



Universally Designed Family Engagement

How to connect with families, build partnerships, and
establish strong communications



FEDERATION FOR CHILDREN
WITH SPECIAL NEEDS





INTRO- DUCTION

“Effective family engagement involves connecting with families, interacting with them as equal partners, and establishing strong two-way communications channels.”

During COVID-19 and beyond, it is more important than ever to engage our families and our communities. To ensure that we connect with all families, we have to universally design our family and community engagement practices.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework that recognizes that “one-size-fits-all” practices exclude some learners. The UDL Guidelines are a tool used in the implementation of Universal Design for Learning. These guidelines offer a set of concrete suggestions that can be applied to any discipline or domain to ensure that all learners can access and participate in meaningful, challenging learning opportunities.

This idea also applies to families and the community. Since our goal is to teach all students and engage all families, we need to recognize barriers that may prevent meaningful involvement, and build partnerships, where parents help the school improve the education of their children. This resource presents strategies, informed by the UDL Guidelines to scale family and community engagement.

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, June 2020, *Strengthening Partnerships: A Framework for Prenatal through Young Adulthood Family Engagement in Massachusetts*, <https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/family-engagement-framework.pdf>

Strategies to Build Family Engagement

Provide options for recruiting interest

Getting parents involved in your classroom is a huge effort that has awesome possibilities. Parents, like teachers, are very busy but many will want to get involved in some way. Offering them different options expands the possibilities.



Do a virtual “Bring a loved one or caregiver, (or anyone) to school day” by having the student interview their parents, caregiver, community member etc. in a writing or in a recorded video on their phone. The interview can be about their culture, their personal history, their work, etc. Have them keep it to just one or two questions.



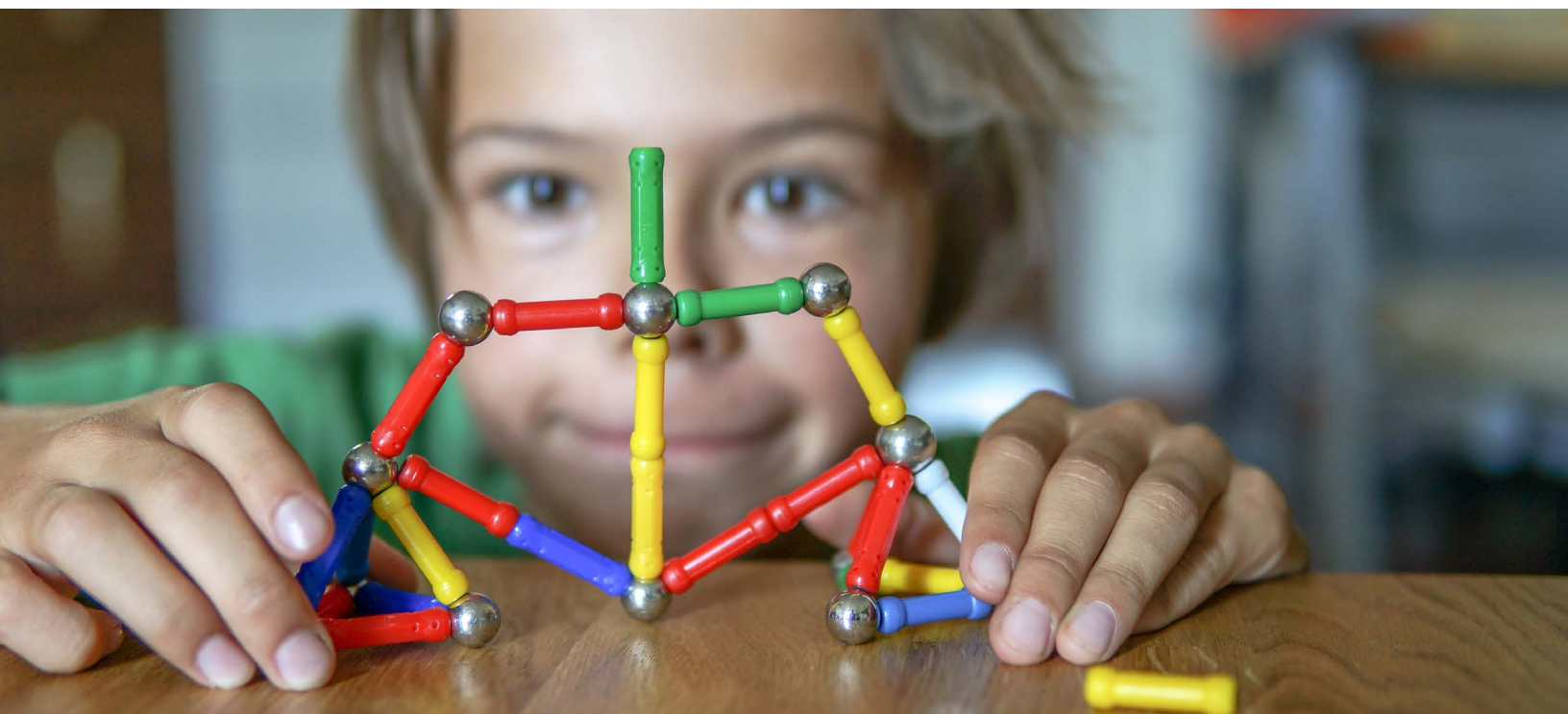
Ask for help creating digital graphics or photos of posters for topics of the week.



