TeachME PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
CEUs for Teachers and Educators

Helping School Professionals Support Students

Part 1:

Introduction

If you're a school professional, your mission throughout your career will involve educating the next generation of young citizens to make the world of tomorrow a better place. To do that, you may spend much of your time performing educational activities, such as creating curricula, actively teaching, helping individual students with their studies, and grading papers.

All of that represents a vital part of being an effective educator. In order to be an ethical educator, you need to think more about the logistics of how you go about supporting your students. The National Education Association has stated that all educators must work to support the dignity and worth of the students they serve. Educators need to strive to ensure equal opportunities for all of their students. All educators need to work to make sure that their students' data, privacy, confidentiality, and other aspects of their young students' educational endeavors and personal life are protected at all times.

In this course, we will review the various ethical standards educators need to adhere to, review privacy and confidentiality standards and procedures for schools, discuss the need for equity in an ethical school environment, and otherwise work to understand what it means to be an ethical educator in today's academic environments.

Section 1: An Overview of Ethics for Educational Communities, Including Data, Equity, Student Rights, and More

According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, students cannot learn properly unless they feel safe. While they're still in school, to a large extent, the responsibility for ensuring that safety falls squarely on the shoulders of their teachers.

That's a great deal of responsibility. Unfortunately, in the past, that burden has been neglected or abused. To provide families with confidence and to protect teachers from allegations of unethical behavior, educational authorities have created guidelines and standards to direct the ethical behavior of all educators.

These codes tend to focus on a singular first principle: The worth and dignity of the students that educators seek to serve. After all, the point of an educational career is to help students grow, keep them safe, and seek excellence all the while.

The National Education Association, or NEA, has created a Code of Ethics that can help educators accomplish their goals in a professional, ethical, and effective manner.

What are some highlights of the NEA Code of Ethics?

It's a good idea for all teachers to review the NEA Code of Ethics in full on a regular basis, just to ensure that they are up to date and cognizant of the very latest version of the guidelines. Major themes and current regulations follow (NEA, 2020).

The NEA Code of Ethics begins with a preamble discussing the common goals of educators. It also makes clear that 'educator' can be interpreted as a broad term that includes support professionals. The Code of Ethics then breaks down its guidelines for educator actions into two different principles. The first, Principle I, summarizes an educator's commitment to their student. The main points of this principle's related guidelines are as follows (NEA, 2020):

- Educators work to help all students realize that they're worthy members of society.
- Educators help students get excited about learning independently. They don't stand in the way of independent learning.
- Educators don't deny students their unique points of view, within reason.
- Educators do not suppress information that is relevant to the progress of their students.
- Educators protect their students, when at all possible, from situations that could be harmful.
- Educators do not intentionally disparage or embarrass their students.
- Educators do not deny benefits to, exclude, or give advantages to any student based on their sex, status, beliefs, race, color, background, or orientation.
- Educators do not take advantage of their professional relationships with their students for any reason.
- Educators do not disclose private information about their students unless the law or a compelling reason (e.g., student safety) compels them to do so.

Principle II of the NEA Code of Ethics concerns an educator's commitment to the profession of educating. The public trusts educators to seek the best for their students. The NEA has implemented the following guidelines to help educators do so effectively (NEA, 2020):

- Educators work to promote an environment at their schools that will attract good educators to work with them.
- Educators work to ensure that unqualified people do not become educators.
- Prospective educators do not make false statements or fail to disclose relevant information in applications.
- Educators don't assist non-educators attempting to become educators or teach in an unauthorized manner.
- Educators don't disclose information about their colleagues unless the law or a compelling reason (e.g., safety) compels them to do so.
- Educators do not make malicious statements about their colleagues.
- Educators do not accept anything that could look like a bribe.

This is not a comprehensive representation of the NEA Code of Ethics; rather, it is a representative sample of guidelines to show how seriously the educational field takes the ethical behavior of all involved (NEA, 2020).

The NEA Code of Ethics is far from the only collection of regulations that influences the everyday actions of educators. For example, FERPA, or the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, also governs the way that teachers need to think about student records and student rights (NEA, 2020).

What is FERPA?

FERPA, or the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, is a law that governs the disclosure and maintenance of any records that a school maintains. Specifically, FERPA governs the way that a school must maintain and/or disclose records that relate to any individual student. One of the main tenets of FERPA is simple: All students have the right to see their own school-maintained records. Conversely, other people cannot see those records without having the express permission and consent of the student they're

associated with (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). In some cases, for very young students, their legal guardians can provide permission and consent in their stead.

FERPA covers any record that a school can link to a specific student. That includes records that are associated with a unique student by name, student ID, or social security number. If a record is identifiable, it's likely under the auspices of FERPA. This will generally include any assignments, transcripts, and financial records. Notably, FERPA may or may not have overarching governance over some logistical or 'directory' information, such as a student's address and phone number. While schools must operate with a goal of keeping a student safe and therefore must exercise discretion over access to information that could impact a student's safety, such as their address, basic contact information may not be required to be confidential under FERPA (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

FERPA applies to all matriculated student records. Educators and educational support staff who routinely work with and maintain student records need to ensure that utmost privacy is granted to all student records at all times. Depending on the rules at your school, educators and support staff may be able to share student records (or certain aspects of student records, perhaps de-identified) with other school employees as long as there is a good reason for doing so (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

It's key to note that grades are a part of student records. Therefore, like all other student information that falls under FERPA's governance, grades must be kept private. Grades should not be disclosed to anyone without the express consent of the student. As a result, schools should not post grades publicly or set out graded papers with clearly-visible grades for students to pick up in a public location (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Under FERPA, students should have the right to view their own information. Educators and educational support staff should work to ensure that it's relatively simple and safe for students to see their own records. There should be a clear paperwork trail to keep a record of how and when students access their own information (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

FERPA is not the only law that governs the ways educators and schools must maintain and share records. For example, there are also laws that govern how schools must maintain the confidentiality of health records. Student financial information is similarly protected under different laws (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Why do schools collect student data?

In many instances, It may be clear why schools collect some data—for example, to monitor student achievement over time, or to have emergency contact information in the event it is ever needed (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

In other cases, it can be substantially less obvious why a school needs certain pieces of information. Next, we'll discuss the reasons why schools acquire and use student data. The purposes of this type of data collection may include (Student Privacy Compass, 2021):

- Improving the educational experiences of the student base—e.g., by allowing instructors to track the progress of their students and respond as may be deemed necessary.
- Protecting the safety and health of students at school (or enrolled in a remote study program), for example, by maintaining current medical information of all students as well as updated allergy info and contact numbers.
- Assisting the school with full administrative function—e.g., data that will help a school manage and report enrollment numbers, statistics, academic records, government-required reporting, and more.

Who uses the data that schools collect?

The short answer is—it depends on the situation. Once collected, any number of individuals working at a school could have reason to access student data in order to fulfill their job-related duties. Here is a quick rundown of the roles at a school that could require data access, and why that access might be necessary (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

- Students might access their own data to track their achievements over time and set goals to help them progress towards their diplomas.
- Parents might access the data to follow their child's learning journey and to be a more knowledgeable member of the teacher-parent support team.
- Teachers can use various types of student data to understand how their students are learning, to create lesson plans that are geared to help students where they are, and to assess the outcomes of their current teaching strategies.

- Administrators may be able to use student data to learn more about how their programs are performing, to assess the types of resources and services they may need to think about pursuing, and to put together adequate reporting to ensure that their school remains compliant with all expectations.
- The Department of Education in your state may need to use student data to see how its districts and schools are able to meet the needs of the students in the area. As a result, your state may be able to make more informed funding choices, which can help your district thrive.
- The United States Department of Education ultimately receives and uses aggregate data of all students in the nation to help make informed decisions about funds and to provide updated, accurate information to the public about student performance.
- Educational companies that make academic resources and Edtech platforms may use student data to help serve students.
- Researchers use aggregate or de-identified data to help answer larger-scale questions about the way students are learning, typically in an effort to help make more informed decisions about the future of education.

Clearly, the many ways that data can be used can lead to a great deal of confusion, especially with the different roles that the people using the data can play.

Since this is the case, it's important to maintain data privacy whenever possible to protect students (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

What are the key laws that schools need to follow surrounding student privacy protections?

We've already discussed the NEA Code of Ethics and FERPA. While these are certainly crucial in terms of governing educational rights and privacy (particularly FERPA), they are far from the only government regulations in effect. Here, we'll discuss additional sets of laws that seek to promote an equitable, ethical educational experience for all students (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

PPRA - This regulation, the **Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment**, gives schools a series of restrictions that help educational institutions know when it's okay to ask students for their personal information (e.g., as part of a federally-funded evaluation or

survey). For example, because of PPRA, schools must receive parental consent and/or notification before their children can participate in school activities, including surveys, that could involve students submitting or sharing potentially sensitive data (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

One frequent example that typically falls under PPRA involves health surveys. In order to help support students' mental, physical, and emotional health, schools may use surveys as a way to glean information about what students actually need. Schools might use these surveys to learn more about their students' behaviors and resources they may have access to (e.g., internet access, or food security) — again so that schools stand a better chance of helping students in a way that is truly beneficial. While there may be nothing more than the best of intentions behind these surveys, it's important to remember that these surveys can ask for very sensitive, potentially damaging, or embarrassing information. To stay in line with the PPRA, schools need to show parents surveys first and allow each family the chance to opt-in or opt-out of taking surveys (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

COPPA - Another government regulation, the **Children's Online Privacy Protection Act**, regulates the type of information that non-educational (or, at least, not strictly educational) companies can collect from children. These companies include those that operate mobile applications, games, and websites, particularly those directed and marketed toward children under the age of 13 (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

Under COPPA, these companies are required to have a privacy policy that is clearly written and accessible for their site (or app) users. These companies also need to obtain consent from parents before obtaining any information from young children and provide direct parental notice of children's use and activity. When the company offers an educational service, it may also be the case that teachers have the power to provide consent in lieu of parental figures, as long as the technology or media is only used for educational purposes (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

This should provide some level of protection for students because educational companies operating in line with COPPA can only collect data from their users (or young students) for specific educational purposes, not commercial ends. Schools that use these types of programs typically have policies as well that require strict administrative approval before teachers can let their students use these services. In addition, these companies can only retain student data as long as it takes to fulfill the educational aim. After that purpose is achieved, the companies are expected to confidentially dispose of all retained student data (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

IDEA - Many of the regulations that surround student rights do not speak to the unique obstacles experienced by individuals who are differently abled. The **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act** ensures that people who have special needs are still able to access a 'free appropriate public education' with the support that they require for success (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

IDEA regulations also help determine who receives federal funding to fuel systems that support students with special needs. In order to be eligible for this federal funding, officials in each state must have a system in place where they can demonstrate completely protected confidentiality for all student data. Under IDEA, states and schools need to obtain parental consent to exchange and maintain student data. IDEA gives parents the right to access some of the child's records and promises each student an individualized education plan to keep all educators, parents, and administrators on the same page in terms of a specific student's plan of care (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

What are some of the basic rights that students have at school?

Confidentiality and data privacy concerns are far from the only student rights that need protecting. In fact, even many educational professionals are unaware of the fact that student's rights are protected by the Constitution. As a result, these vital rights often go unacknowledged.

The ACLU has provided resources to assist schools in making sure that students' rights are secured. Students have specific rights that must be adhered to, and if parents or students feel that these rights are violated in any way, they have a right to step up and file a complaint. As educators, it's a good idea to be aware of these rights. That way, you can assess your school's systems to ensure that your school doesn't have any policies that necessarily violate these rights — and you can be prepared in the event that any parents or students file a complaint at your school (Tashman, 2017).

Student rights at school include (Tashman, 2017):

1. **Right to free speech:** Students should not receive any punishment for exercising their rights to free speech, as long as they do so in a way that does not violate other school policies (e.g., they don't harm another student while speaking freely). This is still the case if school administrators, instructors, or other students do not agree with the things that the speaking student is saying. Some schools threaten student free speech and even student privacy by requiring students to reveal their social media accounts and open their personal technology devices.

2. **Right to express themselves through clothing:** Many schools across the nation have established uniforms or dress codes. Having these expectations and norms is perfectly within the rights of the school, and students, if they wish to attend these schools, do need to comply with these established norms. However, when dress codes are used to target specific groups of people, punish those who exhibit clear ideologies through otherwise licit articles of clothing, or infringe upon the religious rights of a student, this practice is significantly less acceptable. When reviewing and enforcing your school's dress code, it's definitely a best practice to make sure that any dress code citations are actually about clothing items that detract from the school environment or disrupt school activities. Citations should not be used to chastise marginalized groups.

3. **The rights of immigrants:** Discrimination against any students due to their national origin, race, or color should be expressly prohibited. No students should be penalized for any lack of or limited English proficiency; instead, schools must provide them with both the same level of opportunities as their peers and added support in the form of language instruction.

4. **The rights of the differently-abled:** Federal law prohibits public schools from practicing any type of discriminatory acts against people with special needs. Instead, schools must provide equal access to health services, school technologies, field trips, academic courses, and extracurricular activities. Discrimination can be insidiously hard to detect, unfortunately. Whenever educational professionals refuse to provide medical accommodations, ignore harassment, or even fail to train their staff on disability compliance, they discriminate. In addition, schools must work to defend students with special needs from biased treatment and bullying from other students.

5. **The rights of LGBTQ+ students:** Students who identify as LGBTQ+ are often the target of intense bullying. In the past, schools that did not understand their plight may have all too frequently encouraged this behavior or turned a blind eye. Schools have a duty to provide a safe environment to their students regardless of their identity or orientation; and, moreover, students have a right to express themselves at school, as long as they do so without violating other policies or norms (e.g., harming another student).

6. **The rights of pregnant students:** While schools have a responsibility not to exclude students who are pregnant (or students who have children) from their academic community, this practice is still common. Since 1972, when Title IX was

passed, schools have been prohibited from this type of discriminination. However, schools can often accomplish this very subtly (and even subconsciously) by assigning impossible-to-complete classwork, failing to provide necessary support, refusing to provide accommodations, or even recommending unearned disciplinary sanctions (sometimes under the guise of providing safety). It's important to remember that this constitutes denying a young mother her right to an education. Public schools need to work to ensure pregnant students feel safe, have the opportunity to make up any classes they miss due to doctor appointments or temporary medical conditions and enjoy the ability to make their own choices about the pregnancy itself without judgment or ramification from the school.

Schools must also remember that (particularly in the case of pregnant, LGBTQ+, and differently-abled students) some types of biased treatment could constitute violations of a student's privacy. Schools need to take special care with this, both to provide their students with the best treatment possible and to avoid any behavior that could leave them open to legal action (Tashman, 2017).

Finally, in addition to protecting student rights and student data, ethical educators will likely be striving for some form of equity. We'll delve into what this means in the final question of this section.

What does equal opportunity in schools mean? As ethical educators, should we be striving for equal opportunity, equity, or equal outcome?

Part of being an ethical educator includes making sure that we don't deny students educational benefits based on their race, orientation, or other external attributes. A term that is very popular in K-12 education right now is 'equity.' In an effort to be more ethical educators (and school districts), many public schools are adding this term to their mission statements. What does this mean, though, when compared or contrasted with other similar-sounding terms?

The general idea is simple: That we strive to make sure that all students have equal opportunities for educational success, regardless of their race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, or prior performance. Unfortunately, this term and associated ramifications can become problematic. While many schools may strive to make 'equity' an integral part of their mission statements, what they actually tend to prioritize in their student

performance outcomes is a sense of uniformity of academic results —regardless of where every student starts out from. This can place more pressure on students who may begin in a more disadvantaged place, instead of giving them the support they need to grow (Ingraham, 2021).

