



SchoolLinks

Back to School Toolkit:

Engaging Families Around College and Career Readiness

August 2022

The Critical Importance of Family Engagement This Year

As we kick off the new school year, it is vital—even more so than in previous years—that schools and counselors make a concerted effort to work on establishing and rebuilding relationships with families. Families are powerful partners in helping students to get the support they need and meet their goals.

Use this toolkit to proactively connect with families, promote dynamic communication channels, and create meaningful partnerships that will catalyze student success.

Efforts early in the year will mean that everyone is more successful—students, teachers, and counselors.



What Topics We Need to Engage Families This Year

The goal of family engagement around college and career readiness is to have families explicitly connect the idea that efforts today lead to opportunities and choices for their students tomorrow.

Counselors can do tremendous good by ensuring that families understand how to:

Access relevant information

Check to see if their students are on track

Find opportunities for exploration and enrichment

Seek support when they are struggling or uncertain

At the Elementary Level

Schools across the nation have been deeply concerned with academic gaps from pandemic-related learning loss and accelerating learning that slowed with the many transitions and disruptions. With this hyper focus on academics, it is easy for activities and lessons focused on social and emotional learning to get lost or deprioritized. And, with concerns about immediate achievement measures and benchmarks, finding ways for students to explore passions or interests that relate to postsecondary choices and opportunities can seem unnecessary in the near term.

With less time for the learning experiences at school, families can be a tremendous partner for building these skills and connecting interests with real-world career aspirations.

Counselors can communicate with families on topics to support this important development:

Opportunities for Enrichment: Share information about events, camps, and other opportunities at museums, libraries, other local schools, or colleges that allow for hands-on learning or explore potential careers and areas of interest.

Conversation Prompts to Encourage SEL at Home: Send families easy-to-use scripts to ask their children questions about how they are feeling, tips for managing strong emotions, and tools to access if they have questions or concerns.

Bridging School and Home: Keep families up-to-date on any SEL initiatives or curriculum being used at school and share easy ways for them to extend or reinforce this learning at home.

At the Secondary Level

Over the course of the pandemic, one of the most significant losses in school cultures has been the support that has been able to be provided by peers and families to each other because of their prior knowledge. The informal “word-of-mouth” networks of how to do things and who to ask questions were disrupted by the pandemic.

This year’s high school seniors never have seen a class of high school seniors have a normal school year. Students seeking internships and apprenticeships may not know any students that had such an experience because they have not been available for almost three years. And, many requirements and opportunities were provisionally suspended or changed due to the pandemic. Because of this, things counselors and other school staff used to automatically assume families knew can no longer be assumed.



At the Secondary Level

Being explicit and redundant is more important than ever. Counselors need to ensure that families are aware of the following with sufficient lead time.

Information on:

Testing Processes and Schedules: Updated requirements for testing as it applies to graduation; testing requirements for applications for postsecondary opportunities; schedules for testing dates.

External Deadlines: FAFSA, institution-specific financial aid applications, college or training applications, scholarship opportunities.

Internal Deadlines or Timeframes: Magnet program applications, letters of recommendation, transcripts, support for essay writing, and course planning and completion.

Course & Other Relevant Requirements: Pre-requisite courses, community service hour requirements (as they relate to requirements for graduation), higher-ed opportunities, scholarships, apprenticeship programs.

Resources for:

Hands-On Learning Opportunities: Regularly share with families any local opportunities for volunteering, internships, or employment and explain how these experiences can inform their student's college and career planning.

Postsecondary Exploration: Share opportunities for field trips to local businesses, college visits, career talks, or any online resources your school has for students to explore their postsecondary options.

Tracking Student Progress: Share with families how to access their students' grades, attendance, and whether they are on track for a variety of postsecondary outcomes.

Best Practices for Engaging with Families

In order to ensure that students are college and career ready, counselors at all levels regularly work with students to provide teaching and coaching of important life skills, advocate for them to have equitable access to the resources they need, and ensure that they are making progress on important academic, personal, and social goals. **Engaging with families is foundational to all of these pursuits.**

Use these best practices and tips to strengthen relationships with families, increase the reach and impact of information and events, and set students and families on a path to success.



Best Practices: Connect

Make Relationships with Families a Priority

Find ways to connect with families early in the school year. Attend back-to-school events, include a photo in a welcome back letter, or put out video messages welcoming families. These efforts help counselors become a friendly face within the school community and work to establish the foundation for important communication channels throughout the school year.

Provide Contact Information and a Description of your Role

As schools send out information early in the year, ask them to introduce you and any other school counselors or school-based mental health professionals with contact information and descriptions of roles. This helps families know who to contact as issues arise and alleviates frustration from families as they try to determine who might be able to support student or family needs. Reshare this information at regular intervals throughout the year and post it on the school website so that is accessible for families as needed.

Find Ways to Include All Families

Not all families can attend in-person events due to work schedules, childcare, and other life circumstances. Find ways to include all families by offering live, virtual options as well as recordings of speakers and events. Family engagement is not about parents and families coming to the school building; it is about families connecting with school personnel, learning new ways to support student growth, and sharing perspective and insights to inform the student experience.

Be Student- and Family-Centric

When sending information to families, vet the messaging from the perspective of a parent or family member. Assume that most of the audience does not have a background in education or rich experience with the college application process. By focusing on how information may be received and understood, counselors can maximize the impact of the communication.

Best Practices: Communicate

Regular and Proactive Messaging

Create a communication plan to engage with families throughout the year. Ensure that communication is regular and ongoing and covers timely, relevant topics. Planned communication that is part of a routine or schedule helps families to know when to expect information and keeps them connected to the school.

