

## **TO AVOID REOPENING DISASTERS, REAL ENGAGEMENT WITH PARENTS AND TEACHERS IS CRUCIAL**

*By Lauren Hajjar, Suffolk University*

As school districts across the state scramble to make final decisions on fall learning plans, parents and teachers take a front row seat as spectators in a process that will greatly impact their lives. I study the role of relationships on performance in multiple settings, including K-12 education. My research shows that while implementing a plan as complex as school re-opening during a pandemic, it is essential to carefully manage communication and relationships among key stakeholders – students, teachers, parents, administrators, other staff, and public health officials.

My experiences as a parent and as an advisory council member – both framed by my work as a social science researcher – indicate that many of Massachusetts' school districts are headed for failure. District leaders have neglected to meaningfully engage teachers and families as credible members of the school community.

These failures jeopardize everyone's safety because clear, honest, and open communication is essential for spotting and stopping the spread. Further, buy-in from teachers and parents is more critical to the successful implementation of learning plans than ever before. It is not too late to address these issues and to enter the school year with a foundation of meaningful engagement from the people who are most effected by and integral to successfully reopen.

### **Meetings And Surveys Do Not Equal Meaningful Engagement**

Take one Massachusetts school district as an example. District leadership initiated a large back-to-school planning task force representing multiple stakeholder groups, including health and mental health professionals, principals, staff, teachers and parents. While promising, this task force has proved to be more of a formality than anything; leaders have continued to carry out their own agendas and largely dismiss ideas, insights, and questions brought up by teachers and parents.

When a parent asked about the potential for more [outdoor classroom spaces](#), an administrator responded: "That's not a good idea" without providing reasons. An Occupational Therapist Team Leader asked about increasing staffing to accommodate safety protocols. The response: "We can't do that." No explanation provided. This lack of consideration reinforces harmful stereotypes about how public education runs: with authorities dictating, "sit down, shut up, and do what you're told."

To make matters worse, the use of bad data threatens to confuse conversations about strategy. District leaders made an effort to survey families in the district regarding their preferences for in-person, hybrid, and remote learning plans, including questions about childcare needs for younger children. While well-intentioned, the survey was not well-broadcast, and thus, yielded few responses. The respondents were not representative of district families. Rather than making an effort to increase the response rate, leadership used the little data they received to inform their plans. The key takeaway here: saying that you're engaging teachers and families in a process is a lot different than actually doing it.

## Silos and Faulty Accountability Structures Must Be Addressed

In many organizations, including schools, accountability structures are designed to achieve command and control, reinforcing silos by holding managers accountable for specific measures related to their function, according to research by Jody Hoffer Gittel of Brandeis University. This top-down approach is ever present in bureaucratic systems, where those in positions of power make procedural decisions without regard to the impact on key stakeholders.

In Massachusetts, the Department of Early and Secondary Education holds local districts accountable for specific goals, school improvement plans, report cards and other performance indicators. Districts place that accountability on individual schools. Without adequate buy-in from all stakeholders, particularly the teachers and specialists on the front lines and the students and families served, the accountability structures become punitive and can create further challenges.

You see, this is a leadership problem that has nothing to do with COVID-19. Education leaders across the country have responded to this pandemic in the same outdated way as they respond to any complex problem. Yet, they expect different results. This manner of developing plans and making decisions in silos does not lend itself to the creativity and innovation needed to solve complex problems. Nor does it support meaningful or productive partnerships with teachers and families.

Instead of feeling engaged in the process, teachers and families are being *told what to do and how to deliver learning plans*. As a result, teachers, left with questions about their own safety, are now [pushing for fully remote plans](#), [protesting reopening plans](#) and/or leaving their jobs. Parents are making their own plans to [homeschool](#), form [micro learning pods](#), and [create outdoor classrooms](#) as they fret about continuity of learning for their children and maintaining employment.

## A Path Forward

Regardless of the mode of K-12 education delivery this fall, leaders, teachers, staff and families still need to coordinate and recognize their interdependencies in order to be successful. District leaders have an opportunity to shift from a top-down accountability system to a bottom-up approach, which would garner more support from teachers and families and create conditions for more students to learn and engage in meaningful ways. Engaging with *teachers and families as partners* would allow districts to more effectively implement and assess remote and/or hybrid learning curriculums.

**Develop shared goals between schools and families.** District leaders must not assume their goals are shared by families or teachers right now as they promote hybrid and remote learning curriculum and determine in-school safety protocols. Meanwhile, conversations in parent circles are centered on children's mental health, safety and continuity of learning—and the elephant in the room: how the implementation of said curriculum will impact family and work life. Nobody is talking about this.

Without clear and consistent communication among district leaders, teachers and parents, it is unlikely that school plans will reflect an approach that is embraced by all. Districts must gather information from families and teachers on an ongoing basis about what is going well, what is most challenging and how the district can support their emerging needs. This data must reflect families and teachers across a district.

**Generate buy-in and establish teachers and families as integral partners.** Schools are no longer playing the lead role in delivering education—they are now facilitating a process that must be largely implemented by teachers and families. Teachers are integral to the successful implementation of fall learning plans, and, unlike previous academic years, parents will play a frontline role in delivering education to their children. Districts need to recognize that successfully educating children during this crisis will require an approach that engages parents as credible members of the school community whose input into the curriculum is essential for success.

To do this requires *listening to understand* the perspectives of parents and teachers and using approaches such as [humble inquiry](#) to building trusting relationships. Without a clear end to the pandemic in sight, districts need to do a better job aligning with teachers and parents and engaging them as co-producers in this process.

Imagine what the future of K-12 education would be if parent and teacher input were taken seriously. Would there be opportunities to explore innovative reopening solutions such as use of outdoor space or more creative staffing patterns? Might we consider models from other countries that access untapped community assets? If parents helped produce the process, would districts have more human capital to draw from? The answer is yes to all of these questions, and this is where innovative, sustainable change lies—in the ability of district leaders to value and draw upon the expertise of all school stakeholders for the collective well-being of students. It's not rocket science, but it does require an intentional effort.