It is imperative that ethical academic communities work to identify students who may be struggling and give each group of students the resources and support necessary to realistically get everyone to the same place. It's key to realize that this may feel uncomfortable, as much of the equal opportunity messaging that we have been given has told us that we need to treat each student the same. With this updated understanding of what equity truly means, it may feel like we are treating some students with favoritism or bias. In reality, if we are educating equitably, this may just mean that we're giving students who need more help and support the larger amount of time and attention that they require. This redefinition of equity and related efforts spawns directly from the advances made in critical race theory, which theorizes that all disparities associated with race are the products of past or present discrimination. In order to work toward eradicating those disparities, we may need to act uncomfortably. One author put it succinctly: "The only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination. The only remedy to present discrimination is future discrimination." In other words, it may take some inequity or advantage in favor of the underrepresented and those most in need, in order to move toward true equity (Ingraham, 2021).

Ultimately, as educators, we need to understand that administering equal opportunity in our schools will in and of itself not likely result in equal results, because not all of our students are beginning from the same place. Today, in order to be equitable and ethical educators, we need to maintain high expectations for all of our students, work hard to make sure that students from disadvantaged backgrounds, in minority groups, or students with special needs have the resources and support necessary to do just as well as their peers, and fully acknowledge the disparities that are present in our schools and in our culture. In the third section of this course, we'll take a look at some of the things educators can do to work toward a more truly equitable classroom (Ingraham, 2021).

Section 1 Reflection Questions

- What systems does your school have in place to ensure that you are compliant with FERPA, COPPA, and related laws?

- Do you feel that your school has created an environment in which student rights are maintained and celebrated?
- Do you know how your school maintains student data?
- Do you feel your school works toward equal opportunity or equitable educational access (or both)?

Section 1 Summary

As we work to be effective, ethical educators, we need to work to make sure our students feel safe. In order to help our schools increase the safety of our academic communities and to ensure that everyone truly feels safe, we need to work in line with several governmental regulations such as FERPA and COPPA, and the PPRA. However, we also need to go further and protect the rights our students should enjoy on school grounds, and establish truly equitable access to high-quality education for all of our students.

In the next section, we'll discuss the different ways that schools can manage confidentiality concerns and specific privacy protections regarding their students' data.

Section 2: Confidentiality Concerns and Privacy Protocols for 21st-Century Schools

As educators, we have immediate access to very personal data for our students. In this section, we'll discuss how to ethically manage, access, and disclose student information and data to promote protections for those in our care.

What is data privacy?

Data privacy is a complex concept. The term 'privacy' can even mean a myriad of different things. To some people, it means being able to close a door on a private space; to others, it means living free of any type of surveillance (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

Since the concept of privacy is relatively vague and ambiguous, it's probably a good idea to provide a few comments on common conceptions regarding data privacy. For example (Student Privacy Compass, 2021):

1. **Data privacy is recognized as a fundamental right.** From the United States Constitution to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, over eighty countries around the world recognize that people have a right to privacy (including data privacy).

2. **Data privacy ultimately includes control by individual persons over how their personal information will flow from them to another**—or, in other words, how data is shared from one person to another.

3. **Data privacy can be subjective.** All people have their own data, and they will all have their own unique take on privacy and expectations for how their data will be used and shared. One person might be excited to share as much data as possible for efficiency and transparency's sake; another may find the exact same practices invasive. Many people will wish to share data differently depending on the specific type of data or the people who will be on the receiving end.

4. **Data privacy requires context.** Individuals will decide whether or not to share their data based on what feels normal to them given the specific context. This could differ wildly depending on whether the data in question is academic, personal, or any other type of data.

The concept of data privacy has increasingly evolved due to the modern ubiquity of digital technology. Many people may feel, now, that privacy is a thing of the past. Whether this is the case for some forms of data (such as smartphone or social media use) or not, the need to protect personal and academic student data will continue to be a need regardless of the time or environment (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

In many cases, the ability to access and leverage user data can be spoken of as power over the user himself or herself. In order to avoid undue power or unwanted control, data sharing and privacy protections have been put into place by most governments and many organizations. This promotes fairness and transparency while still allowing for people to feel secure regarding the data they are sharing (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

What types of information constitute confidential student data?

Any student information that a school collects or uses is generally termed student data. Traditionally, this term referred to information that a school collected on campus. Now, with the advent of increased online learning and remote learning educational paradigms, student data can refer to a much wider amount of information—including, a little controversially, information entered on student devices while a student is at home (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

Some relevant examples of student data may include:

- The student's name
- The student's age
- Demographic data such as race, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity
- Academic information such as test scores, grades, any disciplinary information, career, and college goals
- Any observational data a teacher may have recorded about a student's interests or behaviors
- A general log of your student's performance in school
- Any provided information about a student's living situation and lifestyle, including health needs, home internet access, transportation access, and more

As described above, there is a significant amount of information that could fall under the general umbrella of 'student data.' To better help with future distinctions about how schools can manage and share student data, it's now helpful to break down student data into a few different types (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

These types include (Student Privacy Compass, 2021):

- **Personally Identifiable Information.** This type of information will include data that can directly identify the student it relates to. These types of identifiers can include a student's name, a social security number, or even indirect information that could help identify students such as their date of birth.
- **De-identified information.** This type of information, as its name may suggest, only contains student data that could not possibly identify a student. For

example, this might be the type of information you'd find in a large-scale anonymous student survey about general demographics or student achievement.

- **Aggregate Information.** This type of information is about a group of students. For example, this might be the type of information a school could anonymize and then send as part of a mandatory reporting package about the achievement of the student base as a whole.
- **Metadata.** This type of data describes other data—for example, a dataset that shows how well students did on their tests throughout the year could be accompanied by a meta dataset that indicates how much time a student spent on each test.

What are the potential limits of confidentiality?

While confidentiality of student data is extremely important, it's also key to be aware that it does have its limits. Often, we find the limits of confidentiality when we look into how student information could compromise the safety of the students themselves or others.

In order to provide a little more concrete guidance surrounding the limits of confidentiality for teachers, parents, and even students, we'll list some common limits to help you determine what might be the extent of confidentiality at your school. Your school should have this documented in the school's bylaws. Your school should also be following detailed state laws regarding confidentiality. As such, you may find that some of the listed limits to confidentiality may apply to your organization; others may not apply (The Center for Ethical Practice, 2020).

Some of these possible limits to confidentiality are (The Center for Ethical Practice, 2020):

- Access to student information by support or counseling colleagues—e.g., other counselors, or other people working in support of the student, people that may have similar job titles as the person who first collected the data
- Access to student information by administrative or other colleagues—e.g., people within your community that may have different job functions, but should still be working in concert with staff to support the student

- Access to student information by contractors or vendors at your school—e.g., people who do not specifically work at your school, but do have an approved supporting relationship. It's a good idea, in this case, to make sure that privacy and confidentiality protections are written into your contracts with these vendors. Parents may wish to see those contracts before feeling okay about these contractors or vendors having access to data about their students.
- Disclosing confidential information in the event that a student likely is a danger to self
- Disclosing confidential information in the event that a student is likely a danger to other people
- Disclosing information to parents about a minor

Some of these last disclosures may fall under local reporting laws, such as a duty-to-protect law or a situation in which you as a teacher or a colleague (such as a school counselor) has a duty-to-warn (The Center for Ethical Practice, 2020).

What are some common misunderstandings about student privacy and confidentiality?

Clearly, there is a significant amount of information to digest surrounding student confidentiality and privacy. This can feel overwhelming. Unfortunately, it can also lead to misunderstandings, which can, in turn, lead to more work than necessary for teachers and administrators or even worse, to poorly protected privacy for students and other members of our academic communities (Comegno, 2020).

When it comes to FERPA and HIPAA, it's key that teachers can understand the basic concepts so they can work within these regulations and guidelines to protect students from unlawful or even unsafe disclosure of their personal, academic, or health information (Comegno, 2020).

To help reduce staff stress and promote student safety, we'll next work to clarify five popular FERPA and HIPAA misconceptions. The first is very simple (Comegno, 2020):

1. **I have to make sure that I don't violate HIPAA at school.** False! Even though many of us may think of HIPAA when we think about privacy in general, HIPAA violations tend to occur elsewhere, and other laws are much more applicable on school campuses. This can feel like an odd distinction to make, particularly when

student planning and personal data may involve health information (e.g., developing IEPs for students with special needs, or implementing Section 504 plans). It's key to realize that this type of sensitive student data is indeed protected. However, it's not protected specifically under HIPAA. HIPAA stands for "Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act," established in 1996. Under HIPAA, the use and disclosure of protected health information are mandated, and such regulations generally apply to healthcare providers and insurers. Your school's protected information will fall under more school-centric rules, even information collected by a school nurse or a school counselor. While it is a good idea for school officials to be aware of what HIPAA is, it is more likely that school mandates will fall under FERPA regulations.

2. **We need a signed release to call a doctor to learn more about a student's note.** If you're trying to learn more about a statement that a doctor has made in order to inform your IEP drafts or Section 504 plans, you may wonder if you're able to contact that doctor without violating FERPA regulations. Here, the answer is a little unsatisfying: It depends. Under FERPA, this information request may be okay because you are not sharing or disclosing information about your student. Instead, you're asking for information (or confirming information). The doctor can readily refuse to give that information. (Physicians may need to secure their own releases from the parents in this scenario, but that's not something you likely need to initiate).

3. **Parents should be able to access any school document that mentions their student.** This is not necessarily true. While the parents of your students may have access to most documents that concern their child, this access will not extend to every single file concerning their child's name or other identifying information that exists at your school. Any records that your school technically houses that are constantly kept in the sole possession of the record-maker may not be considered FERPA-protected education records. A good example of this is the private notes of counselors or teachers that they keep for their own information, without any intention of ever sharing them or making them accessible for other people. These documents may become FERPA-protected education records, however, if they are shared with colleagues after the fact, or if the record-maker puts them in a file or folder that is accessible to other members of the staff.

4. **Under FERPA, paraprofessionals and teacher aides can't see Section 504 and IEPs.** Since FERPA concerns the proper prohibition of undue disclosure of data

that identifies students without proper written consent, it could be easy to wonder whether colleagues who would likely benefit from this type of access could review relevant student records. FERPA doesn't require parental written consent in this context. As long as school officials have a legitimate educational interest, they may have the right to review certain student records. However, each part of that statement has terms that are not completely clear. Terms like 'school officials' and 'legitimate interests' are not defined by law. Your school, instead, should have policies or regulations that define these terms or the processes you need to follow in order to ensure that all members of a student's care team have the information they need without violating confidentiality. Moreover, that plan needs to be included in a regular stream of information that goes out to all parents, to ensure that everyone is kept notified of your policies and procedures.

5. **Student grades need to be confidential between students, too:** Under FERPA, no student should see another's grade. This depends on the grading procedures that are accepted and practiced at your school. Grades tend to fall under the umbrella of identifying information that receives protection under FERPA. In the past, the United States Supreme Court has ruled that students can score each other's tests (and even call out the grade) without violating FERPA. In this case, the Court decided that these grades weren't yet recorded in the educational record. As a result, if you tend to rely on peer grading in your classroom, know that it's likely licit from a legal standpoint. (You should check to see whether it's okay by your specific school's policies as well.) Once the teacher has a grade and it is entered into the education record, that grade becomes protected information. It can be shared with parental consent, which often occurs for situations like publication through an honor roll or sharing student records with another school. Without consent, that information needs to remain private.

What is the role of the school counselor when it comes to confidentiality?

While teachers themselves may oversee significant amounts of student data, school counselors may have access to the most sensitive student-shared information. The American School Counselor Association has outlined the various obligations that school counselors must recognize regarding confidentiality to the student and their obligation to disclose key data to the student's family or guardian. Here is an overview of the

relevant guidelines that school counselors must follow in order to respect student privacy while working toward their safety at all times (ASCA, 2018).

Under the American School Counselor Association's guidelines, all school counselors need to prioritize treating all students with dignity and respect. School counselors must do so at least in part by respecting the privacy of all students at their school, whether or not they seek counseling. Students who do enter into a counseling relationship with school staff must be able to expect and enjoy an atmosphere of confidence and trust, just as those who seek counseling services do (ASCA, 2018).

School counselors are bound by legal and ethical obligations to protect the information that a student shares as part of the counseling relationship. That protection is contained within the term 'confidentiality'. Confidentiality must be maintained, with the sole exception being that any time a student's confidentially-reported information could lead to harm (to that student or to another student), the counselor does have a greater responsibility to report or act upon that knowledge and to work to protect the students from harm (ASCA, 2018).

The definition of foreseeable and serious harm may differ from school to school. The degree of harm tends to depend upon how old a student is, and the settings they are in. It's important that school counselors inform their students in any situation where a school counselor might have to act upon or disclose confidential information (ASCA, 2018).

Confidentiality is a legal term. Another relevant legal term is 'privileged communication'. This term refers to information that a student shares with a school counselor within a counseling relationship. However, this privilege is only in place if granted by either a state or federal statute in your area. If communications between a counselor and student are privileged, this represents another layer of legal protections that may be able to be applied to confidential information (ASCA, 2018).

The American School Counselor Association has provided a more detailed summary regarding the role of school counseling professionals with respect to confidentiality. These guidelines are as follows (ASCA, 2018):

- School counselors must support students by upholding their right to privacy. This means that counselors must protect the confidential information their students tell them, as well as any information given to them by staff and the family of the student.

- They need to make sure that their students understand their right to privacy. Counselors should do this by explaining what confidentiality means (and establishing the limits of confidentiality) in terms that their students can understand, depending on the student's age. Counselors should repeat this information as necessary in order to ensure that the student is consistently aware of their rights.
- School counselors must obtain informed consent regarding the confidentiality of their counseling relationship.
- School counselors must be aware of the limits of confidentiality. The limits of confidentiality may include:
    - When the confiding students relay information that makes it clear that they are a danger to themselves or towards other people
    - When there is a court-backed reason for disclosing specified information
    - Conversations with other trained student support professionals, including the counselor's supervisors, colleagues, and other personnel who work to support student welfare
    - Any participation the student may have in group counseling
    - Any information that could indicate the student is in need of substance abuse treatment
- School counselors are expected to keep their personal notes distinct from the educational records of the student
- School counselors must seek legal advice (or speak with their supervisors and colleagues) if for any reason their confidential records are subpoenaed. They should also advocate that their students' identities remain anonymous if, for any reason, the confidential records need to be displayed.
- School counselors must work to provide the best (e.g., most private and sensitive) method of communicating sensitive student data (e.g., in person, or over the phone, instead of over email or text)
- School counselors should work to be aware at all times of the local security standards and the federal and state regulations regarding communicating and storing data

- School counselors must fight for a students' right to have ownership over their own data
- School counselors should act in line with the policies of their school board as well as the laws in their state regarding the use and sharing of student records, including health and academic information.

The relationship between a school counselor and their students requires an air of safety and confidence. In order to preserve this environment, students need to know what their rights are, what the limits of confidentiality are, and know that their counselor will be working to protect them at all times (ASCA, 2018).

What does data privacy for students look like?

It may be fair to wonder what student data needs to be private and what data privacy laws may look like for younger children. For schools, educators, and administrators, it may be helpful to consider a working definition of student data privacy:

> *Student data privacy involves the ethical, equitable, and responsible collection, sharing, use, and protection of data for students (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).*

Why is this distinction and definition important? Unfortunately, there are many stories out there detailing just what can happen when personal data is compromised (e.g., identity or credit card theft) (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

As many younger children may not have the experience necessary to know how important data safety is, it's important that organizations that work with and support younger children have privacy protections in place. The goal of a school's data privacy system, therefore, will likely mirror the goals of the entire school system—e.g., to support the students and keep them safe (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

There exist misconceptions about student data privacy that are worth exploring. They are as follows (Student Privacy Compass, 2021):

- Student data privacy is not synonymous with preventing all people from learning anything about an individual student. The goal is not to enshroud each student in unnecessary levels of mystique—fundamentally making several different administrative and supportive processes for educators unnecessarily difficult. Rather, data privacy works to establish reliable conditions and routine processes for sharing personal information to trusted individuals.

- Student data privacy and school data security are not necessarily the same thing. The two concepts are closely related, but a perfectly secure data system could technically still violate a student's individual privacy.
- Student data privacy is far from just another routine to-do item that requires completion. Data privacy is an ongoing, vitally important priority that will be integral for ongoing data use. Misusing data or failing to protect it properly can put students and entire families at risk, so it's key to give data privacy its due.

