

Best and Promising Practices for Communicating with Students Virtually

GOAL: Connect with students during virtual learning to strengthen relationships, provide emotional support, and make sure they can complete what they need for high school and prepare for college when we are not seeing them in person.

Relationships are the key to connection and success in a virtual environment. Relationships are everything. Students don't connect with you if they don't WANT to.

These best practices have been gathered from teachers, school counselors and other educators on the West Coast (Washington, Oregon, Alaska, and California) who have successfully connected with students during the virtual learning environment in 2020.

Lead with care

In communications with students, focus on the relationship FIRST. How are they doing? How is their family doing? What do they need? What are they worried about right now? Schedule individual and small group check ins where the only purpose is to find out how students are doing in life.

Devote one day of the week to connection ONLY and/or start the school year with connection ONLY

Choose one day of the week to only focus on connecting with students and building relationships instead of tasks and instruction. If possible, spend the first two weeks of school on connection and teacher training/professional development BEFORE instruction begins.

Encourage students to connect with each other

Promote opportunities for students to work together on projects with other students they choose. Provide the optional opportunity to stay on the Zoom/Google Meet/Microsoft Teams to talk with others after the class or meeting.

Let students lead

Give as many opportunities as possible for students to choose a topic they want to learn about and work on it. Form design teams of students and staff for what virtual learning can look like and how it can be better.

Ask students to research and teach something they are already an expert in with the rest of the class or group OR what they are learning during their time at home, invite these lessons learned at home into school to validate their importance.

Weekly class meetings/assemblies with door prizes

Hold a weekly class meeting (9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th graders). Include announcements and make it fun. Provide incentives to show up, such as pizza gift cards.

Leverage Peer and Family Relationships

Get to know who students' friends are and ask them for help in connecting with students you haven't been able to reach. Let them know that you want to help their friend get what they need and give your number. Similarly, connecting with students' parents helps (make sure you emphasize that the student is not in trouble for not participating in virtual school so far).

Get students' cell phone numbers and use them as much as possible. You can get them from friends, coaches, family members or from Remind (if student provided their number).

"I found when calling families of students who were not participating in my online class, rather than blame the student, I would state why I was calling and offer help. In 99% of the calls I made last Spring, families were SUPER appreciative that someone from the school was reaching out and trying to help their child."

Schedule virtual meetings with students after 11:00 AM

Many schools and staff in multiple states (teachers and counselors) report that virtual meetings held after 11 AM were better attended than those held before 11 AM.

Text before calling and do it after noon

Get [Google Voice](#) numbers so that you don't need to use your personal cell phone to make calls. Text the student or parent before calling so that they can save your number, let them know who you are and why you'll be calling. This results in a much higher pick up rate than if it's a cold call from an unknown number. Also, send the text and make the calls in the afternoon or early evening.

Texting in general and calling in general (in the afternoon and evening) have been more effective than email alone (can work well paired with email).

Pay attention to the subject line and timing of emails

The subject line matters to students and parents. If the subject of the email is graduation, put graduation in the subject line. Make sure that the subject line is related to the content of the email and also something that students and parents will understand and care about (like graduation).

Emails sent in the evening are more often responded to right away.

Make emails as personal as possible. Specific and personal emails directed to one student are more effective than email blasts.

Use a proactive approach instead of office hours

Proactively reach out to specific students and set up specific times rather than open office hours when students can drop in. Students have been more responsive to the personal reach than the open invitation.

Track student contacts on spreadsheet along with method and time of day

Tracking connections with students including how they were contacted, the day and time of day on a Google sheet. The Google sheet could be a class, grade level or any other grouping of students. Easy for multiple adults to track communications with students.

Use Instagram

Create a professional account on instagram for yourself or your classroom or group of students. Students are already engaged with the platform and in addition to posting, you can also use Instagram stories for polls or other ways to interact with students. Direct messaging within instagram can be a good way to connect with students.

"Coming to a platform/tech they already use regularly for non academics. Integrating community oriented "fun" stuff into the virtual space so it doesn't feel like a drag to engage. With instagram you can make polls, ask anonymous questions, post photos and videos on stories, and make it more interactive and visual. I made Instagram stories to "hype" the week's lessons (and you can always see who has viewed the stories!) in addition to community building content."

Consider home visits or participating in community resources such as food distribution sites

For students who have not been able to connect virtually, a home visit (with safe social distancing, outdoors and masking) to check on students and their families is an effective way to trouble shoot. Others have had success with joining food distribution sites and connecting with families there.

"We created a home-visit structure, identifying students who we had lost connection with over the course of the closures, and deployed school teams to homes and work sites to re-connect. This method was highly effective and arranged through a data base accessed by grade-level Care Teams."

Additional Resources:

30 minute video about building connectedness and belonging when school buildings are closed:

<https://go.panoramaed.com/video/video/building-connectedness-belonging-w1>

Navigating grades and motivation during (and not during) the pandemic:

<https://www.edsurge.com/news/2020-05-21-grades-fail-at-motivating-students-intrinsic-motivation-works-better>

Research about engagement in remote learning:

<https://www.edsurge.com/news/2020-05-06-how-can-educators-tap-into-research-to-increase-engagement-during-remote-learning>

Round up of what is happening around the country in remote learning:

<http://www.catalyst-ed.org/what-catalysted-has-been-seeing-and-hearing/>