

Family Engagement in Literacy

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About This Column

Families play a key role in their children's literacy development and school success. To support educators in building positive working relationships with their students' families, this column offers practical suggestions to promote family communication, involvement, and partnerships.

Insights on E-Learning at the Elementary Level

In March of 2020, all K-12 schools in Illinois shifted to remote teaching and learning due to the stay-at-home order issued by the governor in response to COVID-19. What we thought would be a period of a few weeks stretched until the end of the school year. As teachers rushed to move to e-learning, paper packets, and other versions of remote teaching and learning, families struggled to figure out how to support their children's learning at home while juggling other responsibilities such as working in essential jobs outside the home, working from home, and caring for multiple children.

Social media was awash with the challenges of "home-schooling" one's own children and praise for teachers who were missed by students and parents alike. As the spring unfolded, praise began to change to frustration with the difficulty of teaching one's own children and fear that children would be far behind when school resumes in the fall. Medical experts, as well as district leaders, suggest that it is likely schools will have to move back to e-learning at some point during the 2020-2021 school year until a vaccination or effective treatment is found for COVID-19. Therefore, it is important to reflect on what did (and did not) work with remote teaching and learning during the spring of 2020.

In this column, I will share insights I gained from conversations with teachers and parents about elementary e-learning experiences. I will not identify the "perfect" platform, app, or online resource because there is no perfect solution for every school, teacher, student, and family. Rather, I will share insights, promising approaches, and caveats that may be useful as we prepare for the next round of remote teaching and learning.

Being Prepared Pays Off

Schools that were already operating with 1:1 technology such as chrome books or iPads indicated that they were able to make the transition to e-learning more easily and quickly than schools that had to spend weeks acquiring devices or that had to hope students had access to devices and the Internet at home. According to the National Center on Educational Statistics report, *The Condition of Education* (Hussar et al., 2020), 94% of children ages 3 to 18 in the United States in 2018 had access to the Internet at home. More specifically, 88% had Internet access through a computer, 6% had access through a smart phone only, and 6% had no Internet access at home. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's *Quick Facts for Illinois* (2019), from 2014 to 2018, 88.3% of households reported having a computer, and 80.6% had Internet access. A recent report by the Metropolitan Planning Council (2020)

found that 20% of children in Chicago did not have Internet access; and in some of the city's poorest neighborhoods, up to 46% of children did not have Internet access in their homes. Furthermore, with libraries and community centers closed during the pandemic, many of these children and their families had no viable option for Internet access.

The Metropolitan Planning Council (2020) offered recommendations for addressing Internet access that included school districts working with philanthropic and community groups to establish Wi-Fi "super spots" that could serve up to 100 users in the most underserved neighborhoods. In Illinois, some districts took the idea of "super spots" into their own hands and outfitted school buses with Wi-Fi service and parked the buses outside apartment buildings and other densely populated areas. Two key partners that school districts can work with to acquire devices and Internet access for their students are the 1 Million Project Foundation (www.1millionproject.org) and the Education SuperHighway (<https://www.educationsuperhighway.org>).

While the investment in 1:1 devices and Wi-Fi hot spots is huge, not addressing the technology gap is even more costly because without such technology, students will be unable to participate fully in their educations. As we live through the impact of the pandemic on education, we are faced with a fundamental question: "Is it time for districts to work with Internet service providers and philanthropic groups to develop plans to provide every student with a device and Internet access?" Based on what I have heard from teachers and parents, the answer is "Yes, it's time."

While having access to devices and the Internet is essential, it is not sufficient to ensure a smooth shift to e-learning. Teachers who were already using a learning management system or online platform such as Google Classroom, Canvas, Seesaw, Class Dojo, or Flipgrid reported that the transition to remote teaching and learning was fairly easy. Since teachers, students, and

families were already familiar with the system, they were able to focus their time, effort, and energy on teaching and learning rather than setting up and figuring out how to use a new system. Based on these experiences, another key question arises: "Is it time for all teachers to use an online platform with their students so they can move to e-learning quickly and easily?" Based on what I have heard from teachers and parents, I would argue that the answer to this question is also "Yes, it's time."

Considering Organization and Clarity

In my conversations, I heard repeatedly about the importance of organization and ease of access for successful e-learning experiences. Some parents reported spending a great deal of time trying to help their children find assignments and lessons that were organized and labeled in ways that made sense to teachers when they prepared the e-learning materials, but from the user standpoint, the organization and labeling were not clear. One parent shared how grateful she was that her daughter's 4th-grade teacher sent a weekly e-mail message with a link to all of the materials needed for that week. She also appreciated that while there were suggested dates for completion, all assignments were due by the end of the week. To provide a bit of context, this parent is an essential worker in the healthcare industry, and her husband was working from home while caring for two elementary-aged children as well as a toddler. The schedule flexibility for e-learning allowed them to develop a plan to oversee their daughter's school lessons. When they compared this arrangement to how their son's 1st-grade teacher organized things, they indicated that while they appreciated that the teacher gave the children choice in which assignments to complete by using a tic-tac-toe format (like they did in the classroom), she and her husband spent a great deal of time trying to figure out what he

needed to do, where the materials were, when they were due, and which things he did not have to do. Furthermore, they said they often wondered what the purpose of some lessons was. The mother commented, “There were a bunch of apps our son had to do for math practice, but we weren’t sure what he was supposed to be learning. Knowing what skills he was supposed to be practicing would’ve allowed us to do a better job of helping him. We really just made sure he spent time on the apps the teacher assigned, but we didn’t know if he was doing what he was supposed to or not.”