Next, we'll discuss the risks and harms that your students could experience when protections are not in place, to add some perspective to this discussion of student data privacy.

What are the harms associated with poor levels of student data privacy?

When schools fail to properly protect their students' data from undue levels of access, the students (and their families, and the entire school) could be at risk. There are three levels of harm that could happen as a result. These categories are as follows (Student Privacy Compass, 2021):

- **Real harm to the student:** After a data leak or unsafe data access, the students involved may experience harm to their reputation, emotional, or even physical harm.
- **Legal consequences:** If the school officials do not protect their students' data well, they may face fines or lawsuits for their failure to comply with the relevant privacy regulations.
- **Public relations repercussions:** If there is a data leak or misuse of data at your school, you may be able to work quickly to avoid legal sanctions. However, if your community at large realizes that your school was operating in an irresponsible or unethical way, the reputation damage done to your school could potentially be permanent.

Since active, actual harm to your students is likely one of the highest priorities at your school, it's a good idea to be very aware of the distinct risks that your students face with irresponsible privacy protections. These include (Student Privacy Compass, 2021):

1. **Excess commercialization:** If companies or organizations get too much access to student data, they may start to target that student or students with similar demographics with excess advertisements. While on some level this may seem innocuous, it can lead to adverse mental health situations.

2. **Concerns about equal access:** In any given community, some students will have significant access to internet-enabled devices. Others will have significantly less access. Since a great deal of data input and privacy violations tend to happen through internet-enabled devices, this lack of equity in access can result in further implications regarding which children become the victims of data privacy issues.

3. **Social harm:** Perhaps one of the clearest risks associated with poor data privacy protections is that a student could stand the risk of revealing too-personal, too-sensitive information. If some types of information are leaked to the wrong audiences, the result could include cyberbullying and stigmatization.

4. **Undue surveillance:** This risk is one that many parents are worried about, perhaps for good reason. In some cases, a lack of basic privacy protection can result in over-collection and over-monitoring of student data. If students are aware of this, they may lose their interest in learning, or feel like they can't be adventurous while they're online.

5. **Records of unhelpful permanence:** The length of time that institutions retain records of student events—in particular, the mistakes that students may make—can harm the future chances of success that students can enjoy.

6. **Opportunity loss:** Overly-transparent student data can help administrations make decisions that could reduce access for specific groups of students. This could in turn result in reduced opportunities for that group of students.

7. **Access to inappropriate content:** Without proper data protections, students may find that they're able to access content online that isn't appropriate for their viewing.

8. **Physical safety:** Finally, if some groups of people are allowed access to very specific personal data of the students—e.g., their allergy and health information, or even their personal home or email addresses—they could misuse or leverage that data inappropriately, resulting in possible physical harm to that child.

Why is it important to maintain student privacy to ensure higher data equity?

In order to be as responsible as possible with our data use, it's key to go further than merely being compliant with the laws and regulations in our area. Instead, we must prioritize the creation and maintenance of privacy policies that are geared to ensure a high-quality, ethical, and equitable educational experience for all of our students (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

If a privacy policy is to be truly equitable, it needs to minimize the risk and harm done to students who belong to traditionally marginalized groups. Data ethics is slightly different. Here's a working definition:

Data ethics concerns the way that stakeholders use, govern, and protect data to minimize the risk and harm to students. Examples of the ways that data can be used ethically include the creation of policies that guide data governance and the creation and maintenance of practices surrounding data collection, retention, access, purpose, and use. An ethical data policy will include information surrounding inappropriate and appropriate data use to make the standards clear for everyone (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

Data ethics must come first; only after ethical data practices are established can we work toward data equity. Data equity focuses on the use of data—from individual to aggregate sets—to help understand and then remove systemic barriers to the success of our students (again, particularly marginalized groups).

Practices that point toward equitable data use include auditing data regularly, as well as our data practices and data systems themselves, and locating and making plans to reverse any existing discrimination or bias. Some common forms of bias and discrimination that this auditing can find would be unequal forms of surveillance and unequal forms of discipline (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

A school system working toward full data equity will prioritize including the student and the family in its decisions regarding data use. This must include regular, transparent communication regarding the students' needs, what they're experiencing, and information about the students' right to their own data (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

One of the reasons that it's key to work beyond minimal compliance to privacy protection standards is simple: It's possible for a practice to be technically in line with

FERPA's regulations, but it may be unethical or inequitable in some other way. For example, wholly legal privacy protection standards could still allow schools to (Student Privacy Compass, 2021):

- Draw unfounded or inappropriate conclusions about their students
- Make key inferences that fuel policy decisions that are based on biased data
- Rely on logical fallacies in order to make apparently reasoned decisions
- Cherry-pick the data in order to present an analysis in line with a predetermined story
- Exhibit confirmation bias

These, among other poor practices related to data use, can lead to real harm for marginalized populations (or any group of students). In order to minimize that harm, therefore, we need to pursue a system that is both legal, ethical, and equitable (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

What would a culture that fully celebrates privacy look like?

If all we needed to do to fully protect student data was get school leaders and district administrators on board, we wouldn't have an issue. Unfortunately, we need to go further. Everybody who has a stake in the quality of our educational processes—community members, students, parents, investors, instructors, and administrators—will need to work in a specific way to protect and responsibly use student data. All of these entities need to work together to establish and maintain a culture of privacy. In a culture of privacy, all involved parties know that data needs to be protected and are willing to put in the work to achieve that goal (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

Doing this is not immediate or easy. A privacy-centric culture requires legal support, well-maintained data systems, professionals who know how to vet and onboard new management and Edtech tools, and consistent training of all members of an academic community (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

The roles that individuals may have in their communities and what practices they may be able to perform in order to establish well-protected student data vary, and may include the following (Student Privacy Compass, 2021):

- **Leaders of schools and districts** can work toward analyzing, researching, and writing robust privacy policies that detail expected practices and procedures. Then, leaders can prioritize proper training of all educators and staff. Finally, school leaders can facilitate consistent, effective, and open two-way communication with all members of an academic community.

- **Educators** can focus on professional development that centers on student data privacy, as they're enabled and given the room and resources to do so by their school leaders. They can then work to share key information with families and students about student data collection. Finally, educators can work to make sure that they select programs and tools that are well-vetted and set up to provide protection for their students.

- **Parents and caretakers** can dedicate their time toward learning the laws that will protect their students' data, and work to make sure that they understand their own parental rights as partners on their children's educational journey. With this, they'll be more empowered to protect their children from harm. As informed members of their academic community, they can then advocate for better privacy systems and training. Finally, they can speak frankly with their children about good data practices, so that students themselves feel empowered to act in a responsible and safe manner online.

- **Students** themselves can focus on learning good digital literacy skills, manage their identity and time online with care, and educate themselves (perhaps in partnership with their parents or instructors) on their own school's privacy programs and local regulations. This way, they'll be able to work to keep themselves safe and be on the alert for any possible dangerous data practices occurring in their schools.

In our discussions regarding school equity, we've concentrated on the ways educators can equitably serve students from poor socio-economic backgrounds or from minority groups that are often the target of discrimination (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

In this final part of the second section of this course, we're going to discuss a few of the ways that educators can work to support students with special needs as they pursue a high-quality education.

What rights do students with disabilities have at school?

The short answer is simple: All of the rights that their more traditionally-abled peers have, along with some additional supports to help ensure that their educational access and experiences are equitable.

Since there are so many different ways in which a student with special needs could require support, the related laws are numerous and can be extremely difficult to understand. To help clear up some of the confusion, we'll review some of the major laws, associated guidelines, and ways schools can implement them strategically in this section (ADA National Network, 2018).

In the United States, there are three primary laws that oversee the rights of students who have special needs and are enrolled in public schools. These are:

- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
- Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act
- Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

As discussed above, IDEA was created to ensure a free and appropriate education for those with special needs. This act, along with Section 504 and Title II of the ADA were passed at distinctly different times in history, so they tend to address the issues that were most glaringly prevalent at the time. The ADA is the most recent of these laws; it was passed in 1990. As with the other regulations, it is critical to stay abreast of the necessity for ADA compliance (ADA National Network, 2018).

Although these three laws have similar goals, since they were not necessarily laid out at the same time with the same plan, they can be confusing to uphold or examine in practice. Here, we will examine how these laws are different, so you can be an advocate for parents and students who may need help understanding them or can make choices based on how your school is going to implement them (ADA National Network, 2018).

What does each of the primary laws protecting student disability rights cover?

Each of the above laws - the ADA, Section 504, IDEA - work to address a different part of the educational experience of a student living with a disability.

The ADA, as the most recently-established law, is perhaps the broadest. Under the ADA, all individuals who have disabilities in the United States are assured of basic civil rights protections. This law covers education, but also many other aspects of life (including, for example, the right to different options for viewing a website or watching a movie with subtitles). Title II of the ADA speaks more directly to the student experience at public schools. Under ADA's Title II, public schools cannot discriminate against students with disabilities (ADA National Network, 2018).

Under Section 504, all people who live with disabilities who enjoy the support of a program that receives federal funding (such as a public school) should be assured of basic civil rights protections. There are some areas of overlap between the ADA and Section 504, as we'll touch on next. For now, remember that neither Section 504 nor the ADA is a law that provides funding; rather, they simply enforce the necessity for nondiscrimination (ADA National Network, 2018).

IDEA is a little different. Under IDEA, eligible students with disabilities must have access to a free appropriate public education (or FAPE), and that education must occur in the least restrictive environment (or LRE) possible. These two acronyms represent legal terms with strict definitions. Unlike the other two laws, IDEA does provide schools with federal funding to support students eligible under IDEA (ADA National Network, 2018).

A little confusingly—perhaps due to the different times these laws were established—these laws contain different definitions of disability, varying requirements, different coverage, and some areas of overlap. The coverage for each is as follows (ADA National Network, 2018):

- **ADA** covers a wide range of settings, both private and public, for all individuals with ADA-defined disabilities.
- **IDEA** covers individuals with IDEA-defined disabilities in school. "School" here is a general term that covers academic experiences from preschool through postsecondary education, as well as health, employment, welfare, and social settings and functions that rely on federal funding.
- **Section 504** covers children with defined disabilities from their birth through graduation or age twenty-one. Section 504 may include some early intervention services available in some cases.

How do these disability laws define disabilities?

As the above summary of coverage under disability laws indicates, the legal definition of a disability is extremely important for determining the level of support mandated in a specific student's situation (ADA National Network, 2018).

To make things a little less complicated, both the ADA and Section 504 work with the same relatively broad definition of disabilities. IDEA makes things a little more limited. Here's where these definitions lie (ADA National Network, 2018:

- The **ADA** and **Section 504** define a person with a disability as "A person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment."
- **IDEA's** definition is a little more concrete, describing their target demographic as: "A child with specific disabilities who, by reason thereof, needs specially-designed instruction and related services." IDEA goes on to list out those specific disabilities, from autism to orthopedic impairments to traumatic brain injuries (ADA National Network, 2018).

How do schools determine eligibility under the various United States disability laws?

The above definitions help determine whether a specific individual is eligible to receive benefits or support under a law or not, and where the funding to fuel that support will come from.

This makes determining initial eligibility a little more straightforward than one might expect: To receive protections under the ADA, Section 504, or IDEA, a person needs to meet the definition of disability under that law. This may mean that the individual needs to work with a medical or behavioral health professional to obtain an official diagnosis. Since the definitions for disability under the various laws are a little different, it's also possible for a student to receive support and coverage under the ADA and Section 504 (the non-discrimination laws), but not necessarily IDEA (the specially-designed instruction law). For example, if students have diabetes and require certain medications or specific dietary support, but tend to perform well in school without additional aid or modifications, they might be protected from discrimination under the ADA and Section 504, but they may not require or qualify for additional academic accommodations.

However, a student who has dyslexia and may not be able to keep up easily at school could qualify for coverage under all three laws (ADA National Network, 2018).

What is an IEP?

As an educator, you may already be familiar with one of the methods of support that qualifying students receive under IDEA. This is the individualized education program or the IEP. Qualifying students receive a specific, written document that identifies the services a student will require and will receive. This plan will be developed as a collaboration between school staff and parents.

Alternatively, students receiving non-discriminatory support under the ADA and Section 504 may not receive a specific, documented action plan. Sometimes, under Section 504, students may receive a written plan describing the services provided, but this is a best practice and not necessarily a mandated deliverable requirement (ADA National Network, 2018).

What is meant by the least restrictive environment?

Under IDEA, qualifying students with disabilities have the right to an education that occurs within the least restrictive environment. This means that the setting of the received education is very important. Children who live with disabilities must receive education alongside their peers without disabilities if at all possible. They must receive the supplemental services and aids that will allow them to accomplish this least restriction goal. In the past, there has been a presumed idea that children with disabilities should all be educated together, separate from their peers without disabilities. This is not the case. Instead, it is vastly preferable that children with disabilities should only be removed from the classroom environment when this is absolutely essential for meeting their needs (ADA National Network, 2018).

Section 504 and the ADA's Title II also make it clear that educating students with disabilities in the same classroom setting as their peers without disabilities is preferable. This is, generally speaking, what is meant by the least restrictive environment (ADA National Network, 2018).

Section 2 Reflection Questions

- Do you feel that your school has a good system for supporting students with disabilities?
- Does your school prioritize student data privacy protections?
- Do you feel that you have a working understanding of the limits of confidentiality?
- What types of data do you collect and work with in your classroom? What do you think would happen if someone with malicious intent could access that data?

Section 2 Summary

Supporting our students in the most ethical way possible often involves ensuring that we protect their rights, their data, and their privacy. This involves identifying the information we have about our students' lives that is most sensitive and maintaining systems that are geared toward protecting that information at all costs.

For students with disabilities, this may include health information. In order to maintain a truly equitable environment, it's key that our schools know how to support students who may require more help than others. Having a working knowledge of the regulations surrounding students with disabilities can help educators work toward that aim.

In the third and final section of this course, we'll discuss some practices that educators and school professionals can implement to work toward an atmosphere of privacy and protection for students.

Section 3: Best Practices for a More Safe and Equitable School

In this course, we've discussed the necessity of good data privacy standards, the need for confidentiality, and the need for an updated understanding of equity and equal educational access. In this final section, we'll discuss some best practices and specific actions that educators can take to promote ethical standards at their schools.

We'll start with methods for promoting privacy protections for your students' safety.

What are the data privacy policies that my school and district should absolutely have in place?

In addition to federal and state-level policies, it's key (and essential for ethical practices) that your school has its own methods for ensuring and protecting student privacy. Your policies need to provide key management information to educators and administrators; you also need to include specific standard operating procedures for classroom practices and regular communication. You should make sure that your school has specific policies (or sections/language within policies) that speak to the following subjects (Student Privacy Compass, 2021):

- Vetting and Adopting EdTech Systems or Platforms
- Posting and Sharing Student Work
- Personal Social Media Use and District/School Social Media Use
- School Directory Data and Information
- Obtaining, Managing, and Sharing Videos and Photos of Students
- SOPs for Virtual Learning and Video Classrooms
- Communication with Students and Parents
- Destruction of Data
- Requests for Information from Parents
- Sharing Student Data with Community Organizations
- Handling a Breach of Data
- Sharing Student Data with Researchers

We should note that your school should not only have these policies in place but should also share these policies with the academic community regularly or at least have them freely accessible for all those who wish to reference them (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

What are common parental concerns regarding student privacy and confidentiality?

As your students' teacher, you'll be one of the first lines of defense protecting their confidentiality and privacy. You'll also be one of the primary resources that your student's parents have to understand confidentiality and privacy concerns, which means that you may receive a lot of requests and questions regarding privacy that you will have to know how to support.

Here, we'll list out some of the most common parental concerns regarding student confidentiality and privacy that you could encounter (Kiesecker, 2020).

