

# Family engagement professionals become first responders, develop creative ways to connect with students and parents

*As remote learning continues, parent coordinators take the lead in reimagining services to 'meet families where they are' and adapt to an ever-changing fall semester.*

**Author:** GFRP Staff

In these extraordinarily challenging times, school systems' investments in family engagement are paying off in essential ways. Family engagement specialists have rapidly adapted and are using their relationship-building, empathy, and communication skills to meet families where they are, ensure their needs are met, and encourage continued engagement in their children's learning.

Mariela Rivera, the parent coordinator at P.S. 101Q School in the Gardens in Forest Hills, New York — part of the New York City Department of Education — serves as one example of how these professionals have responded to the challenges. Rivera has always been the "go-to" person for families in her school, essentially reducing any delays for parents in getting their questions answered.

"Not being able to speak to someone is very frustrating," Rivera says. "I have to be super flexible and super accessible."

But if helping families navigate the nation's largest school district wasn't already a feat, facilitating communication between schools and families in the midst of a pandemic, while schools were closed, has Rivera — and family engagement professionals across the country — stretching far beyond what they thought they were capable of handling.

They essentially became first responders in the spring, stepping outside of their normal responsibilities to attend to the health, mental health, and basic needs of their school communities. Instead of planning school events and monitoring attendance, Rivera says she became "in charge of if your mother got sick." And while technology isn't her specialty, she had to walk parents through the various platforms their children would need to stay connected to their teachers.

Rivera says her role and that of the school's guidance counselor "merged."

"We had to show more of a united front," she says. For families, the school is a building, "but the building is also made up of great people."

## 'The School-to-Home Link'

Now as the new school year begins in much the same way as it ended in the spring — virtually — family engagement specialists and coordinators are again serving as a sort of landline for families connected to schools only through their screens.

"As a coordinator, it is important to maintain the school-to-home link that provides the fundamentals to a learning environment," says Jesse Mattingly, the family resource and youth service center coordinator for Washington County Elementary School and Washington County Middle School in Springfield, Kentucky. My overall goal as a coordinator is to ensure families know they have someone they can contact to ensure their overall needs are being met."

Mattingly, like others in her position nationwide, conducted surveys of families to assess their needs for food, mental health services, information on unemployment benefits, and other types of emergency assistance. They became part of a vast operation of distributing meals to families, troubleshooting internet connection issues, and conducting home visits, if necessary, to check on hard-to-reach families. She has also created a [virtual resource center](#) to keep families aware of available services.



Jesse Mattingly, a family resource and youth service center coordinator in Springfield, Kentucky, created a virtual resource center.

Because it can be easy for students to go unnoticed if they're not in school, some coordinators and family liaisons took extra steps to make students — and their families — feel special during such a confusing and stressful time.

Mattingly, for example, began conducting in-depth interviews with students in the elementary grades and their families and then posting “spotlights” of them on the school’s social media pages. The interviews served as a way to make sure families were OK, but also to highlight and share what they were doing to cope through the lockdowns.

“It was a joy to hear many families spending quality time together that in a normal circumstance would not happen due to the hustle and bustle of our everyday lives,” she says.

Family engagement specialists also stress that with the central role parents have had to play in continuing and supporting children’s learning during school closures, the education community should recognize what families bring to the conversation about how to make distance learning manageable.

“Our families are gold mines of information, resources, and perspective into their needs,” says Latascha Craig, a family resource center coordinator at the Foster Traditional Academy in Louisville, Kentucky. Partnering with families to brainstorm solutions, she says, has led to better two-way communication, and now parents initiate those conversations instead of waiting for her to take the lead.



Lisa Hirsch, coordinator of the J.B. Atkinson Family Resource Center in Louisville, Kentucky

**“We must be willing to suit up each day for the treasure hunt which leads to familial resilience and strengthening.”**

*- Latascha Craig  
Foster Traditional Academy, Family Resource Center Coordinator*

## Immediately establishing relationships

Leaders of the [Academic Parent Teacher Team](#) (APTT) program, an initiative now in 27 states, have learned just how resilient families can be when faced with concerns over their children losing academic skills.

