



Looking Back to Face What Is Ahead

District strategies to engage with English learner students, students with disabilities, and their families

As schools begin to reopen and transition back to in-person instruction through the COVID-19 pandemic, districts are tasked with sustaining meaningful connections with students and families. To address the diverse ways schools and districts have supported students and families during the pandemic, Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Midwest created a documentary in collaboration with Chicago's PBS affiliate, WTTW, to highlight the research on evidence-based practices related to student and family engagement and promising ways to support student learning across in-person and virtual learning settings. The documentary highlights schools and districts that successfully provide strategic supports to two groups more significantly affected by the pandemic: students with disabilities and English learner students.

About the documentary

This 30-minute public television program focuses on research-based evidence related to student and family engagement and changes in learning supports through the pandemic. The program presents strategies and promising practices used by two Illinois districts—Hoover-Schrum Memorial School District 157 in Calumet City and J. Sterling Morton High School District 201 in Cicero—to support students with disabilities and English learner students during the pandemic and into the future. The program presents research on evidence-based practices related to student learning needs, such as structured learning time and peer learning and small-group tutoring, as well as family engagement strategies, such as school-family communication and outreach, electronic reading tools, and other tools to support parent and/or guardian engagement in their children's distance learning.

This documentary features researchers Patricia Garcia-Arena, PhD, American Institutes for Research (AIR), and Dia Jackson, PhD, AIR, who discuss research on practices to connect with families and engage English learner students and students with disabilities in their learning. The researchers also highlight promising strategies for engaging these student groups as they transition back to in-person instruction. In addition, the program features the perspectives of district and school leaders, as well as teachers who primarily work with English learner students and students with disabilities. These educators discuss strategies they plan to use to connect with students and families as school begins in fall 2021 and students re-engage with learning. The interviewees also reflect on the transition back to in-person learning and discuss how the strategies can be applied across learning environments.

[Family engagement] helps the child stay motivated at school. Suddenly, the parents know more of what the student expectations are, so they can help them at home meet those school requirements. They feel part of the community—they feel welcomed.

– Patricia García-Arena, PhD, Principal Researcher, American Institutes for Research (AIR)

Even though we're reopening, a lot of people's lives have drastically changed. I mean, we've had students who have lost family members. We have parents who have lost jobs, who've lost stable forms of income. Everything's changed even though we're "back" to normal. The learning outcomes don't change, but the grace that we give our students does. Beyond the pandemic I want to see that grace be extended.

– Sofia Sandoval, Civics Teacher, J. Sterling Morton High School District 201



Scan the QR code to watch the documentary.

Intended audience

REL Midwest created this documentary as a tool for district administrators, school leaders, educators, and families to use when they consider promising strategies for supporting student populations, particularly students with disabilities and English learner students, during the transition back to in-person learning. Although the documentary focuses on examples from two Illinois districts, the promising practices and strategies are relevant for district leaders and educators across the country.



Related resources: REL Midwest has developed a series of resources related to COVID-19, including a [toolkit for assessing learning changes after spring 2020 COVID-19 school closures](#), a [webinar on evidence-based literacy interventions to support young learners during and after the pandemic](#), and blog posts on [supporting students' reading growth](#) and [their social and emotional needs](#).

? Discussion questions

- How would you apply the strategies and research highlighted in the documentary to improve student and family engagement in your district?
- If you were part of an effort to improve student and family engagement, whom would you involve in those conversations? What steps would you and others need to take to transform those discussions into actions?
- How do the strategies shown in the documentary align with goals of your school and/or district? How can school and district leaders incorporate these approaches into their strategic planning?
- What other insights have you gained about teaching and learning in the pandemic that could be useful as ongoing strategies?
- What types of needs do students and families in your district have as they transition back to in-person learning in the fall? What are possible strategies to meet these needs?
- From your experience, what are some promising practices to engage with students and their families beyond the pandemic, particularly English learner students and students with disabilities?



About REL Midwest

REL Midwest is part of a network of 10 regional educational laboratories funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences. REL Midwest works in partnership with practitioners in seven Midwest states to conduct applied research and provide training, coaching, and technical support to create a more evidence-based education system. To learn more, visit the [REL Midwest website](#) and follow [@RELMidwest on Twitter](#).