**Return to school: Positive parental engagement**

We are acutely aware that schools have worked tirelessly to deliver high-quality educational experiences during these exceptional times. We understand that this has been balanced with the safety of the whole school community and continuous work around safeguarding. Our next challenge is ensuring that parents/carers can send their children back to school with as much confidence as possible, ensuring maximum attendance. This guidance provides practical strategies to engage with parent/carers so you can identify and develop approaches that meet the bespoke needs of your school community as they return.

## **Why should thinking about parental partnerships be a priority at this challenging time?**

Whilst there is always a case for meaningful and effective parental partnerships, a pandemic necessitates an increase in this requirement and simultaneously presents challenges, complexities and additional considerations for schools at an already difficult time.

Meaningfully and equitably involving parents/carers in the academic success of their child is of increased importance in overcoming the impact of a pandemic. In times of uncertainty, parents/carers need to feel engaged with their child’s school. It is important to communicate with all your families to actively engage them with their child’s educational journey.

There is no one-size fits all approach that can be adopted. It is important to consider the experiences of the parents that comprise your school community. For example, some parents/carers are more likely to be essential workers or have experienced a greater financial and/or health impact from the pandemic than others. Disengaged and hard to reach families may experience increased, multi-faceted factors that compound isolation. Inclusively engaging with parents/carers can help to prevent the educational gap increasing.

## **How do we improve communication?**

Strengthening communication, transparency and trust is key to containing any Covid-19 related anxiety within your school community. Two-way communication will ensure you provide a safe space to listen to concerns, receive feedback and strengthen partnership with parents/carers. This will help build trust and support for the decisions you need to make as a school.

During times of uncertainty, clear and consistent messaging from the school staff and governing board is vital in establishing trust and reassurance that it is safe to return to school.

It is very important to retain familiar, consistent and systematic patterns of communication with parents/carers, not just those that are necessary as a result of Covid-19. This will help parents/carers stay connected, involved and support their child’s learning. Ensure that all parents, including the most vulnerable, can access information by considering SEND, language and technology needs.

Norfolk County Council has a range of specialist advisers and support available:

* Outbreak Management Centre 01603 223219
* CADS 0344 800 8021
* Critical Incident 07623 912974
* Education Duty Out of Hours Line 01603 222680
* Inclusion Helpline 01603 307736 inclusionteam@norfolk.gov.uk

## **Keep calm and carry on communicating**

How you feel when you author any communication to parents/carers will be apparent within the tone of the messaging. It is fully understandable, in the current context, that communications may be more frequent, written under pressure and sent using methods that necessarily expedite the sharing of information. Whilst some of the influences are out of our control and responsive to DfE or local updates, it is useful to take a few deep breathes and restore a sense of internal calmness before communicating. This will help to evoke a sense of stability and reassurance for parents/carers when reading.