

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Virtual Support for EL Families

Here are four ways to help offset learning loss By Leslie M. Babinski, Steven J. Amendum, Steven E. Knotek, and Marta Sánchez June 19, 2020

By Sharron Livingston

1. Support students' emotional and mental health by maintaining relationships with schools and teachers. During the abrupt end to in-person schooling because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to virtual instruction, it was important for school leaders to pay special attention to their districts' outreach efforts to families who do not speak English as their first language. Many families with English-language learners may also face significant challenges during this time from loss of work, separation from extended families, and concerns about their health. Information to help parents support their children allows for continuity of the central place of the school in the lives of many families. Additional resources from schools and districts for interpretation and translation with clear two-way communication may be necessary to support both teachers and families during remote instruction for ELLs.

2. Encourage and support families to use their best language. As parents have moved into a home schooling role, it is important to provide a clear message to families that by using their home language, they can continue to support their children's progress in literacy. In fact, recent research shows that young ELLs with strong early-literacy skills in their native Spanish at kindergarten entry made greater growth in English reading from kindergarten through 4th grade. In this study, the effect of early Spanish reading ability was more influential than students' ability to understand and speak English. Given the results of this study, the message for virtual learning is clear: Support and encourage families to use their best language. Skills learned from reading in native languages support learning in that language and can also transfer to learning to read in English.

3. Build on the considerable strengths of bilingual families. Families of English-language learners have considerable strengths that can be leveraged by schools and teachers to help them through this difficult time. By building on families' cultural wealth when planning virtual learning activities, ESL and classroom teachers can collaborate to tap into their students' cultural and family backgrounds through instructional activities that originate from a strengths-based viewpoint and can engage and sustain connections with families. Such a model can be used to recognize and build on family strengths and cultural knowledge. For example, teachers can offer learning activities that include the entire family, such as taking turns in storytelling or having older siblings read to younger ones. In the Latino community, for instance, parents may engage their children by using "cuentos" (stories) or giving "consejos" (advice in the form of a proverb).

4. Provide opportunities for enhanced teacher collaboration. Imagine kindergarten and 1st grade students and their parents trying to navigate virtual instruction from multiple teachers with different content, web portals, and instructional strategies. From our research in elementary schools, there are clear benefits for students when ESL and classroom teachers collaborate to provide aligned instruction with coordinated scaffolding for their ELLs. For example, after briefly planning together, ESL teachers can provide direct instruction to preteach specific academic vocabulary to support ELLs' comprehension during literacy lessons provided by their classroom teachers. Or ESL and classroom teachers can align instruction by using the same instructional strategies to teach phonics or reading- comprehension strategies across settings. Meaningful access to remote instruction for ELLs requires intentional collaboration between classroom and ESL teachers. As this type of collaboration is all the more difficult as the teachers themselves work remotely, it will require support for teachers from education agencies at the school, district, state, and national levels. Focusing on supporting English-language learners and their families during virtual instruction will help teachers provide access to the curriculum and keep lines of communication open. While this is critical as families, teachers, schools, and communities adjust to life during various phases of stay-at-home orders in many states, these principles can also support families in the transition back to in-person schooling.