Multimodal Communication

Consider sending important messages in a variety of ways. Multimodal communication—via emails, texts, social media posts, and mailed letters—helps to reach more families, and redundancy helps to ensure that families are receiving messages.

Assume Positive Intent

When communicating with families, lead with warmth and understanding. Most often, families are doing the best they know to support their children. If they have missed a deadline, rather than showing frustration or judgment, try to support them with steps to take to remedy the situation.

Home Language

Take special note of the primary language of parents and families, and ensure that communication is sent in the appropriate language.

Best Practices: Support

Share Deadlines Early and Often

Counselors, especially those that work with secondary students, deal regularly with important deadlines. These deadlines—for financial aid applications, internship opportunities, college applications, scholarship submissions, and more—are critical prerequisites for students to access the opportunities and resources they need for postsecondary aspirations.

Include Actionable and Clear Steps

Clearly explain the iterative steps necessary to accomplish each deadline and explain how the steps connect to one another. For example, students might need to complete a particular course or number of service hours before submitting their application for a scholarship. Or, families might need to access various bank paperwork before filing their FAFSA application. Share as much information as possible with actionable steps and easy-to-access links for families.

Encourage Families to Make a Plan

When working with families to resolve a problem or accomplish a particular task, help them to outline the steps they will take and include how you will follow up with them. Families are more likely to take action when they have specific tasks and know to expect someone to follow up with them.

Tools to Engage Families:

Social Media Sample Language

As part of social media posts or other communication with families, use these templates to guide your outreach. Be sure to personalize with school- or district-specific resources, links, and dates.

FAFSA Completion: Applications for FAFSA will open on October 1st. Some funding and financial aid is granted on a first-come, first-served basis. Make sure to complete your FAFSA as soon as possible. Click [here](#) to complete the FAFSA.

Financial Aid: Did you Know? 84% of all college students receive some kind of financial aid. Click [here](#) for resources on applying and securing financial assistance for college.

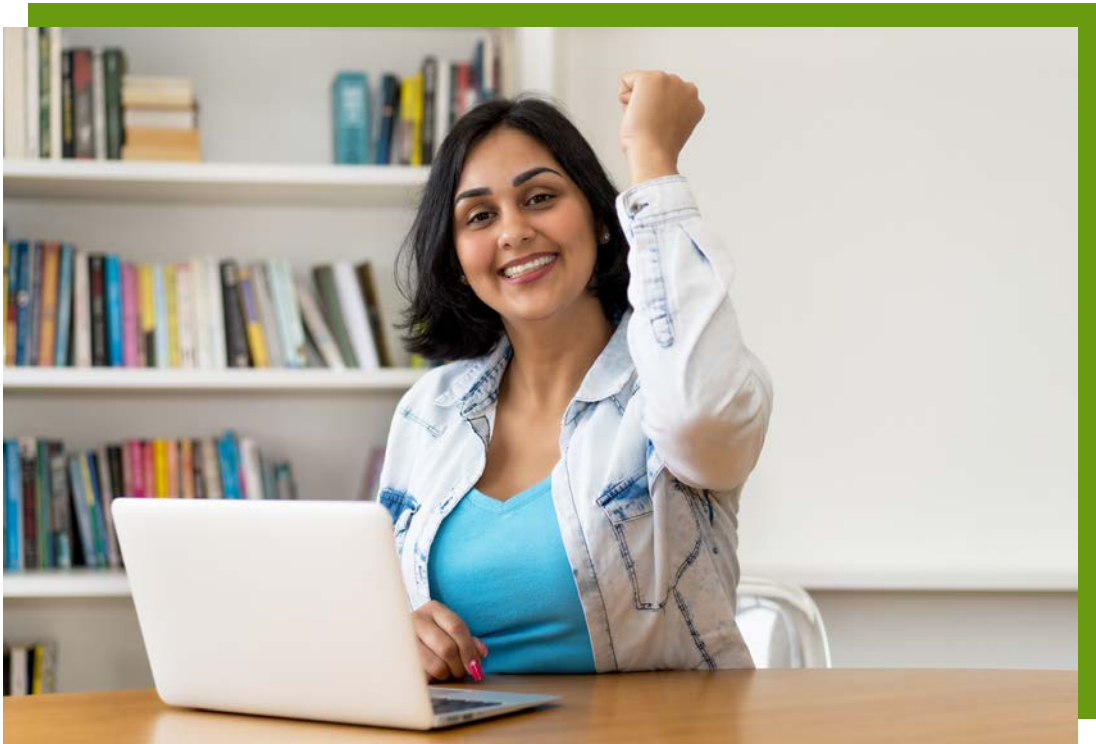
Scholarships: Scholarships are not just for academics or athletics. There are many scholarships available to recognize essay contest winners, artistic achievements, volunteer service to the community, a desired career path, and other talents or achievements? Visit this scholarship database to find scholarships that might be a good fit for you.

Elementary Career Development: What do you want to be when you grow up? It's never too early for children to start exploring interests and connecting those interests with their future goals. When your child displays a specific interest or skill, help them brainstorm careers they might be able to use their talents.

Social and Emotional Learning: Just like students learn to count or read, students have to learn how to manage their feelings and emotions. Visit our school's webpage to learn more about ways to help your child develop these important skills.

General Family Engagement: Families, you are a valuable and important part of your student's success. Please join us for a school event. Thank you in advance for partnering with us!

We hope this toolkit has prepared you for the year ahead!



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