A number of parents and teachers remarked that the use of condensed schedules was very helpful during the e-learning period. For example, some elementary schools implemented a Tuesday-Wednesday-Thursday schedule for instruction with Monday and Friday for teacher planning and teacher office hours for tutoring and individual conferences. Furthermore, some parents remarked that having a few subjects per day on a rotational schedule was helpful from an organizational standpoint. For example, one parent commented that she found it useful that her son’s teacher scheduled Math, Reading, and PE on Tuesday; Reading, Social Studies, and Music on Wednesday; and Math, Science, and Art on Thursday. According to one teacher, the most important insight she gained was being flexible and changing things that did not work. She explained that she was honest with parents and students that this was the first time she was teaching entirely through an e-learning format so she welcomed their suggestions, questions, and concerns. She then took that feedback and made adjustments to improve the e-learning experience for her students and their families.

Setting Priorities and Expectations

One message I heard from several teachers was making their students’ well-being the top priority, and then worrying about their educational progress second. While some of the

teachers reported that at first they just tried to shift everything they did in their classrooms to an online format, they quickly learned that their students and families were grappling with the many changes that happened to not only schooling but many other aspects of their lives. By first making sure that students were safe and healthy, teachers could then put their focus to teaching and learning.

At first, the duration of e-learning was expected to be short. Therefore, many teachers were instructed by their district and school leaders to focus on reviewing and applying previously taught materials. As the e-learning duration stretched, teachers reported that they needed to figure out ways to teach new content, skills, and strategies. Using video to provide lessons and demonstrations is a useful tool for teaching, but requiring that all students log on at the same time is impractical and can create unintended barriers. Some teachers shared that while they did synchronous class sessions on Google Meet, Canvas, or Zoom, they recorded the sessions so students who could not join at the scheduled time could still watch the video later to access the instruction and see their teacher and some of their classmates. Some teachers reported that at first they expected that e-learning would follow the same schedule as school, but they soon learned that did not work for many of their students due to sharing devices, parent availability—especially for those who were still working outside the home—and family needs to balance their own at-home work schedule with multiple children each with a different e-learning schedule and set of expectations.

In alignment with the governor’s recommendation that students not be penalized for the move to remote learning, most districts implemented policies so students could improve their grades during e-learning, but their grades could not be lowered. According to input from teachers, parents, and school administrators, an unintended consequence of this approach was that some students disengaged with their homework and did not turn in

assignments. Therefore, in planning for future e-learning periods, clear and realistic expectations for completion of assignments as well as grading will be needed.

One of the big challenges with the spring 2020 shift to e-learning was finding a balance between academic rigor and overwhelming expectations. Some parents talked about their concerns with too much work vs. too little work. For example, one parent reported that her son (in 2nd grade) had so much work to do that even after several hours each morning and again in the afternoon, he fell behind, and this caused them to be very stressed. However, her daughter (in 3rd grade) had approximately 30 minutes of work each day and was bored because she did not have enough to do. It is important to note that both students were enrolled in the same school, but the expectations and e-learning experiences were very different. A 4th-grade teacher shared how she sought balance between rigor and reality by having a core set of lessons and assignments for all students and offering enrichment materials for those who wanted them as well as providing re-teaching and practice sessions to individual students who needed additional support. Furthermore, that teacher set up “office hours” each day so students and family members could “ping” her to ask questions, request re-teaching or tutoring, or just check in and visit. She was surprised that many students just wanted to say “hi” and express how much they missed school, their teacher, and their classmates.

One wise 2nd-grade teacher shared that she tried to make lessons and assignments relevant by linking them to the students’ home lives as much as she could. For example, for writing, she had students write letters to her, to their classmates, and to family members who did not live with them. In science, she had them take a nature walk and report on birds and plants they saw before introducing lessons on plant parts and functions and animal characteristics and adaptations. For math, she was grateful that the remaining units focused

on money and measurement, so she had students do lots of hands-on experiences at home; and because the content was familiar to many parents, they were happy to engage and help. She noted that making such connections to the students’ daily lives at home was relatively easy due to the focus of the 2nd-grade curriculum. She also commented that her own son, who was in 5th-grade, enjoyed when his teacher made these types of connections as well as her use of YouTube videos to teach science and social studies content.

Closing Thoughts

In addition to the move to e-learning, the school year was cut short by 20 days. Both of these situations limited the amount of instruction available to students. As noted earlier in this column, those students who lacked Internet access were also prevented from participating fully in their schooling. While teachers, students, and families put forth a great deal of effort to make e-learning work, the amount and quality of learning for many students is less than what would be expected if the school year had played out in a normal manner. This means we will need to look at the curriculum and make adjustments for the fall to reflect where students will need instruction as well as employing differentiation to address the varied learning needs of students in each classroom. This may also mean setting aside some favorite units or activities to make time for the important content, skills, and strategies that students will need to learn to be successful in the new school year.

What happened in the spring of 2020 was unprecedented (at the time), but it is likely that we will need schools to transition to e-learning, modified schedules, and alternating formats in the coming year (and possibly beyond). In the past, we generally had to prepare for a small number of snow or cold weather closure days, but as was demonstrated by school

closures from mid-March until the end of the school year, longer-term and more systematic planning will be needed so we can ensure that all children have access to the education and tools they need to learn. I hope that some of the ideas in this column are useful as educators across Illinois prepare for the “new normal” and make sure that quality education is available to all students—even when it can’t be delivered in a traditional face-to-face format.

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