1. **Parents may ask to opt their students out of directory information.** The type of information that goes into a school's directory can vary from district to district and even institution to institution, but it typically involves a decent amount of student identifying and contact information—ranging from a student's first name and grade level to full name and email address. Information classified as 'directory information' may be able to be shared about students with third parties. This may be done without student or parental consent. In order to avoid this happening, many parents will opt their students out of directory information. Under FERPA, schools must notify parents of their right to opt their students' information out of the directory at the beginning of the school year. This may matter to many parents, because, under the regulations of the United States Department of Education, information included in your school's directory can include:

    1. Your students' name
    2. Their address
    3. Their home telephone number
    4. Their email address
    5. Information about where and when they were born
    6. What they plan on studying
    7. A photograph of your student
    8. Attendance data

9. The types of sports and activities they participate in
10. Student ID numbers.

2. **Parents may express concern about the amount of screen time their children are subjected to.** Particularly in the remote school era post-pandemic, many schools may be operating with several hours of Zoom (or other) meetings all day, every single day. As a result, both students and parents might be worried both about the effect screen time is having on the students and any privacy issues that may arise from so much internet exposure. If your school uses Zoom (or Google Meet, or Skype, or another similar platform), it's key that your students are aware of what is in their backgrounds. You may get requests from parents who want their children to use a virtual background, or even turn off their camera in order to protect their privacy and their family's privacy. You'll have to make choices and responses that are in line with your school's policy, but at the very least you'll need to make sure that your students are aware that their backgrounds and video feeds can be seen at all times when the camera is on. Including a short tutorial at the beginning of the year on how to use virtual background software, on what is or is not appropriate as a Zoom background, or on how much camera feed access your school needs can help parents and students understand what is expected. Note that FERPA does not prohibit any parent from observing their students in the classroom environment, which means that parents may be able to sit in on Zoom calls.
3. **Aside from the specific privacy concerns possibly associated with screen time, parents may ask you to maximize all opportunities for hands-on learning even if you are educating remotely.** Managing the amount of screen time that your students are exposed to is the subject of another course entirely, but it could be mentioned in the context of familial privacy concerns. Again, making the expectations for how your remote educational plans will work very clear at the beginning of the year may help, as will any strategies you have for helping students take occasional breaks from screen time during the day.
4. **Parents may ask you detailed questions about the types of apps or learning and communication platforms that you are using at school, as well as the potential confidentiality and privacy concerns that may go along with these apps.** In particular, parents may ask if you or your school district has screened these apps to ensure that their children are protected at all times, or whether a specific app is in line with your state's privacy laws. Some parents may go so far as to see the

terms of service associated with specific educational apps, or a list of the specific data that your apps of choice will be using that pertain to their child. Other parents will be interested in whether your school allows vendors to show ads to students. This is legal in some states and prohibited in others. Firstly, you'll have to make sure that your school has a process in place for vetting all apps that you want to use in an educational manner. It'll be the best bet to stick with using online tools or apps that are completely FERPA compliant. Under United States Department of Education guidance, you can only require a student to use a tool or app if it doesn't violate FERPA.

5. **Parents may ask to see the data that exists in their child's current educational record.** Under FERPA, this is their parental right. Your school may have policies regarding the frequency of parental access or the type of sensitive information (e.g., privileged information) that is available for access, but, generally speaking, guardians and parents of students should have access to most student data. Parents also have the right to provide updates to correct any information that could be considered inaccurate within their student's educational records.

6. **Parents may have concerns about your school's recommended practices for entering student information or data when making any necessary accounts on Edtech applications.** Whether you (or another staff member) makes an account on the behalf of a student in your classroom or you guide students through the account creation process, it may be a best practice to recommend that your students only enter in a minimal amount of their own personal data when creating any accounts. Parents may ask you if their children can use anonymous credentials — e.g., usernames that are not associated with their name, email, or student ID.

7. **Parents may ask you about the amount of time that you require students to be signed in to their school account during school hours.** For example, if they are simply completing online research or activities related to school projects, do they need to be logged in? Or if students are engaging in non-school activities, do they need to be signed into their school accounts? Do you have regular practices in your remote classroom for making sure that your students are logged out of their accounts at the end of the school day or week? Parents may also ask about their right to clear their students' cookies, or about using privacy-friendly browsers or browser extensions that remove ads from their children's web experience or

don't allow trackers to follow them online. Make sure that you are aware of your school's policies in this case.

8. **Your parents may ask about the necessity of location-tracking applications or software present in your students' devices, particularly if your students are using Chromebooks or other school-issued devices.** You may field requests from parents regarding their ability to turn off location tracking for their student's applications or devices. Again, research your school's policies, make sure that you give answers that are in line with what your school requires or recommends, and be clear about these policies from the beginning.

9. **If your school relies on any of the GSuite for Education applications (such as Google Docs, Google Classroom, or even Gmail), then parents may approach you to ask whether your student's associated accounts and internet activities (such as their YouTube watch history, or the terms they search on Google) are visible by the school.** Depending on your school's specific policies, you may be able to help your students (or their parents) turn off location tracking and sharing of their associated non-school internet activities. You may also be able to recommend the use of privacy-friendly Internet applications, such as search engines that don't necessarily use data from searches.

10. **Parents may ask about the data associated with standardized tests.** When your students sign up for standardized tests, your school shouldn't require or instruct them to fill out the associated surveys and questionnaires. Instead, students should only complete the required information. Your school may consider including a note to applicable students that opting out of these questionnaires and surveys if present will not affect their scores.

11. **Parents may ask about the logistics and ethics of remote proctoring technology.** It's important to realize that some of the paradigms that are being used in remote education can border on surveillance. For example, remote proctoring technology, particularly those involving AI, can seem unfamiliar and scary to parents and students alike. Review your school's policy to see whether it's necessary to use these types of technology and whether your students and their parents will be able to opt-out of this process and pursue an alternative if desired.

How can I teach my young students about privacy and consent?

To students young and old, the concept of data privacy and its importance for safety can be hard to grasp. For younger children especially, devices and the Internet may have only been an unmitigated source of entertainment. Their own data, insofar as medical histories and grade reports go, maybe something they don't really think about at all.

However, in order to make sure that you're able to obtain informed consent and set your students up to make a lifetime of smart confidentiality choices, it's best to make sure that you're painting an accurate portrait of privacy for your students from a young age. Here are some of the best tips we've found for teaching young students about consent and privacy (Miller, 2021).

1. **Give your students a good set of online privacy habits.** Many students need rules to understand what they need to do, particularly when it's something that feels relatively vague and unthreatening, or at least remote (like a data breach or an unsafe Internet privacy event). If you have younger students, it may help to simply set forth a set of good privacy rules and explain them in a very straightforward manner at the beginning of the year. This may involve guidelines from the way kids should interact with websites that require login information to specific security parameters on the educational apps you use. From an early age, you should also empower your students to question anything that seems odd to them, either online or in practice (e.g., if they feel unsafe online, or if someone asks them a question in real life that they don't want to answer). Establish that you're a knowledgeable, safe resource for helping deal with these situations.

2. **Help your students realize what's worth sharing.** In current times, children are always going to be exposed to potential opportunities to share a great deal of their personal information. Every time they join a social network or even purchase a game, children are asked questions and are even given incentives to input their personal data in exchange for some nominal benefit. Teach your students about the importance of protecting their personal data. Tell them that there are only certain situations in which they should divulge important information, and give your students alternative options (e.g., an email address just for gaming, etc) that they can use to do the things they want in a safer, more private manner.

3. **Help your students use good password protections.** Children can often use passwords that are overly simple, and they may use that password for more

accounts than, perhaps, is safe. Help your students come up with creative methods for generating their own passwords (don't let them tell you their options!). Encourage students to have passwords on all their devices (laptops, phones, tablets) as well.

4. **Teach your students how to use social media safely.** While social media can be wonderful for quick communication, particularly in a remote education era, there can be many dangers associated with being overly vulnerable on these apps. Help your students realize what's safe to share and what may be oversharing. Make it clear that your students can come to you, a parent, or a trusted school counselor in the event that they experience anything that makes them uncomfortable online. Remind your students, too, that as strange as it may feel to imagine, not everything that they say through their messaging apps and related services is really private.

5. **Educate your students about the power of clickbait.** Unfortunately, your students do need to be aware that there are people on the internet who will take their data and use it against them. One of the ways that these people can obtain your students' data is if they click on shady-seeming sites; which, to a young student, might just seem like an especially attractive piece of fun information. Make sure that your students are aware of what could happen in the event of a data breach, and empower them to walk away from stranger solicitations and clickbait on the internet.

6. **Tell your students about the importance of keeping some details secret from most people.** The concepts of privacy and confidentiality can be difficult for young students to understand; they may have been used to being fairly open about what's happening to them with their family and close friends. Your students will need to know that their grades, health data, login information, and other private and important pieces of information need to be kept private or shared with very specific people (e.g., parents).

7. **Become a good role model for privacy and confidentiality yourself!** In order for your young students to learn good data management practices, they'll need to see someone else doing it well. Don't ask your students potentially privacy-violating questions, don't overshare with them, and don't have any personal social media accounts that your students can easily find. If you exhibit practices that make it clear that you value data privacy, it'll make it easier for your students to emulate these routines. One specific example that may make a difference in

your classroom may occur when you ask your students to download a new app or tool for academic use. As you walk them through the setup steps, talk about what you and your team have already done to validate the app, what types of security questions to use (and not to use), and why you feel that this is a safe app to use. Later, when students start downloading their own media and navigating the internet on their own, they'll have an idea of the types of practices they should be implementing before they simply download software or start answering security questions.

What are some specific practices I can implement to safeguard school records and protect confidential student information?

Especially with younger children, you're going to need to have some practices in place to help protect their data. As you help educate and empower your students to protect their own information, you should also establish ways to safeguard their data from your end. As their teacher, they trust you to help protect them; and, as a member of the staff at your school, you will be required to have access to much of their sensitive information. Your informational access may go far further than mere academic information about your student, after all; you may have access to significant knowledge about your students' families, interests, personal health, and more.

As an educational professional, you are required to work under an array of regulations, laws, and ethical obligations that make it clear that you need to avoid disclosing sensitive information and protect your students as much as possible. Your school may have already provided considerable training to make this easier to facilitate on your end. Here, we're simply going to emphasize five simple practices that you may be able to incorporate into your routine to keep you and your students protected as you use their information to support them in a licit way (Chapple, 2019).

1. **Minimize the amount of data you're collecting from your students in the first place.** This may seem obvious, but it's one of the best ways that you as a school can help reduce the amount of vulnerability your students and their families experience. In the privacy protection industry, this is known as 'minimization,' and it's well-known as a simple yet effective step that can reduce the risk of the malicious or unintentional disclosure of protected information. (After all, if schools simply don't have sensitive data, there's no way that they can even accidentally lose all control of that sensitive information.) Your school may need

to reconsider the data that it's been collecting for years. For example, while many schools collect social security numbers, there may not really be any good reason for schools to do this. The United States Department of Education even makes clear that parents don't need to disclose social security numbers with officials at their children's schools. As social security numbers constitute very sensitive information that could cause consequential harm in the wrong hands, it may not make sense to allow even accidental access to this information by school staff. If your school routinely collects seemingly very sensitive information without a very clear purpose and associated stringent security practices, you may consider reviewing these data collection practices.

2. **Routinely get rid of any student records that are no longer necessary.** In the same vein as the previous point, your school should really work to ensure that it's not maintaining records that aren't useful for its immediate needs. To the extent that you keep historical records as may be helpful for reference for previous students, you should remove any sensitive data from these records so they are just for informational purposes. If you're able to purge old records, you will be able to lower the number of families that are associated with a potential data breach. In your school's data management policies, you should set a standard length of time for your record retention. For different categories of student records, you need to make it very clear what types of information are retained for a specific amount of time. For example, your school may decide that some information is worth keeping permanently (e.g., the types of course-level grades that could help your school issue transcripts for students even years after the fact). You might decide that student personal data files need to be removed shortly after the student graduates, and disciplinary data can be removed on a yearly basis (or something similar). Very personal data that's required for very specific purposes —e.g., residential utility bills from parents required to prove their residency — may only need to be reviewed very quickly before they are expunged from school records.

3. **Establish data encryption practices for the data you do retain — both for long-term retention and for any transit purposes.** After you've minimized the data you need and purged some of the data you no longer require access to, you'll need to make sure that the data which remains is as safe as possible. With both technical security methods and administrative behaviors, you can work to ensure the highest level of security possible. Your school district may need to invest in strong encryption methods and other technologies, as well as security methods for your

network to ensure that any protected information sent via that network is as safe as possible. From an administrative standpoint, making sure that as few people as possible (or as necessary) have access to protected data will make a data breach less likely, and much easier to investigate should an investigation prove necessary. If your school issues devices to students, you'll need to make sure that both the devices themselves are secure and that students have options for secure internet access (perhaps through VPNs) while they are at home.

4. **Utilize the principle of lowest or least privilege when assigning security permissions at your school.** According to the principle of least privilege, all users that have access to data at your school should only have the minimum amount of access necessary in order to perform their jobs well. Many times, schools simply give everyone the same (generous) level of data access, because this is much more convenient than going in and determining which roles require certain levels of clearance. Doing so exposes the associated data to more risk than is necessary. It also makes investigating a data breach much more nightmarish. Instead, work with your IT administrator to impose the principle of least privilege whenever possible in your school's data privacy systems.

5. **Make sure that your IT administrator is monitoring all user activity across school networks.** This doesn't have to be a hugely onerous activity; many schools already have software that will allow some type of tracking system regarding who accesses certain files. (Windows file servers have this auditing capability.) This will make it much easier to identify suspicious activity. It can also reduce the number of attempts to breach data that people can make in the first place, since people who have malicious intent for data will know that their usernames will be associated with a specific file activity and timestamp.

How can teachers protect privacy in the classroom?

We've discussed school privacy policies at length, and it's vital to make sure that your school has programs for student privacy at the district or institution level. However, it's even more important to make sure that you're practicing them and protecting your students in your own classroom. This means that teachers need to have the knowledge and training to help them make privacy decisions on a daily basis that are in the best interests of their vulnerable students (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

This type of information also needs to be accessible and easy to practice. Why? Teachers already have enough on their plates. They're already performing a daily balancing act that requires them to monitor their students' health and safety from many different angles. Simply asking them to monitor student privacy as well without further resources would be unfair and unmanageable. To help work toward that goal, it's a good idea to begin with transparency. Teachers need to feel comfortable asking questions about privacy and learning more about the topic. Then, they can be true advocates for their students (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

Here are some action items teachers can pursue (and schools can help them pursue) to practice privacy-protecting actions in the classroom (Student Privacy Compass, 2021).

- Teachers can work to learn more about the differences between security, confidentiality, and privacy.
    - Privacy can refer to simple access. The concept that student data should remain private means that things like grades, demographic information, and assessment results should only be shared with people that students deem appropriate for this level of access.
    - Confidentiality becomes a concern after a student chooses to share private data. This refers to the idea that people who have knowledge or access to private data exercise that privilege responsibly.
- Teachers can help empower students to realize that they have the power to share the information that they want to share with the people they want to keep informed. Part of this responsibility includes helping students understand that personal information is often very important, and the people who have access to that information can have a large amount of say over how a student's educational experience plays out.
- Teachers can practice confidentiality by sharing private information about students only with people who need to know it in order to help provide the best support possible to the student. A teacher practices confidentiality by acting in a way that inspires student confidence in their trustworthiness.
- Teachers can also work to establish and practice great security practices in their classrooms. For example, early on in the year or semester, they may communicate with students the privileges and rights concerning their own data, as well as practices to avoid (e.g., sharing passwords with friends).

- Teachers can choose technologies and data collection systems that are safe. There's no getting around the fact that teachers work with huge amounts of student data (from observations and anecdotal notes to private conversations with students and confidential test results). It's clear that teachers will need a way to organize and manage this data. In finding tools and systems to help them do so, educators should prioritize options that protect privacy.
    - This can include such options and practices as double-checking the people who have access to documents on Google Docs prior to every document update and auditing the rights (edit, share, etc) that every person with access has. If you opt not to use a cloud-based platform like Google Drive, simple measures for managing privacy with physical measures involve the disuse of external storage drives (which can be stolen or lost easily) or using high-quality passwords with facial or fingerprint recognition. Teachers can also work with their school's administration and IT department to vet the platforms and tools they wish to use in order to ensure that they are safe.

