** Send email invitations to your parents, families and teachers that includes a link to register and submit a question. The collection of questions can be as simple as a Google form. Designate one person who can receive and track question submissions.

- **Select your questions.** You may receive too many questions or too few. Review them and select the most relevant for the moderator to ask. If you need additional questions, use the 10 Critical Questions.
- **Designate a moderator.** The moderator will open the session, moderate the town hall, ask the submitted questions and monitor time.
- **Develop a run of show.** Be specific and identify who will be speaking and when. Also include time guidelines for the introduction, questions and closing. Allow time for additional questions at the end.
- **Prepare your school leader.** Share your run of show and consider doing a practice run to make sure your school leader is comfortable with the technology. In addition to the submitted questions, make sure your administrator knows important topics that can be discussed during the town hall, including:
  - Plans for future school closures
  - How they will measure and address learning loss
  - Safety measures the school is taking

## Hosting the Event

- **Log in early.** As a host, have all speakers log in 10 minutes early to allow time to fix any last-minute glitches and for everyone to get settled to start the session.
- **Remind the audience of virtual etiquette.** To avoid unnecessary interruptions, remind the audience they will be muted to minimize distractions, and unmuted individually if they need to speak. It's a good idea to review how to use the mute and camera functions on the software before beginning the session.
- **Use your run of show to stay on track.** Keep an eye on the clock to make sure you get through the submitted questions in the allotted time.
- **But also go with the flow.** A town hall is meant to be a dialogue, rather than a scripted session, so it's okay if other topics come up along the way.

## After the Town Hall

- **Keep the conversations going.** Virtual town halls are a great way to maintain the relationship between parents and school in a time when communication is so important. Think of this town hall as the “first in a series,” and identify other key moments throughout the school year when it is important to bring together different school leaders to answer parents’ questions. Here are some ideas to keep the conversation going:
  - Consider hosting a twitter chat as a follow-up to the town hall.
  - Host another town hall with health officials from the local health department or the School Nurses Association. You could also consider a session dedicated to social and emotional learning and invite school counselors and psychologists to participate.
  - Establish a dedicated place for families to share their questions and input. For example, in coordination with the school district or school, you can create a hotline for parents to share their thoughts and/or set up a designated email inbox.
- **Use the survey in the toolkit as a follow-up.** Be sure to send out the survey at the end of the town hall to your participants. This will give you a better understanding of how effective the session was and what questions parents may still have.