APTT is a model in which educators share data with parents on their children’s progress, along with strategies for helping them improve particular academic skills. The model takes the traditional parent-teacher conference several steps further by having multiple meetings throughout the year and fostering relationships between families.

Not long after schools closed down in March, Maria Paredes the inventor of the APTT program and a senior engagement manager at WestEd, where APTT now lives, received an email from Kay Boehart, the family liaison at Hamilton Elementary School of Engineering and Technology in Sanford, Florida. Boehart explained that when distance learning began, the team decided to keep the APTT meeting on the calendar and use a variety of online platforms to present the information to students and families. Almost 400 families viewed the information on YouTube and over 300 on Facebook.

“This platform presentation has shown us that we can use the digital APTT information to continue to reach parents,” Boehart wrote. “I know that you celebrate with us ... Hamilton's successful continuation of APTT!”

In planning for the return to school, school leaders moved the first APTT session earlier in the schedule “with the intent to immediately establish relationships and connections with our families,” said Hamilton Principal Michael Pfeiffer.

**“I predict we are all in for a wild ride, but it is critical that our families know we are all on this ride together.”**

*- Michael Pfeiffer,  
Hamilton Elementary School, Principal*

## Considering and overcoming the hurdles

Family engagement professionals are also supporting families with young children, especially those who have youngsters entering school remotely. The lack of traditional in-person registration and orientation activities, such as tours of the classroom and meet-the-teacher gatherings — combined with the digital divide that continues in many communities — has increased the risk that parents aren't enrolling their children in kindergarten. Several major school districts have [reported drops](#) in kindergarten enrollment so far this fall.

As a result, family engagement specialists are doing all they can to connect virtually with families and assist them with the transition process.

Before COVID-19, Claudia Esteva, a family engagement coordinator with Peninsula Family Service in South San Francisco, California, conducted weekly home visits and organized twice-monthly social gatherings for families with young children enrolled in the agency's child development centers. When shelter-in-place orders were issued, Esteva shifted to connecting with everyone by phone.

Now she's planning to schedule Zoom social sessions so the parents can interact with each other participate in workshops on topics that interest them.

## Continuing investments in family engagement, building on lessons learned

Those who work with families say It's important to be mindful of the challenges the pandemic has created, particularly for those who were already struggling prior to this period of economic decline and interruption in vital services.

"I think it is crucial to understand and consider the possible hurdles families are jumping over right now — child care issues, working and learning from home, furloughs, health issues, income disruption," says Lisa Hirsch, a resource center coordinator at J.B. Atkinson Academy, also in Louisville. "We must meet families where they are, ask, and listen to what supports, resources, and information they need to be successful during distance learning."

Coordinators and specialists note that many of the strategies they have developed in response to the pandemic will alter their practices for years to come.

For example, this crisis has motivated Hirsch to "look for ways to help families, especially grandparents raising grandchildren, become more digitally literate," she says. "I believe we will also carry forward the new technology skills we've all learned as well as we continue to be flexible, adaptable, and creative."

Craig added that the mechanisms used to support and connect with families during this period of "nontraditional instruction" should remain in place — not only because they are effective — but also because many of the families that coordinators serve are highly mobile.

The pandemic has forced education and family engagement professionals to recognize "some of the greatest deficits in our readiness for abrupt change," Craig says. "We have realized the need to become better prepared for crises. Now we must commit to making these changes a seamless addition to our systems and foundational values." ↻



*A room stocked with supplies for families at Washington County Elementary School in Springfield, Kentucky*

## A Request for Stories

These professionals demonstrate not only their commitment to families, but also resilience and flexibility in a constantly changing situation. With the school year now underway — and schools using a variety of hybrid and remote models — [please share with us additional stories](#) of how liaisons are working in partnership with families and reaping the benefits of dedicating resources to supporting families over the years.

© 2020 [Global Family Research Project](#). All rights reserved. May not be reproduced whole or in part without written permission from Global Family Research Project.

**Contributor:**

Linda Jacobson, Global Family Research Project

**Design:**

Rachel Hanebutt, Global Family Research Project

**Suggested Citation:**

Global Family Research Project, (2020). *Family engagement professionals become first responders, develop creative ways to connect with students and parents*. Retrieved from [bit.ly/GFRPLiaisons](https://bit.ly/GFRPLiaisons)