What other responsibilities do teachers have in terms of privacy protection?

It's key to realize that respect and awareness of student privacy privileges and rights have grown precipitously in recent decades. Since this is the case, it can seem that teachers bear a stronger responsibility than, perhaps, ever before to help protect student privacy. Situations that may have been left up to teacher discretion in the past are now mapped out with high levels of legal detail.

In order to best support students and remain in compliance with the various laws that work hard to protect student rights and disabilities, there are concrete actions that teachers can take. This non-exhaustive list of ideas includes (Davis, 2020):

1. **Practicing grade confidentiality.** In an age of transparency, it can be easy to wonder why it's so important to keep grades private. Many of us may remember past educational paradigms in which it was completely legitimate to post public grades. As one of the main responsibilities teachers have is to assess their students' progress and provide feedback, it's important to know who you can report grades to and who may not need to know this information. It's always best to check your school's particular policies just in case there are unique situations

in place informing local practices, but, in general, teachers do have the responsibility to disclose student grades to parents and legal guardians. One exception can involve test scores from standardized tests. However, this information, in order to be shareable beyond the family unit, needs to be de-identified. If you are a teacher that employs peer or group grading as a strategic learning tool, it may be the case that this does not violate confidentiality laws, but you will need to double-check with your local regulations to make sure. Outside of this situation, teachers may not share student grades with people who are neither the relevant student nor their parents.

2. **Practicing medical privacy.** As an educator, you may have access to your students' medical files. Much like grades, this private information should not be disclosed to anyone who is not the relevant child or a parent (or legal guardian). However, as a teacher, you may also be operating under the responsibility to disclose suspected medical issues. If you observe signs that your student may exhibit that could relate to a possible medical issue, you may need to inform the student's parent. This is the only entity that should require this information. At the same time, FERPA prohibits teachers from subjecting children to assessments that could be used to help them determine whether a student has a medical issue without parental consent. Parents have the right to refuse this suggestion in all cases.

3. **Exercising the responsibility to report with care.** In order to remain compliant with student privacy laws and invest in your relationships with your students, it's a good idea to keep the majority of information disclosed to you by your students simply between you and your students. However, if a student discloses information to you which makes it clear that he or she may be in danger—e.g., if the student mentions suicidal thoughts, illicit substance use, or abusive situations at home—you have the responsibility to report this information to someone who can help (e.g., authorities, officials at your school, or the students' parents, as would make sense given the nature of the concerning information). This is because teachers have a basic responsibility to act in the well-being of the student above all else.

In addition to privacy and fairness concerns, there are other critical ways that teachers can work toward equitable and empathic educational experiences in their classroom. A compassionate and empathetic school community can play an invaluable role in working toward a truly ethical atmosphere for all of its members.

What are some specific ways that educators can work towards true equity in their classroom?

Establishing true equity in your educational system is going to be the work of more than one teacher. This will have to happen as the result of hard work over many years, by many people.

That's not to say that starting small is a bad idea, or that your classroom practices will be ineffective; it's just to help with some perspective. You can start the work of forming more equitable educational practices in your classroom by considering some of the following practices in your teaching endeavors (Lexia, 2021):

1. **Try not to assume things (or recognize that you are likely assuming things more often than you may realize).** One of the first steps toward disrupting discrimination is to realize that it is a pervasive problem. We were all brought up with prejudice and bias; we all make assumptions based on what we perceive. When we notice that a reader in our classroom is struggling, our brain wants to find a reason for that — and, so, often, we do. Equity starts with realizing that we are making assumptions about our students based on their backgrounds. Working to identify these inferences and rethink any decisions or behaviors we are making surrounding them is a good practice for any ethical educator. These assumptions and practices may often come from a well-meaning place: For example, if you know certain students are from a low socioeconomic background and are struggling with literacy, you may naturally start to 'cut them some slack' and harbor lower expectations from those individuals, because you assume that this will be easier for them and that (due to their background) they may just not be able to keep up with your students with more advantages and resources. This does those students a disservice. As one expert noted, "it is impossible to predict anybody's preferred learning style based on a single dimension of her identity and … nobody, regardless of identity, learns the same way regardless of what he is learning." Check your assumptions and associated behaviors, and start to do so on a daily basis.

2. **Rely on data.** Once you've been able to identify and work toward resolving your assumptions and expectations, you can start to use hard data to identify how to support each of your students equitably, efficiently, and ethically. Look at how your students are actually performing to see where they are in their learning journeys, what their real strengths and weaknesses are, and what (based on your

experience and expertise) it would take to help those students grow in the specific ways they need to in order to be high-achieving individuals. If those students require more support than others to get to the expected achievement for their grade level, that's okay. Part of being an ethical instructor is acknowledging that, and working to help support students as they require it.

3. **Use targeted and explicit instruction.** If a student requires an intervention or increased support from you, don't be vague about it — to the student, or to the administration. At the same time, don't phrase it in a way that will put the student down: It's not a bad thing to require more support, and a student should not feel shame for being in that situation. Instead, approach this step with the same objective focus as you would assessing hard data. Provide those students with a personalized learning structure with specific information that they can use to delve into their skills. Re-review this learning structure as necessary if the students continue to struggle. This will likely require a lot of focus, dedication, and extra time from you. Since this is the case, rely on the final step.
4. **Make sure that your colleagues are similarly engaged.** All educational staff in your school, from teachers to aides to administrators, should be working with these same equitable focuses in mind. If a student or group of students is struggling and requires more support, time, and resources in order to achieve the same outcome as other groups of students at your school, no one teacher should be taking on the brunt of the effort associated with that goal. Instead, bring it up at school meetings, and collaborate with other educators to develop and refine effective and efficient teaching techniques that you can creatively use to provide struggling students with empathetic, high-achieving education.

How can I work toward a more empathetic and ethical school culture?

As we conclude this course, let's talk about what may be an end goal for an ethical educator: Creating an empathetic school culture in which every member of the community is working with each other to achieve common goals of excellence.

It may not be immediately clear why empathy and ethics are created. For one thing, having empathy makes ethical nuances and decisions much easier. People who exhibit empathy are much less likely to act maliciously toward one another. People who are more empathetic are able to understand the people around them more and work better

with their peers, classmates, and colleagues (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2018).

Several studies have been able to show that when students invest in being empathetic, they're able to display better relationships, fewer aggressive behaviors, better communication skills, and higher academic achievement. Helping your students grow in this essential trait can be complex, but is one of the best ways to help all of your students safely meet their goals (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2018).

Often, developing empathy is boiled down to simply imagining that you're walking in someone else's shoes. This advice may be difficult for some students to imagine, so they will likely need practical assistance in growing this skill. Your students all have the capacity to be empathetic people, regardless of their background, health, or status. One of the most important ways that they will learn this important life skill is by taking cues from people who are empathetic. All of the adults at your school - from teachers to administrators, cafeteria workers, and bus drivers - will have a role to play in modeling empathetic and ethical behavior (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2018).

As an adult modeling empathetic behavior for your students, you can help your students expand their 'circle of concern.' As a rule, students tend to feel more empathy for those close to them in proximity, or those who have similar life experiences. One of the important lessons that students need to learn in school is that it isn't enough for their circle of concern to be so narrow. Students (and adults, for that matter) must exhibit empathy for everyone, especially those who may have had different life experiences (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2018).

When teachers fail to treat each of their students empathetically and equitably, regardless of the differences that may be apparent among their students, young individuals learn that they do not have to treat everyone with empathy. They learn that they can treat people with different backgrounds and beliefs differently. When teachers model different treatment of different people - even if such treatment is meant kindly, like lowered expectations for certain groups of people - they model that behavior for entire classrooms of impressionable students (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2018).

Where we can start to create the bridge from empathy to something even more helpful - to truly build an ethical school culture - is when we can help students realize that we need to take the leap from being empathetic people to acting in an empathetic manner. Instead of assuming that we'll know what to do when we feel concerned, we need to

help coach students so they will realize how to take action to do what is right. Again, we can only help students realize this skill if we (and the other adults they see at school) model this behavior for them (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2018).

Before we can work toward that end, we need to help identify and reduce the barriers to empathy that may exist in our academic communities. These obstacles are things that may get in the way of our noticing that other people may be experiencing difficulty or from acting upon that initial feeling of concern. These barriers may also simply create distance between people, which can result in a feeling of indifference. Barriers to empathy include stereotypes, magnified differences of opinion, tiny circles of concern (that are reinforced and incentivized to stay tiny), clearly unethical behaviors modeled by adults, a feeling of danger or a lack of safety at school, and poor mental health practices within the academic community (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2018).

To more successfully establish an empathetic, ethical, and equitable school environment, schools need to complete the five following steps (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2018).

1. **School staff must model empathy for young students.** This can be easier said than done, but without showing students how to be empathetic, any instruction on this subject will be essentially moot. When you get frustrated with students, pause, and try to imagine what they may be experiencing before responding. If you need a moment, verbally reflecting the feelings your students may be experiencing or the apparent rationale for their behavior may establish common ground. It can also be helpful to follow up on your students' non-verbal cues. Noting that your students are slumping over in their chairs or appearing withdrawn, for example, and following up with a kind question instead of an immediate reprimand can go a long way. Responding to student feedback and using student input can also help show students that you really listen to them, which will in turn pave the way for them to start listening to others.

2. **School staff must teach students what empathy is.** Empathy can be a difficult concept to grasp. Children are benefits-minded, so we need to show them why they need to expend effort when it comes to being nice to other people. Explain to your students why empathy is key: Why it improves classrooms and the overall school community. Tell your students that it's important they practice empathy for people beyond their immediate circle of friends. Give them concrete examples of ways they can practice empathy, so you're not relying on student creativity to make it happen .

3. **Schools need to create opportunities to practice empathy.** Simply telling students about the concept of empathy and then expecting students to perform empathetic actions in real-life scenarios isn't realistic. (We wouldn't do that for any other important skill, would we?) Creating opportunities to imagine what another person might be feeling, role-playing scenarios in which empathetic solutions would play a part, discussing books that contain empathetic characters — can all represent safe ways for students to practice empathetic skills. Having the harder conversations with our students as well, such as discussions surrounding the current barriers to empathy will also make it very clear for our students why it's necessary to be empathetic.

4. **Schools need to make the ethical expectations of the entire academic community very clear.** Put concisely: Ethical educators make it easy for everyone to act ethically. One way to do this is to clearly state what are ethical actions. In addition to modeling the types of ethical behaviors that will keep your students safe, praise ethical behavior in others. Hold your students to similar standards. Put posters around your campus that reiterate the ethical expectations you have of your community. In particular, it may be effective to establish guidelines for language and behaviors that are acceptable and unacceptable — e.g., using slurs and hurtful language to refer to other people. These are the types of actions that may not seem particularly offensive in one-off actions, but can be extremely hurtful in the long-term and even make more hurtful actions easier to perform due to the lax environment.

5. **Schools need to invest in the safety of their school culture.** We'll end this course with the same sentiment that we started it with: Students need to be safe in order to learn successfully and well. The end goal of being an ethical educator is to facilitate that sense of safety so that your students can be free to learn. To do this, in addition to following the guidelines and regulations that are in place to make it clear what actions are expected regarding data privacy and confidentiality, schools need to collect and examine data from their community. Regularly survey your students about health and safety. Ask whether they feel respected, cared for, and safe at school. Ask what they would like to see in order to feel better about their school environment. Act on this feedback. That way, you can know that you're working to create a superior climate and culture for every member of your community.

Section 3 Reflection Questions

- What types of practices do you already have in place promoting student safety? What about equity?
- Do you currently prioritize teaching your students how to be more empathetic?
- After going through this course, do you have ideas of any policies your school should implement to protect student privacy or safety?
- Do you think empathy, equity, and ethical behavior are connected? Why or why not?

Course Summary and Conclusion

The mission to become an ever more ethical educator is one that every instructor should shoulder. Each member of an academic community should be working in concert to establish a safer environment for everyone — including members of marginalized communities and those with disabilities. On some level, this needs to be completed at an administrative level with ethical policies. However, being an ethical educator also depends on the choices that each of us makes, every day. When we make choices to follow our schools' regulations and to work to protect our students, we make it easier for our students to learn and grow into the best versions of themselves. This makes it far easier for us to win at our goals as ethical educators as well.

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Part 2:

Introduction

School discipline encompasses the various consequences, strategies, rules and regulations that exist to reinforce specific behaviors in a student population. Such practices are seen as a set of rigid rules that are firm and necessary in order to have a peaceful, safe school atmosphere *and* as a means to help our students grow up to be productive, law-abiding citizens.

Unfortunately, this isn't what the data says happens when we administer discipline. In fact, the past years have told us that there are crucial disparities associated with discipline, particularly exclusionary discipline. In addition, when students experience exclusionary discipline, they often go on to be involved in repeated infractions—which may tell us something about the efficacy of our discipline practices, if we're willing to listen.

School districts across the nation are leaving exclusionary discipline practices behind and implementing restorative justice instead. As a result, we are (en masse) working toward healthier school climates. Importantly, the reduction of exclusionary discipline practices will help us pay closer attention to our students' actual needs, and it will help us to stop unfairly doling out punishments in larger numbers to the students who most need our help.

In this course, we'll discuss the various disciplinary policies that may need to see an update, the effect they're having on our students, and alternatives that may help us better care for our students going forward.

Section 1: The State of Discipline in United States Schools

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of school discipline policies, it's important to look at how we currently implement discipline, and the immediate impacts that such practices may be having on all students involved.

One of the primary forms of discipline that exists throughout schools in the United States is 'exclusionary discipline,' which has resulted from zero tolerance policies intended to prevent school violence and enhance safety for students.

What is exclusionary discipline, and why is it a problem?

Exclusionary discipline has been a mainstay of corrective action for a very long time. However, this does not mean that it's an effective method. Exclusionary discipline involves removing a child from school or even the academic community for a period of time after an infraction. While, in theory, a time-out may seem merited, this type of exclusionary discipline—when taken to extremes—can mean that a student misses out on valuable instruction time (and valuable time in which social behaviors are taught). In many cases, this strategy only serves to compound the problem (De la Rosa, 2021).

Moreover, it's increasingly clear that exclusionary discipline doesn't serve children in the long run—and this type of discipline seems to disproportionately affect students who may require the most amount of support. For example, in one recent school year, the ACLU reported that exclusionary discipline in the form of out-of-school suspensions cost the American academic community 66 million hours of lost instruction. Black students and students who have disabilities made up the majority of those cases (De la Rosa, 2021).

Findings such as these have caused experts to weigh in on exclusionary discipline. The American Psychological Association offered a working definition:

"Exclusionary discipline encompasses any type of school disciplinary action that removes or excludes a student from his or her usual educational setting" (American Psychological Association Services) (Smizer, 2021).

APA experts and several studies, including research out of the United States government, show that exclusionary discipline affects boys, students of color, and students with disabilities far more often than their peers. Interestingly, this trend remains true regardless of other factors, such as the average income level of students attending a specific school (Smizer, 2021).

Perhaps due to the very nature of exclusionary discipline—e.g., that it causes and even strengthens a break between student and school—it's clear that there is a link between instances of exclusionary discipline and students who drop out of school or exhibit increasingly unacceptable in-school behavior. The demographics associated with this trend, as well, have led to a theory termed 'disproportionality.' (Smizer, 2021)

What is disproportionality?

Disproportionality is the idea that there are some educational practices—such as exclusionary discipline—that tend to put specific groups of people at a higher risk of receiving severe and potentially harmful (or unhelpful) forms of discipline. These types of discipline are considered unhelpful or harmful because studies have shown that they are correlated with higher rates of potentially avoidable outcomes, such as school dropout, academic failure, and even incarceration (Smizer, 2021).

While this concept is unfortunate, it does give way to its own potential solution. By realizing that there are consistent consequences associated with exclusionary discipline and other similar punitive measures and noticing that we as a community tend to administer these disciplinary practices disproportionately to the students who most need our help, we can start to make steps toward more equitable justice and more restorative rerouting practices (Smizer, 2021).

