
SUPPORTING ENGLISH LEARNERS DURING AND AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Tips for Families/Caregivers

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Focused on the role of families/caregivers of English Learners, the author suggests ways in which family members can reach out to the school community to ensure that English Learners receive the academic and social-emotional supports they need to overcome challenges caused by recent school closures and reopenings amid the global pandemic.

In-person events aimed at building relationships between schools and families/caregivers became a rarity as we sheltered in place over the last year and a half. Although some districts and schools made great gains in connecting with families virtually, the absence of in-person events like Back-to-School Night or monthly coffees with the school principal made it difficult to keep in touch with teachers and school personnel. In this context, how can families/caregivers initiate and maintain productive relationships with teachers and other school staff that benefit English Learners both during and after the pandemic? What resources are available to help families/caregivers continue to support their children and teens? That is what is covered in the answers to common questions below.

Question: How is my child doing in school?

Answer: Over the years, QTEL staff has conducted many focus groups with families/caregivers of English Learners as part of our work in schools and districts. These focus groups, conducted both before and during the pandemic, reveal dissatisfaction with messages families/caregivers receive regarding their children's progress in school. On the one hand, families/caregivers report that teachers often say their children are making good progress and generally doing fine; grades, on the other hand, tell a different story. Report cards as a measure of student progress are problematic for many reasons. One reason is that report cards often reflect student performance on multiple metrics. For example, grades can reflect scores on tests, the percentage of homework assignments completed, participation in

class, and progress toward course goals. They are not a simple measure of whether students are achieving grade-level standards. Another reason grades are problematic is that they tend to be viewed by families/caregivers and teachers as a measure of how much effort a student is putting forth. High amounts of effort do not always translate into high grades, unfortunately. There could be underlying reasons why a student is having difficulty in school.

Rather than rely on students' report cards, families/caregivers are encouraged to have conversations with their children about their progress in each of their core classes (English, mathematics, science, and social studies). Open-ended questions such as the following can be used during these conversations:



1. What are you studying in class?
2. What do you find enjoyable about the class?
3. What do you find difficult about the class?
4. What do you do when you don't understand something?
5. What is your relationship like with your teacher(s)?

Your children's answers to these questions will reveal much about their comfort level in the class and their level of motivation. If your student or child is unmotivated, is frustrated, or does not feel comfortable asking for help, it may be time to have a conversation with your child's teacher. If you do speak with the teacher, be sure to ask whether there are additional services or supports the teacher and school can provide and what you can do at home to help.

Question: How do I talk to my child's teacher?

Answer: If your child is struggling academically or is feeling bored and unchallenged in class, they may not be receiving the intellectual push and/or support that they need in order to flourish. Talking with your child's teacher may reveal whether this is, in fact, the case. If possible, make an appointment to speak with your child's teacher. A parent-school liaison may be able to help with this. If necessary, ask the school to arrange for an interpreter. In your meeting with your child's teacher, explain your concerns and ask if the teacher has the same concerns. Ask about what resources are

available to support your child's learning. Many teachers are available before or immediately after school to answer questions or help students with areas in which they are experiencing difficulty. Ask if this is the case. Teachers may also be willing to provide advanced students with more challenging work. Don't be afraid to ask about ways that you can support your child or teen at home. If the teacher does not offer any suggestions for providing additional support, it may be time to involve the school principal and/or other members of the school community in the conversation.

Question: My child/teen is unusually anxious, sad, or upset. How can the school or district help?

Answer: Many students are experiencing stress and anxiety as a result of changes to their daily routines and relationships caused by the pandemic. This stress and anxiety could affect your child's ability to focus on school-related tasks. All school districts employ professionals who may be able to work with your child to assess their particular situation. A school guidance counselor or school principal can share this information with you. Additionally, many schools and districts now offer wellness centers where your child/teen can

talk to trained counselors about personal topics at no cost. These counselors may also be able to refer you to resources in the community that can be of benefit to your child. Private or community service providers commonly offer a sliding scale for families who have limited resources. Regardless of where your child receives services (either in or out of school), check in frequently with your child's service provider to ask about their progress and learn about what you can do at home to help.



Question: What are school districts' responsibilities during and after COVID-19?

Answer:

- Public schools are required to provide all students with an appropriate education in core subjects regardless of the state of public health. This includes continuing to assist English Learners in developing their English proficiency. Whether schools are open to in-person instruction, virtual/online instruction, or both is a decision that is determined by the school district in conjunction with local public health officials. However, the amount of time that students are required to spend in class may vary according to the format of instruction.
- In order to measure schools' progress for accountability purposes, annual testing of students' English language proficiency and in English Language Arts and Mathematics resumed in the spring of 2021. Scores on these tests should now be available and can provide families/caregivers and community members with an idea of how well the school has performed in terms of serving its students.
- Public schools are required to follow social distancing protocols and to clean/disinfect school buildings regularly to ensure student health and safety. Furthermore, school districts should inform families about changes made to these protocols and to changes made to school schedules (both virtual and in-person) as the situation unfolds. Any questions or concerns about a school's responsibility to keep students engaged academically and safe during or after COVID-19 should be directed to the school principal.

Question: What are some websites from which I can learn how to support my child/teen during and after COVID-19 school closures?

Answer: There are a growing number of online resources for families of English Learners. Below are just a few.

- Colorín Colorado (<https://www.colorincolorado.org>) primarily offers information for educators. However, there are numerous Resources for Parents of Teens <https://www.colorincolorado.org/resources-parents-teens>. Click on the "En español" button for a Spanish translation. Examples include the following:
 - Helping Your Child Succeed: Helpful PreK-12 Tips
 - Parent Tips: How to Get Your Teen Reading
 - Tips for Parents of Struggling Adolescent Writers
- The National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) provides COVID-19 resources for families: <https://www.pta.org/home/family-resources/coronavirus-information>. Be sure to click on "Spanish" at the top of the page and scroll down to view all of the resources. Of particular interest is the podcast called "Notes from the Backpack." To access podcast episodes, go to <https://www.pta.org/center-for-family-engagement/notes-from-the-backpack>. Several of the podcast episodes are available in Spanish. In addition to these COVID-19 resources, more information for families/caregivers is available on the PTA's Family Resources page: <https://www.pta.org/home/family-resources>. To view them in Spanish, click "Spanish" at the top of the page.
- Learning Heroes is a website that provides advice to families/caregivers on how to help their children learn at home. Go to: <https://bealearninghero.org>. For Spanish, click "Español" at the top of the page.

In addition to these sources of information, many schools and districts offer their own local resources to help families/caregivers support English Learners through the trials of COVID-19 and beyond. Contact your school's Parent Center, parent-school liaison, or local parent advocacy group for these and other resources.

