

FOCUS: FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

VOICES FROM THE FIELD - INSIGHTS ON ESSENTIAL PRACTICES FOR SUPPORTING FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS IN VIRTUAL LEARNING CONTEXTS

Family engagement in schools involves a dual-capacity process for building authentic partnerships between home and school and connecting families to student learning. With the COVID 19 pandemic underway, establishing this process becomes critically important. In these challenging times we see, first hand, how children's homes became their classrooms. It is, therefore, even more essential to validate the family's role as primary teachers. Building authentic partnerships together allows us to learn from each other as we plan and execute a new form or way of educating our children.

Family-School partnerships rely on building relationships with families. Using a co-powering type of communication increases the power of these relationships by raising self-confidence, nurturing connections, and energizing while inspiring each other. This crisis is giving us the opportunity to build those important bridges between the home and the school that research tells us has a powerful impact on student learning. In her work as a family leader at her school Luz León has learned and is using these partnership-building tools with teachers, with her children and with other families by being virtually connected and available.



Luz León is an actively engaged parent leader who enjoys working with other families at the Central Language Academy K-8 school in the Ontario Montclair School District to inform them of the value they bring to their children's education. Along with working with other families she likes working with teachers because she knows this can contribute to her children's learning, and furthermore she states, "my children really like to see their mother at the school." Luz assists teachers in all types of activities at the school, but now realizes that her role in the education of her children is even more important because she is an important link to their learning.

Communicating with her children's teachers, according to Luz, is an important component in maintaining her children's motivation to keep learning in this "new reality," and she takes her role seriously because she knows that she is a central figure in this process. She describes her use of ClassDojo, an application that allows her to communicate with the teachers while keeping apprised of the behavior, assignments and tasks her children need to complete each week. The teachers send students the weekly assignments and projects in all subject areas and also highlight the work to be turned in using their virtual portfolio, as well advising parents to visit Class Dojo everyday. Luz shares, "I have a large chalkboard at my house and create color-coded charts to keep my children on task and to ensure assignments are completed and turned in as requested by the teacher." She works with her son to upload pictures, videos and other items to his portfolio.



Working with her high school son at Chaffey High School in the Chaffey Union High School District entails communicating with him about his daily lessons or the weekly schedules. Luz ensures that he goes on the Zoom meetings with all his teachers at the high school and to talk to counselors about SEL to ensure he is feeling strong through this crisis. At the high school level he uses School-App, an application used for the upper grades. When asked what recommendations she would share with teachers Luz said, "on the whole teachers are doing well." She emphasizes that it would be very helpful to receive additional information and to learn of the technology teachers are using now to teach their children.

Luz encourages her children to "learn more than what is taught, do more than is expected and look beyond what they are currently doing in school because that will be their future."

Luz expresses concern, "if families are not as engaged as me, I fear their children will be left behind and I am concerned about helping them." Luz suggests that a customized survey of families asking them about their comfort level for using virtual tools would be helpful so that teachers and school leaders can reach out to families and then provide differentiated assistance. Luz also has concerns with students who are having trouble—how can they be helped. She hopes teachers are, "reaching out to them with more face-to-face virtual meetings other than the twice a week Zoom meetings they are having at this time

and also being creative in the variety and types of lessons they can have with these children to keep them engaged and still learning." Through all of this Luz remains optimistic and sees an advantage to helping her children not only in the classroom but in her home. She states, "my children see me more as a teacher." Luz encourages her children to "learn more than what is taught, do more than is expected and look beyond what they are currently doing in school because that will be their future."