It's not all the fault of the educators, of course. Many educators realize that there is a disciplinary disparity, but they note that the solutions available to them for disciplinary strategies aren't exactly wide-ranged. In addition, educators need some type of easy solution for administering rerouting solutions or (for lack of a better word) disciplinary mediation when faced with in-the-moment escalation (e.g., when a student suddenly acts out in class, and, perhaps, is not responsive to initial attempts at soothing) (Smizer, 2021).

Clearly, it will take a great deal of research, trial and error, and persistence to effect real change in terms of unfair disciplinary practices and policies. By starting to ask the pertinent questions and track the relevant data, however, we can hope to make progress in the right direction—soon (Smizer, 2021).

When a student starts exhibiting negative behaviors, what are the questions we should be asking?

We should begin to answer this question by acknowledging that educators rarely have the time for ample reflection when a student begins demonstrating behaviors that need correcting. For the purposes of this section, note that we are not saying that these questions are ones that educators need to pause and consider in the heat of the moment. Educators have enough on their plates already! In addition, as we noted above,

the established systems of discipline that educators may have available to them may be beyond their control (Smizer, 2021).

Rather, in order to initiate a comprehensive overhaul of our educational disciplinary systems, we need to reframe our focus from how to shut down undesirable behavior to what may be the root cause of that behavior. As such, in this section, we'll propose some hypothetical questions that teachers could ask of themselves or their students prior to administering exclusionary discipline (Smizer, 2021).

For example, prior to issuing a disciplinary recommendation, instead of merely considering how to stop the situation in front of them as efficiently as possible (e.g., by excluding the student exhibiting problematic behavior from the community), an educator could wonder (Smizer, 2021):

- Why is my student deciding to act out in this way?
- Are there any reasons that I don't know about that could be influencing the student's decision to misbehave?
- Are there factors affecting this student that I should know about before determining the severity of the consequence?
- Is the consequence I'm about to recommend one that all students, regardless of demographic, will consistently have to experience?
- If I'm considering exclusionary discipline in this case, is my student acting out so severely that addressing this issue is worth that individual losing out on instructional time?

One issue that will require deft consideration, too, is this: While exclusionary discipline is problematic, in the current way that school is set up, educators do need a way to maintain behavioral standards, perhaps even a way to address individual students exhibiting particular behaviors, while still meeting the needs of the entire classroom (Smizer, 2021).

Although we have yet to land upon a universal method for meeting this problem, researchers are sifting through large amounts of academic data to see if we can start by being able to identify key trends in recent academic incident reporting. New approaches to school discipline that are emerging because of this research are known as restorative justice techniques and PBIS, or Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (Smizer,

2021). We'll go into these systems in more detail in the third section of this course. Next, we'll discuss recent responses at a government level to the issue of disproportionality.

What is the Biden Administration doing to help work toward fairness and racial equity in school discipline?

Establishing greater equity and fairness around school discipline has been a priority for the past several presidential administrations. The United States Department of Education is currently reopening this initiative and examining it like the civil rights debate that it is. Recently, the agency was accepting public comments to gather data on school climate and discipline. It did this in order to figure out how to invest in school capacity and infrastructure to improve school climates—and thereby, hopefully, reduce the amount of discriminatory discipline (Blad, 2021).

The government can help in one of three ways: Policy guidance, financial assistance, or technical assistance. From early 2021, Biden's administration was exploring how to provide these practical supports to schools nationwide. The previous administrations had dramatically different outlooks upon this issue. (Back in 2014, Obama's administration was able to issue guidance that was nonbinding about the impact of exclusionary discipline.) Biden's handling of the issue will be informed not only by this, but by the fact that in 2021 (and beyond) the nation is undergoing an awakening to the realities of systemic racism (Blad, 2021).

The Department of Education collected public data through most of 2021, and analysis is ongoing. For years, since Obama's non-binding statements about exclusionary discipline, there have been concerns from people nationwide about the school-to-prison pipeline, the civil rights violations of discriminatory discipline, and the need to consider practical and more therapeutic disciplinary strategies. As Obama's guidance was non-binding (and as the Trump administration rescinded that guidance in 2018), it has been very difficult to glean hard data, change actual regulations, and see the real benefits of rethinking exclusionary discipline (Blad, 2021).

The disciplinary data the Biden administration has collected continues to show that we clearly need change. During the 2017-2018 school year, it was found that Black students made up 15 percent of the enrolled students in schools nationwide, yet were involved in 38 percent of out-of-school suspensions (Blad, 2021).

Students who have disabilities or special needs were also disproportionately represented: This population of students represents 13 percent of enrolled students, but 25% of suspensions. To jumpstart policy change across the nation and to support these groups of underrepresented students, there are people—including a group of over twenty state attorneys-general—who are urging state departments of education to return to the Obama administration's guidance on non-exclusionary discipline. Biden's administration has made no clear plans as of yet to do so, but there are some clues that it may work toward this in the future. One such clue is the recent appointment of the assistant secretary for civil rights at the Department of Education; Biden has nominated the same person to hold the role in his administration who served during the Obama administration. Meanwhile, students and school districts all across the nation are watching the Biden administration to see what policies come next regarding equitable discipline and restorative justice practices in school (Blad, 2021).

What effect, if any, did the COVID-19 pandemic have on the state of elementary school discipline?

In one Florida school district, administrators noted that up to 11% of school disciplinary incidents in the 2020-2021 school year had to do with new rules that were implemented to help achieve safety in the face of the pandemic (De la Rosa, 2021).

These rules included mask regulations and dress code violations. It is, perhaps, understandable that these rules would garner more violations; after all, they're new. However, they may also be indicative of a wider difficulty to redirect students toward preferred behaviors in the new social distancing era. For example, many teachers who instruct in person are operating under a new requirement to stand in front of the room; they cannot circulate to communicate with children in the back of class (De la Rosa, 2021).

Other teachers who are suddenly teaching on a remote basis, may be having a hard time figuring out the new behavioral status quo. Some remote educators have decided to enforce a more lenient disciplinary practice to give their students space to feel safe during a stressful time (De la Rosa, 2021).

As we move past the pandemic, the lessons learned in these remote and social distancing experiences will influence the way discipline is practiced going forward. One educational group, Illinois' Transforming School Discipline Collaborative, has recently issued a report that was written by educators, students, and attorneys. The report

indicates how ineffective some of the past disciplinary strategies commonly used have really been, especially for marginalized communities—and how, going forward, we have an opportunity to rethink the 'norm' of punitive practices (De la Rosa, 2021).

The Collaborative's report asks schools to thoughtfully consider what the individual experiences are of each student and staff member who comes to their school. In light of this more comprehensive, empathetic worldview, the Collaborative's report suggests that establishing restorative instead of remedial (or punitive) methods to reroute children who need to rethink certain behaviors would be far more effective individually, and far less harmful for entire communities. As we heal from collective trauma in the wake of the pandemic, this 'heal, not harm' mentality will be vital for the mental health of our academic communities (De la Rosa, 2021).

In particular, exclusionary discipline needs to be rethought—even (or especially) in the wake of the pandemic (De la Rosa, 2021).

Section 1 Key Points

- Disproportionality is the idea that there are some educational practices—such as exclusionary discipline—that tend to put specific groups of people at a higher risk of receiving severe and potentially harmful (or unhelpful) forms of discipline.
- Exclusionary discipline involves removing a child from school or even the academic community for a period of time after an infraction.
- Additionally, researchers found that Black students made up 15 percent of the enrolled students in schools nationwide, yet were involved in 38 percent of out-of-school suspensions.
- In a recent school year, researchers found that students who have disabilities or special needs represent 13 percent of enrolled students, but 25% of suspensions.

Section 2: Research and Data About School Discipline

In order to fully understand what we need to change to support our students more equitably, it's important that we know what the current situation is.

Recently, several groups have performed data analyses to provide answers as summarized below.

What does research say about the negative effects of exclusionary discipline?

Exclusionary discipline can have negative ramifications for affected groups of students. The American Institutes for Research recently examined the effects that exclusionary discipline—specifically, out-of-school and in-school suspensions—had on middle and high school students. By segmenting the specific suspension by its type and length, and by tracking the educational outcomes of the students with respect to the non-disciplined experiences of their peers, the researchers were able to glean an idea of the specific effects that exclusionary discipline can have (Sellery, 2021).

Researchers wanted to complete this study to gain more information that would help point toward future best practices. Over the past decades, there have been many studies that show a predominantly negative effect associated with exclusionary discipline, as we touched on above. In this study, the researchers wanted to assess effects that were correlated with different types of exclusionary discipline, repeated discipline, longer length of discipline, and other types of escalated punitive experiences. In order to get as large a sample of data as possible, the American Institutes for Research paired up with the New York City Department of Education (Sellery, 2021).

The team started by sourcing data for all of the high school and middle school students that attended a public school in New York City over a decade. They then filtered the data to narrow in on the students who were eligible for suspensions, and tracked their performance before and after their disciplinary experiences. They did the same for students who had never experienced a suspension. Finally, they layered in demographic data to see if they could pick out any trends regarding who was experiencing exclusionary data (and its associated poor educational outcomes) (Sellery, 2021).

Over the ten year period studied (from 2009 to 2018), the team was able to identify just under 1.25 million behavioral incidents that had been reported to New York City school staff. There was a wide range of severity of these incidents, from brief episodes of insubordination to use of a weapon on school campus (Sellery, 2021).

The study followed each of the students involved in these events through graduation or through 2018, whichever came first. The conclusions the team were able to draw speak volumes. As David Osher, the American Institutes for Research Vice President stated:

“The results of our research, and related studies on suspensions and the science of learning development, suggest these practices may be harming students’ long-term

educational success and do not have a positive effect on the school community." (Sellery, 2021)

Their study was very significant, as it was able to demonstrate the following (Sellery, 2021):

- The more severe the exclusionary discipline recommended for a student, the more negative their experienced effect would be. Overwhelmingly, the most severe forms of discipline were associated with consistently negative effects for the high school and middle school students. Their math and English test scores went down. They were less likely to graduate on time. Specifically, high school students for whom an out-of-school suspension was recommended (as opposed to an in-school suspension of the same duration) were 3% less likely to achieve the expected standards for both language arts and math over the following year. The negative effects grew with the length of the disciplinary experience: For example, those students who were out of school for more than three academic weeks (or twenty-one calendar days), experienced up to 5% less likelihood of graduating on time with their peers.
- Students who underwent more severe forms of exclusionary discipline tended to have poor future behaviors (e.g., future behavioral events at school, and even after school—sometimes even resulting in incarcerations). This effect was observed particularly with students who experienced one or more lengthy out of school suspensions. The researchers posited that this meant that even though schools may perceive out of school suspensions as deterrents to misbehavior, this may not be the case. They observed this effect far more frequently with younger children, reporting that this occurred largely for middle school students, not for high school students.
- The researchers reported that the poor effects associated with exclusionary discipline—both academically and behaviorally—actually occurred for all students involved, regardless of their ability, socioeconomic status, or race. Unfortunately, the data also showed that students of color—particularly Black students—and students with special needs or disabilities experience exclusionary discipline at much higher rates than their peers. As a result, these groups experience the negative effects of exclusionary discipline at much higher rates than their peers, too.

- The American Institutes for Research found that both high school students and middle school students missed more days because of suspension in years after an initial first suspension. Or, to put it another way, negative discipline experiences a positive feedback loop.
- On the other hand, the researchers' analysis did not show that there was any correlation between the severity of exclusionary discipline a student experiences and the behavior of their peers. This shows that, despite what the academic community may have thought, even using exclusionary discipline as a cautionary tale for others may not have the impact that was initially expected (Sellery, 2021).

Altogether, the American Institute for Research summed up their findings succinctly, saying:

"These negative educational effects on students are not accompanied by any improvements to their peers' outcomes or school's climate. As such, these results do not support claims that removing misbehaving students from the classroom is necessary to deter other students from similar behavior and to ensure that their peers are able to learn and feel safe within their school" (Sellery, 2021).

When students are already technically 'out of school,' as they are during remote learning, what counts as exclusionary discipline?

As students turned en masse to distance learning in 2020, misbehavior didn't necessarily stop, but rather it was presented differently. Teachers have found that instilling and enforcing discipline in their students from afar is extremely difficult—and much of the established precedent simply does not apply (Jones, 2020).

While many of the types of misbehavior that we're used to may happen frequently in person, there are many different types of misbehavior that can happen over Zoom or with remote learning. For example, students can cheat on tests that are administered online or proctored by remote AI; students can disrupt an online class stream; and students can still cyber-bully or find ways to collaborate or use unauthorized materials (Jones, 2020).

In the rush to set up remote learning quickly, as the pandemic first took hold in 2020, discipline was generally a lesser priority than simply ensuring teachers and students had the required resources for success. This makes sense. However, now, as we're looking at increased rates of overall remote learning post-pandemic, it's key to ensure that we have

transparent, proactive discipline policies that affect our in-person and remote students equally and fairly (Jones, 2020).

One of the greatest problems we have in establishing equitable remote discipline practices is a lack of data. For years, United States schools have been required to track expulsions and suspensions. More detailed data regarding discipline, particularly in the remote learning era, has been scarce. Moreover, when we get the data from the 2019-2021 school years, much of it won't be as helpful as we need it to be. For example, the data may not distinguish between pandemic-related (or influenced) discipline, remote discipline and in-school discipline that may be somewhat more traditional (Jones, 2020).

Of course, there are other complicating factors. For instance, if a student misbehaves in a Zoom setting, a teacher can hardly send that student off to meet with the principal at that time. Exclusionary discipline feels different, too, as the difference between an in-school and out-of-school suspension is greatly reduced. One action that teachers have resorted to is muting a student's audio, or turning off their video. Some teachers have even designated specific and restrictive Zoom breakout rooms to monitor a student in time out, away from the rest of the class (Jones, 2020).

Unfortunately for data collection purposes, these disciplinary practices aren't often recorded. They may feel less formal for teachers, or may not feel like true exclusionary discipline. However, according to the Center for Civil Rights Remedies at UCLA, it's key that we recognize these occasions for what they are: Removals from the learning environment. If they happen on a repeated basis or for an extended time, they may have similar effects for the students as suspensions might for in-school students. As we may not have complete or accurate data for this less formal remote form of discipline, there are those worried that we may not be able to track the effects and see whether there are populations of students adversely impacted by this form of discipline. This, too, will make it more difficult to hold academic institutions accountable or help schools implement less exclusionary, more helpful modes of enforcing behavioral standards (Jones, 2020).

This is especially unfortunate, as there are those who believe that we will be seeing a trend toward Black, Latino, and special needs students (among other underserved populations) experiencing higher rates of discipline. One reason in particular is clear: Student misbehavior tends to result from or at least be correlated with trauma experienced at home. We know that marginalized communities were certainly more impacted by the pandemic than others, and therefore likely experienced more trauma.

We can expect that these populations might act out more in class, net more punitive measures, and experience snowballing trauma in that way—but, as noted above, we don't have the data collection methods or expectations in place to observe or confirm this way of thinking (Jones, 2020).

As the director of the Center for Civil Rights Remedies at UCLA put it, "Discipline data is one of the ways we get a snapshot of how civil rights issues are playing out in schools… but if incidents aren't being properly recorded, then we have no objective way to measure impacts on students. … We do know that the pandemic is exacerbating disparities throughout society, including school discipline" (Jones, 2020).

The types of misbehavior teachers are noticing and punishing are changing as well. Over the course of the pandemic, teachers across the nation have recommended disciplinary measures due to wide-ranging misbehavior, including perhaps most often the presence of BB guns or toy guns in students' homes, clearly visible in the background of a Zoom call; there have been instances in which teachers have meted out disciplinary action assuming that these guns were real. In other situations, school districts have sent police to student homes due to allegedly present guns that turned out to be toys. As a result, parents have sued school districts. This ends well for no one. However—as cases identical to these built up—people are wondering if their right to allow their kids access to these types of toys will shortly be curtailed (Jones, 2020).