Develop autonomy: encourage parent(s)/caregivers to offer their students choice in their home - where they sit to work and learn. Encourage asking questions like “Would you be more productive if there were music on in the background or if it were silent?”



Ask parent(s) and caregivers how they would like to help. They may have ideas that have not been mentioned. This gives them voice and choice. Also work to create a culture of nurture where “no” is an acceptable answer.



Optimize relevance, value, and authenticity



Be aware of and sensitive to families' realities, cultural beliefs, and language.



If you have a wide variety of cultures, you may want to script out your messages to families so that you can review it from a cultural point of view. Ask others to review it for you, so you can avoid any unintended word choices or assumptions. You don't have to read the script but the process will better prepare you.



Every family wants what is best for their child. Start with this assumption, and meet each family where they are!

Foster Collaboration and Community



Connect with families you haven't connected with by reaching out in multiple ways. For example, you may want to send an email, call them at home, or send a letter. Once you are able to connect, share good news about their child and ask how their family is doing. Also, ask for their preferred means of contact for future connection. It is also important to connect with cultural brokers from your community organizations.



If the family speaks a language other than English at home, work with the school to have a translator on any phone calls or video chats.



If you are having trouble connecting with your families, create a Google Survey and send it to the home via email or text, and send a letter asking what their preferred means of communication is, as well as what the best time to contact them may be. It would also be helpful to ask what language is spoken at home and for alternative contacts, if the parents are not available. At the secondary level (middle and high school), there are more teachers for each child. Some schools prefer to coordinate these circumstances with the counselor or social worker, instead of having each teacher reach out independently of one another.



Offer a "parent's office hour" for one hour a week on a different night and time each week, so that parents have a few options to connect. This could be done in a virtually or via phone call.



Offer the [Remind app](#) as an option to foster, engage and facilitate a two way communication between the teacher and family members. This is a good way to update families on school site and classroom information. Remind has free basic messaging and translation for up to 10 classes and 150 students per class if you are a teacher.



On a district or site level, offer a Q&A via Facebook or other platform with the principal or superintendent. Parents have the opportunity to ask and have their questions answered.



Support Planning and Strategy Development



Share daily schedules, hopes and dreams, and keep archives in the same place to streamline things for parents/caregivers.

Include ways families can support learning:



- Suggest options like mid-day and/or wellbeing check-ins, setting goals, dinner conversation, daily reading, gentle nudges and praise (@campkinda).
- Create regular opportunities for families to provide low stakes feedback on progress with remote learning at home (ex. Fun Friday check out).
- Share some of your favorite resources for brain breaks and fun at home (GoNoodle, Brain Breaks).



Share resource sites to support their student's learning such as:

- [Khan academy](#)
- [Eureka math support](#) - a helpful site to support parents with homework, etc.
- [Math homework help](#) offers video tutorials, vocab help, and the CCSS math standards explanations for parents.
- [Spelling City](#)



Help families create a schedule/routine for students that works for them. Then, support the family on how to ask their student(s) what's working/not working and adjust as needed.



Encourage parent(s)/caregivers to reach out to the teacher to discuss other options or solutions that they thought of for their child/children when things aren't working (e.g. their child is shutting down, etc.)

Facilitate personal coping skills and strategies



Share resources that the school and community are providing in multiple ways. In addition to sharing via email and social media in multiple languages, contact local newspapers and cable access stations, and collaborate with cultural brokers to distribute information and facilitate focus groups.



Share the contact information for the adjustment counselor/s in your school and other community supports and resources.



Offer a call-in/Facebook Live session for parent grade-level meetings (e.g. 1st grade, 9th grade, etc.) with school counselors and community organizations to offer resources, support, and suggestions for parents/caregivers that can be done at home.

Universal Design for Learning acknowledges that student learning is not a “one-size-fits-all” proposition. It also recognizes that learning does not happen in a vacuum. Learning is dependent upon engaging the whole child, who lives in a unique world surrounded by family and friends, as well as a community and culture that supports the child. As teachers, we need to tap into that world, build upon it, and energize the child to succeed.