According to one San Francisco special education law attorney, it seems like the presence of an online school through a screen may make personal liberties at homes (at least, those regarding weapon-like toys) somewhat less clear. In California, owning weapons at school is illegal. In addition, when the students take a field trip, the no-weapons rule still applies even if they are off campus (Jones, 2020).

If the students are learning at home during distance learning, do the same rules apply? Parents likely don't think so. Schools, on the other hand, do.

This may seem like much ado about one specific type of infraction. But setting this precedent seems important—especially when you consider the ramifications this one rule may have for enforcing a whole host of others. Schools tend to have many other rules about what can and cannot happen on school grounds—or what would earn involved students harsh punishments. What happens when a student cyberbullies, cheats, harasses, declares controversial beliefs, or even violates dress codes when they happen to do so sitting in the privacy of their own homes (Jones, 2020)?

The fact that students are not physically present invites additional types of misconduct that aren't as likely when a student is sitting on campus. For example, there are high school teachers who report that students will turn off their webcams altogether and play video games while they're supposed to be in class, shop online, watch movies, or otherwise fail to pay attention and participate in a meaningful way. This type of infraction is hard to prove, and not necessarily serious enough to merit a resource-intensive investigation. Yet it is clearly harmful both to an individual student's academic experience and to the culture of the entire class (Jones, 2020).

Left with few options and little assistance to brainstorm creative forms of discipline, many teachers resort to excluding students from their classes in order to at least stop the disruptive activity. Much like exclusionary discipline practiced in person, this doesn't seem to help students be successful or improve their behaviors (Jones, 2020).

The senior director of policy from the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools addressed these issues and provided suggestions to help guide schools to more effective remote discipline procedures. According to this recent work, several possible options may include (Jones, 2020):

- Scheduling remote meetings students and their families
- Referring students to meetings with a counselor or a social worker as needed
- Creating plans with students to work one-on-one with them to address their misbehaviors

The underlying thesis? Particularly when students are learning remotely, it becomes vital to work to understand the root of the student's misbehavior. According to studies that compared the efficacy of this type of deep-rooted work to more typical exclusionary discipline, these types of interactions actually tend to see far better results (Jones, 2020).

At the very least, the trend toward remote learning confirmed what we already knew about exclusionary discipline, and how important it is to find more empathic and effective alternatives. As one teacher put it:

"If you think about the loss of learning that's happening anyway due to Covid, seeing students removed from class is extra concerning. I get it...it's easier to stick them in a breakout room than reach out to the family. I know that we're asking a lot of teachers already. But for so many kids, especially those who've experienced trauma, education is so important right now. It really is a lifeline" (Jones, 2020).

Schools in California have been working toward more constructive forms of discipline since long before the pandemic. The state recently banned all suspensions (both in school and out of school) that were recommended in cases of 'willful defiance,' or instances where students ignore or challenge school staff, for all students in grades K-8. While, again, this may seem like one small category of discipline, California schools that have implemented alternative types of discipline for cases such as this have seen rates of suspensions decrease overall. These schools have, instead, adopted restorative justice systems. They prioritize conflict resolution, host routine anti-bullying workshops, and more. One district official noted that the benefit of training and policy change has extended into remote learning: Now, instead of simply seeing a reduction in physical bullying, they are enjoying a reduction in cyberbullying (Jones, 2020).

Cyberbullying has become a critical issue with the shift to remote learning. Now, in these school districts, school counselors work to openly support students who have experienced cyberbullying, creating a sort of positive peer pressure to alleviate cyberbullying. This has, seemingly, worked.

A Californian official summarized her experiences with traditional and alternative discipline practices by saying that suspending students simply results in their coming back to school angrier. It's necessary to solve the issue at the source, not exacerbate it. Now, after the 2020-2021 school year, at least one good thing has come out of the chaos of those months: School officials know that these types of disciplinary improvements seem to work in remote environments as well (Jones, 2020).

Why is tracking data around exclusionary discipline a good strategy for working toward a more fair solution?

The short answer to this question is simple: Tracking discipline practices enables us to know what's happening and gives us a snapshot of who we are disciplining, and helps us to realize what the short- and long-term ramifications of our chosen modes of discipline are (Smizer, 2021).

In order to get data, it's key that we equip both administrators and teachers with easy-to-use tools to help track incidents and monitor the effects of punitive measures (as well as the associated demographics of the students experiencing the punitive measures). Once educators have a tool or piece of software to use, they can track pertinent data surrounding student discipline—location, time of day, student involvement, and more (Smizer, 2021).

When administrators and teachers look at comprehensive discipline reports and highlight common trends, we can take action to reverse any detrimental or harmful trends we may see.

This could be very simple. If we're able to run reports that detail the location of large amounts of behavior referrals, it could become clear that, for example, there are many behavioral referrals that occur in the playground area. If this becomes clear, a school can establish preventative measures on a location-dependent basis, such as staffing more adults near the playground, or reducing the number of students that congregate in that area at any given time (Smizer, C).

We can also use data surrounding behavioral referrals to track the consequences of disciplinary practices. For example, if we track the grades of students who have received numerous behavioral referrals, we can establish what the correlation and perhaps causation is between academic performance and number of times that students who experience exclusionary discipline miss out on instructional time.

Once we've noticed any trends occurring in our specific schools, we can take action toward less adverse disciplinary methods (Smizer, C).

Why do Black children continue to receive higher levels of discipline?

There are those who might scoff at the entire concept of disproportionality. They simply think that Black children (or other underrepresented groups, children with disabilities, or populations who may need more support for higher achievement) simply misbehave more (Welsh, 2021).

This isn't the case, although it is a widespread and hugely harmful misconception. We have the data to show that during the 2015-2016 school year, students in the United States lost 11 million days of instruction due to exclusionary discipline. When researchers crunched the numbers, it became apparent that Black students lost the most school time out of those students—nearly five times as much as their white peers. Latinx students suffered from similarly disproportionate amounts of exclusionary discipline (Welsh, 2021).

At some point, those who have studied educational justice in the past noticed that this data is somewhat parallel to the demographic data we see from the United States criminal justice system. Instead of using the correlations between this data to expose widespread systemic racism and to encourage stakeholders to begin working toward

greater equity for both students and adults, researchers simply seemed to acknowledge what was already known. They used it as confirmatory data, not a gigantic red flag to move toward change (Welsh, 2021).

More recently, research into school discipline methods and associated outcomes has started to spread awareness of the disparities that are occurring. The educational community is beginning to focus on alternative justice-oriented disciplinary approaches that work to actually solve the underlying issues causing behavioral problems instead of perpetuating them (Welsh, 2021).

Unfortunately, decades of negative messaging and ongoing systemic racial injustices have left us with numerous misconceptions. For example, one common misconception holds that if we break down by race the differences in various student behaviors, we'll account for the gap in the total number of suspensions. However, a recent review of the research done in this area has shown otherwise. The idea that the differing levels of exclusionary discipline undergone by people of different races is due to higher involvement (or more severe involvement) in misbehavior by Black students is false (Welsh, 2021).

A secondary fallacy concerns the link between student socioeconomic status and exclusionary discipline. Many believe that children who live in poverty may be more likely to receive suspensions. Studies have shown that the income level of the student (or even the poverty level of the school) does not explain the rates of exclusionary discipline that we see. We do see, however, that regardless of their socioeconomic status, Black students still receive more suspensions than their peers of different races.

We have established that neither higher rates of misbehavior nor socioeconomic status account for the disparity in discipline we're seeing (Welsh, 2021). Where, then, does it come from?

To find that answer, we need to look at the people administering the discipline, or those responsible for writing a school's disciplinary policies. As it turns out, instructors across the United States tend to issue referrals differently for white and Black students, even if they've been involved in similar types of misbehaviors. The data showed the researchers that, by and large, white students receive disciplinary referrals for objective behaviors (such as vandalism, smoking, obscene language, and leaving a classroom without permission) and Black students received referrals for subjective behaviors (such as disrespect, defiance of authority, and loitering) (Welsh, 2021).

This shows us that the disparities in disciplinary referrals based on race likely doesn't have anything to do with the students at all. The issue may lie more in the instructor's response to a behavioral issue—which, itself, may depend on that teacher's innate bias (Welsh, 2021).

When researchers paired this idea with further studies, they found interesting trends. As a group, teachers tend to believe that misbehavior is more destructive or indicative of repeated harm when the students involved are Black. Not surprisingly, they tend to punish Black students who misbehave more harshly than their white peers (Welsh, 2021).

Now that many schools are embracing positive behavior interventions and restorative justice practices, we are seeing steps being made so that all students can receive the benefits of such policies. As a result, researchers have been able to see a decreased rate of suspensions and similar exclusionary discipline in recent years. However, even these updated forms of interventions have not yet had the sweeping-reform effect that many had hoped (Welsh, 2021).

What will be required for any type of sustainable forward motion isn't just widespread policy updates. We need our instructors en masse to do the hard work and ask themselves why they might punish a Black student more harshly than a white student for the same behavior. It's a practice that many of us may have implemented subconsciously and one that we cannot acknowledge as being an issue. We'll only see productive change when we realize that sometimes, we do respond unfairly or unjustly with certain students, even with the best of intentions. Fortunately, this means that the solution is simple. It lies in recognizing our shortcomings and taking appropriate actions toward impartiality (Welsh, 2021).

The researchers saw several points of data that can inform our steps in this direction. First, researchers determined that the progress we have made in reforming school discipline may have the potential to help reduce suspension-related racial inequity. Schools that have started inviting children, instructors, family and administrations to attend seminars focused on cultural awareness and equity have shown promise in this area. Some schools have even offered their teachers specific training to help them improve their cultural responsiveness. Other schools have focused on ensuring their instructors have empathy training and other similar types of social-emotional professional development (Welsh, 2021).

While this does support the theory that some teachers may have been (even subconsciously) helping to drive racial inequity through disproportionate exclusionary discipline, it also confirms that supporting teachers by giving them time and resources to teach and respond to students empathetically and effectively could be pivotal in reducing racial inequity in our disciplinary processes (Welsh, 2021).

There are, of course, many other issues that need to be addressed: The lack of diversity among the educational workforce, instructors who may need to invest in stronger classroom management skills, and overarching shortfalls in the ability of entire school districts to be culturally capable. There is clearly no silver bullet for this issue. However, by providing teachers with the time, resources, and support they need to start implementing alternative disciplinary practices in their classroom, many do believe that we can see improvement (Welsh, 2021).

Section 2 Key Points

- The more severe the exclusionary discipline recommended for students, the more negative their experienced educational and personal experiences typically are.
- The detrimental effects associated with exclusionary discipline happen to all students involved, regardless of their ability, socioeconomic status, or race.
- Black students and students with special needs or disabilities do experience exclusionary discipline at much higher rates than their peers.
- The pandemic has changed discipline, exclusionary discipline, and the way we collect data about disciplinary practices. This can make it difficult to know what's really happening and what we need to do.

Section 3: Putting it Into Practice

Now that we've discussed the state of discipline in the United States and done a deep dive into the ways we can tell what's happening with exclusionary discipline, it's time to talk about how we can start to work toward widespread change.

We'll start with a couple of definitions. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS), as well as restorative justice practices, may be the new alternative disciplinary systems that you'll be hearing about for the foreseeable future.

What is restorative justice, and how can I implement these practices in my classroom?

Whether you teach remotely or in a classroom, it's key to have go-to disciplinary practices that you can turn to when needed. That's precisely why exclusionary discipline became so popular; it was easy. While more equitable and effective discipline may be by nature more hands-on, it's still integral that teachers have simple, quick, and manageable systems to achieve order in their classroom (Ferlazzo, 2020).

Working to attain this balance may take time. Teachers nationwide may have to rethink their disciplinary practices. Schools across the nation will need to prioritize giving teachers the time, space, and resources to do so (Ferlazzo, 2020).

If you're wondering how to get started with the implementation of restorative justice in your classroom, here are some ideas.

First, a word on the specific benefits of restorative justice in schools. It may help to have the demonstrated positive effects of restorative justice at the top of your mind, so you know precisely why it is worth it to invest in this way. The known benefits of restorative justice include (Ferlazzo, 2020):

- Empowering students to maker more healthy and helpful choices in the long term
- Educating students to understand the true impact of their choices
- Helping students understand how to resolve disagreements without discrimination, bullying, or violence
- Increasing beneficial relationships between students and between students and teachers
- Allowing students to remain in school and receive educational access
- Providing an equitable way to help students consider alternative forms of behavior

To be slightly more succinct: We embrace restorative justice practices because they're better for the student and the school environment overall. Where exclusionary discipline and other outmoded forms of punishment have been adopted in large part because they're easy to administer, we turn to restorative practices and PBIS measures now because they better serve the population teachers are called to support: The student.

Ways to start practicing restorative justice in your classroom can include (Ferlazzo, 2020):

- Starting your day off on a positive note by learning from students where they are at that moment and what they need that day. During these short meetings, teachers can work to build their relationship with the individual students in their classroom, try to take a pulse on their emotional mindset, and set the needed tone for that day's studies. This meeting can also serve as an excellent time to help students set intentional goals for the day—which can provide teachers with an effective way to measure student progress over time.

- Allowing quiet time after the occurrence of an unacceptable behavior to ensure everyone involved (teacher, student, and any victims of the behavior) has time to reflect on what happened. Then, instead of immediately administering disciplinary measures, giving the victims (if applicable) space to share how the behavior made them feel. This can also help the offending students clearly see how their behavior affects others.

- Having a student who has exhibited an unacceptable choice complete a meaningful writing assignment—but one that has therapeutic intent, not a simple assignment of an irrelevant topic or a rehashing of the code of conduct at your school. Instead, students should be given the time to answer questions about the choice they made, its underlying cause, and the effect that their choice had on other students. Hypothetical questions can go a long way here, giving the student the chance to imagine an alternate scenario in which they did not make this decision. Often, this can help students and teachers alike realize a root problem or help wrongdoers feel sincere contrition for what they did—and a wish to do better should another time come in the future.

- Scheduling frequent circles for community building. Early in every school year, teachers and students should take the time to get to know each other well. This investment in the relationships of your classroom, especially when it takes up classroom time that could have been otherwise devoted to more concrete learning aims, will be invaluable over the course of the year. Strengthening the relationship between the members of your classroom will help build the empathy each student feels for others, and so reduce interpersonal infractions.

- Taking time to establish classroom norms. Once your rapport with your students has grown through your community-building time, you can help your students

understand your classroom norms and help them brainstorm which classroom norms they'd like to see, as well. This can help reduce the dictatorial status quo that often exists with more one-sided classroom rules—which can inspire rebellious feelings for young students who may have poor past experiences with authority figures. While the classroom norms that you emphasize as being important to you can look eerily similar to traditional classroom regulations, talking through them with your students, explaining why they're important, and allowing your students to add to or edit the list (as is appropriate) includes them in this process, making it seem far less one-sided. This will significantly increase adherence to your classroom norms. This will also enable you as a teacher to see which values are important to your students, which can help you assist them in setting goals that will matter to them over the course of the school year.

- Investing in content-centric community circles: Again, once you have established a strong community within your classroom, you can leverage that connection to present new content to a class of students. This makes it seem like new subjects are more malleable and worthy of discussion, instead of something passive for students to take in. Over the course of the year, you can use content-driven community circles to gather feedback about the way the school year is going, moderate tough situations, share about difficulties the students are having, and more.

- Having restorative chats with students as they are needed: With reference to the classroom norms, teachers can have either one-on-one or whole-class discussions about what happens when students do not adhere to the established norms. Instead of being necessarily punitive, these chats should be treated as discovery sessions, with the aim of understanding what happened and what any involved students require to ensure that growth occurs. If these chats happen with the whole class (which can be less confrontational), the specific identities of students involved in unacceptable behavior can be shielded or out in the open. During these restorative chats, the discussion should focus on what happened (instead of what a student 'did'), what the involved students were thinking and feeling, who was harmed by the unacceptable behavior (or the objective negative ramifications of the behavior), and how students can work toward resolving the harm done. This process feels less punitive, helps the entire classroom see the logical flow of established norms and what happens when they are breached, and doesn't feel authoritative. Rather, students are involved in their own methods of

growth, which makes it far more likely that they will be invested in continuing their development in the future.

One problem that occurs with restorative justice measures is that they are new—and that they require a significant amount of investment. Educators haven't been sufficiently trained—at least en masse—in these practices, and many professionals aren't aware of the benefits associated with restorative justice and see only the massive amount of time and energy they can take. School districts will need to invest in teacher training and resources in order to ensure that educators are not overwhelmed and intimidated with the growing necessity for these types of standards. Certainly, school districts cannot ask teachers to implement this type of new classroom management strategy without reviewing other classroom aims and considering reducing teacher workload or other student achievement goals for a time while this management strategy is implemented (Ferlazzo, 2020).

One of the best ways to begin implementing restorative practices is to start small. While you and your school staff are working toward building that classroom community or other more time-intensive practices, teachers can practice the smaller (yet integral) skills of listening to their students, asking curiosity-based questions (instead of more pointed ones that tend to lead to students shutting down), and effective communication. These practices are easier to implement and can lead effectively into larger restorative practices later, as is possible or appropriate (Ferlazzo, 2020).

What are positive behavioral interventions and supports?

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, or PBIS, is defined by the United States Government Accountability Office as "an evidence-based three-tiered framework for improving and integrating all of the data, systems, and practices affecting student outcomes" (Smizer, 2021).

The purpose of PBIS is to improve both teacher and student outcomes. PBIS systems also seek to reduce exclusionary discipline, particularly for those groups that tend to be suspended or expelled at higher rates than others. In PBIS systems, school districts and academic institutions create clear behavioral expectations for their community, and use actionable systems and procedures to ensure compliance with those expectations. In the event that students do not comply with these expectations, there are tiered support strategies that can provide interventions for those students.

PBIS systems also tend to rely heavily on data analysis and real-time monitoring of individual student progress (Smizer, 2021).

What are some smaller ways that I can start practicing restorative justice now?

It can be difficult to initiate a full-scale overhaul of your disciplinary practices, especially if you don't have support, you're in charge of a large number of students, or you're reading this in the middle of your school year after norms have been established (Ferlazzo, 2020).

Regardless of the specific situation you're in, there are always ways that you can start practicing restorative practices. To aid you with your transition, we'll list some smaller or subtler practices below. This is not, necessarily, to say that they're easy! They may require a lot of internal work and constant self-reminders to treat students that act out with kindness and respect (Ferlazzo, 2020).

Crucial, but often difficult-to-practice actions include (Ferlazzo, 2020):

1. **Listening without bias or judgment.** This is a basic concept, but, as teachers, it can be hard to find the time or headspace to listen well. We're usually trying to multitask, and we may have a hard time picking up on the verbal (or non-verbal) cues that can tell us a student is struggling. One of the ways that a restorative justice classroom seeks to improve equity in discipline is to make sure that we are listening to our students, that we are understanding our students, and that they feel both heard and understood. Fortunately, there are a few reliable ways that we can work to make our students feel that we are listening. (Realizing that the second half of this practice—making our students feel heard—is just as important as our own comprehension can be a true game changer!) Important steps include (Ferlazzo, 2020):

    - First, we can help our students feel heard by mirroring their feelings and emotions when they share them with us. This is an empathetic move that can help your student feel safe when they're sharing. Secondly, we can prioritize the use of active listening principles. When your student pauses, you can say things that make it very clear you've been listening, such as, "I'm hearing you say…", or "Wow. What I'm getting from you is…." Not only does this make it obvious that you've been paying attention, this

summarizing action can help your students process their thoughts more logically. Thirdly and perhaps most importantly, we can work to be completely present for our students. We can validate their feelings. We can make eye contact and say things like, “I understand,” or, alternatively, “I cannot imagine what that must be like.” This makes your student feel like you get and respect their feelings. At the end of this process, it helps to thank them for sharing.

2. **Strategic use of affective communication.** You may have heard of this conflict-mitigating trick before: Use “I-statements.” Encourage your students to do so as well. For example, instead of “You hurt me,” from a victim to a bully, the affected student could say something like, “I felt hurt when you did that.” This approach requires vulnerability and honesty, and it really only works if the teacher initiates it. Share how you feel (with I-statements) when difficult things happen, and invite your students to share as well. For example, you can say things like, “I felt disappointed when I learned that you used the answer key to do well on that test.” Connecting an infraction to a negative emotion (instead of simply feeling angry because they were caught) can be a powerful restorative tool for students who have violated a classroom norm. This practice can also, very logically, teach your students about cause and effect—which can help them understand the impacts of their actions even outside your classroom.

3. **Implement curiosity questions.** Many students, unfortunately, have come to see even simple questions from school staff as threats. You can mitigate this effect by asking more questions of your students on a routine basis, ideally about subjects that are fun! When going about your day to day, take a moment or two to ask a specific student how they are doing and feeling. Do this consistently, until your students no longer associate a query from you with an incoming punishment (or something else unpleasant). That way, when you’re surveying your classroom and you notice that a student seems to be struggling, you already have the foundation to provide support. When, later, you pull that student aside and say something simple and non-confrontational (e.g., “You seem to be having a hard day - can I help?”) the individual will be much more likely to be honest with you, and, therefore, you will be much more able to provide the support that is needed. Simple actions like this can help head off mental and emotional issues that students are struggling with before they become much larger, more problematic issues in the future. You can also use curiosity questions to help soothe children and even provide a little bit of moderation: Ask students impacted by a violent or

traumatic event how they felt when they were victimized, or what they need the offender to do or say in order to feel better. To the offending student, you can ask why they initiated the violence, and what (hypothetically) they might wish to say to the victim of their actions. This will likely make facilitating a resolution much easier for everyone involved.

What about student self control? Is student self-control and self-discipline important?

When we talk about the negative effects of exclusionary discipline, we often talk about student behavior as if it's a foregone conclusion. Of course, this isn't the case; students are human beings who freely make decisions that dictate their experiences (for the most part). However, when students are growing and forming, it's important to consider that our actions are influencing precisely who they are going to be (Lynch, 2019).

It's also important to remember the other side of the coin: That students need to have a strong core of self-motivation and self-control in order to become who they need to be. While setting aside exclusionary discipline and investing in positive behavioral interventions is going to be key, we can also help students learn and master the skill of self-discipline. Here's why—and a few tips to help you get started (Lynch, 2019).

- First of all, remember that your students' brains are still forming. In fact, the part of their brain that we term the 'rational mind' (the part that solves problems and processes complex thought and behavior) isn't done developing until individuals are 25. This does not lessen or invalidate their thoughts and experiences prior to that age. It does, however, make it clear that your teaching is helping to influence the formation and structure of your students' brains.
- In theory, the older students get, the higher capacity they have for self discipline and self control.
- Young people are highly impressionable, and much of what they learn about self-discipline comes from what they see around them.

This last point can be very telling when we think about the implications. Not only are our students learning from what we do (as much as they are from our actual teaching), applying exclusionary discipline and other less-than-helpful (or harmful) disciplinary practices can help students learn inappropriate forms of self-discipline and self-control. Even if they don't suffer the clear, dramatic ramifications of exclusionary discipline (e.g.,

dropping out of school or incarceration), they may struggle with mental and emotional health and drive for the rest of their lives (Lynch, 2019).

Helping our students practice self-discipline and understand the benefits of self-control can help students mature and grow during their formative years. As teachers, there are ways we can help foster student self-discipline in our classrooms. These methods include (Lynch,2019):

1. **Establishing trust.** As it turns out, one of the reasons that students and young children exhibit a lack of self-control is because they don't trust (or they fear) that the caretakers and adults around them won't be able to actually take care of them. This fear causes restlessness and acting out. Academic researchers from the University of Colorado at Boulder recently looked into this phenomenon. They discovered that taking the time to establish social trust in your classroom can go a long way toward seeing higher levels of better and more appropriate behavior. At the beginning of the year (and throughout both semesters), try to get to know each of your students' hobbies, backgrounds, and what's going on in their lives. Then, use this to establish an atmosphere of connection and trust. While this step alone won't revolutionize your students' disciplinary choices, it is foundational and definitely not to be overlooked.

2. **Set very clear behavioral expectations at the beginning of the new school year.** It can be easy for an adult (with a fully developed brain) to comprehend what suitable behavior should be with little definition. This process is much more difficult to navigate for a young child. Sometimes, students exhibit problematic behavior simply because the baseline for proper behavior hasn't been completely outlined and made crystal-clear. After you've built up a layer of trust, go through your behavioral expectations for your students. Set the norms, give examples, and be more descriptive than you think you need to be.

3. Give good reasons for each of the rules and boundaries you set. Any parent will tell you that young children consistently need to know *why*—for pretty much every fact or rule they encounter. This isn't rebellious, but rather a healthy curiosity. Children are also more practical than we think. Often, if we connect a behavioral expectation or a norm with an intuitive reason why it's beneficial to live according to that expectation or norm, children will be much more likely to follow through with desired behaviors.

4. **Invite your students into the norm-creation process.** Ask them to think out loud as they're contemplating what you're asking them to do. That way, you'll get an honest assessment of what they're thinking and feeling as they hear your expectations for the year. If you set that standard of open communication, you may also be able to expect that your students will reach out to you with any difficulties they experience with the expectations throughout the year, which will help you anticipate and respond to any problematic behaviors as or even before they occur.

5. **Establish rewards in your norm-creation process and as your students grow in self-control.** While we don't want to incentivize good behavior too obviously, it can help students associate good behavior with positive accolades during the learning process. As study after study has shown, positive reinforcement (such as praise and rewards) can be much more effective in encouraging self-control and other good behaviors (Lynch, 2019).

Where can I find online support for systems of restorative justice?

One of the biggest problems we face when it comes to implementing these systems for change will involve a perceived or real lack of support and resources for teachers. After all, if one thing is clear, it's that teachers don't need another demand on their plates—especially on that they're expected to manage entirely on their own (Ferlazzo, 2020).

We are waiting for comprehensive federal support and more universal awareness of the problems involved with exclusionary discipline. In the meantime, it's important that teachers are aware that they do have resources available to them (Ferlazzo, 2020).

First of all, it's important that school districts don't simply consider restorative justice as another program to implement. Restorative justice is, rather, all about a mindset shift. We need all people involved—from teachers and students to receptionists, school staff, families, and administrators to invest in a restorative culture. Everyone needs to accept the responsibility inherent with creating a peaceful and equitable school environment. Everyone will likely need to go through some form of training to this end, but it's not about checking off a training box; it's about learning, valuing, and practicing behaviors that will lead to beneficial change (Ferlazzo, 2020).

This will likely be challenging for those involved.

It can be made easier if you're able to share updated, accessible, precise and succinct resources to each member of your school's community. For example, if you have training programs available for those who want them, flyers and flashcards for those who would simply like a brief reminder, materials to assist with onboarding students to this new way of thinking, posters and materials for your hallways, and research that you can hand to new investors or administrators, that will go a long way toward making success in this initiative much easier (Ferlazzo, 2020).

To help you with this end, we've collected a few ideas to help you and your community succeed (Ferlazzo, 2020).

1. Start by honestly assessing where your school is. We'll talk more about this at the end of the course.
2. Identify the different audiences you will need to support and educate, and brainstorm (or survey them) to see if you can anticipate the best ways to meet their needs.
3. Help the various people in your community locate the resources that they specifically need.
4. Remember that this is going to be a long-term project, and that's okay! It will take time to completely update the way you and your colleagues think. Make sure to be realistic about timelines; it will be impossible to completely enforce disciplinary equity overnight.
5. Brainstorm ways to evaluate your progress on a routine basis. You can repeat some of the activities you used to establish your baseline: Checking out the demographic data regarding discipline in your school is a good idea, as is having discussions with your students and families to collect behavioral feedback.

What are specific conversations, openers, discussions and practices I should be emphasizing with my students?

Making the change to restorative instead of exclusionary discipline practices can be difficult. Being able to send a child to detention or a suspension is so grounded in our collective consciousnesses and our culture that it can be done without a thought.

To help equip you and your colleagues as you try to overcome this practice, we've included a few specific conversation starters and new routines or skills that you can help develop with your students (Ferlazzo, 2020).

Conversation Starters that Help with Conflict Resolution

Restorative justice relies on your ability to help students learn how to restore their relationships after a tense event. You need to help them learn repairing processes and facilitate conflict-mitigating practices (Ferlazzo, 2020).

Unfortunately, most students don't come to school with practiced (or existing) conflict resolution skills. Sometimes, even adults don't have these techniques at their fingertips. We need to teach our students the learned skill of knowing when they've harmed someone else. We must also help them learn how to acknowledge and fix what they've done (Ferlazzo, 2020).

This can feel overwhelming, or like you're fighting a losing battle.

It's key to help your students know that conflict will happen. Conflict is inevitable, and it's a normal and even healthy part of life. The existence of conflict does not mean that the people involved are mean or bad. It just means that some type of compromise, healing, and resolution may be necessary. If we help our students realize that conflict is going to happen, and give them ways to navigate through it, the lingering negative feelings that can be attributed to surprise and shock (which may be more than we think!) can be reduced (Ferlazzo, 2020).

After that, we need to make sure that our students realize that the logical, empathetic step that follows conflict (especially conflict that they may have caused or acted upon) is remorse. To that end, one practical lesson you should emphasize with your students is the power of a great apology. A meaningful apology can go a long way toward providing the repairing, corrective action that is central to restorative justice (Ferlazzo, 2020).

Unfortunately, many of us don't know how to genuinely apologize. We mumble through our apologies with embarrassment, we say the words but don't mean them, and we don't actually take any steps or say any words to mitigate the central conflict. If it isn't clear that we are sincere in our remorse, the recipient of an apology won't accept it, regardless of what's actually said. An ineffective apology can foster resentment and make a bad situation worse (Ferlazzo, 2020).

Here's how to help your students authentically communicate remorse and accept apologies empathetically (Ferlazzo, 2020):

- Give them the phrases they need. It's difficult for some to be empathetic, so giving your students a running start by specifically telling them what they need to say (and what the recipient of an apology needs to hear) will go a long way. For example:
    - "I'm sorry/I apologize for…" (Simple, but make sure your student caps off the sentence with the specific, relevant offense!)
    - "I know that it was my fault that this thing happened."
    - "I let this happen."
    - "I'm so sorry I let that happen."
    - "I realize that I did that, and that it was my fault."
    - "I'm sorry that I did that. I'm going to make things better."
    - "I'm sorry that I did that. I know it made you feel sad. I promise never to do it again." (As you can see, the ingredients of a sincere apology include taking full responsibility for the bad thing that happened and showing a clear desire to to make things better. You should impress upon your student that a genuine apology does not always include a full explanation for why the student did the offending thing!)
- Give the recipients of apologies tools and responses that can help them repair the relationship from their end, as well. Providing and accepting an apology places both parties in a vulnerable position, and that is why it can be so difficult. If the recipient of an apology isn't receptive (or is rude), that reinforces the pain of apologizing for the offending students, making it less likely that they'll prioritize showing remorse in the future. The following example responses can be presented to students as they learn to navigate these situations . (Apologies require effort from both people!)
    - "I accept your apology." (Sometimes simplicity is best).
    - "I accept, but please don't do that again."
    - "I accept, because it's clear you mean it. Please don't do that again."
    - "Because you know that what you did wasn't okay, I accept your apology." You can cater the specific phrases you offer your students to their age

level, of course, but make sure that they know sincerity and empathy is paramount.

While learning how to issue and accept a proper apology can seem like a very basic life skill, it's one that's central to enjoying a restorative, respectful community life. This type of respect and empathy is absolutely vital for a community that learns together, too. After all, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs notes that we do our best learning when we feel safe in our environment, and with the people surrounding us. The process of apologizing well creates that safety, and so enables us to be successful teachers and learners (Ferlazzo, 2020).

Other strategies for fostering openness and respect in the classroom include the following (Ferlazzo, 2020):

- Having dedicated time to discuss life, events, and updates with your class every day. All members of your classroom should feel comfortable telling you or others about struggles they may be experiencing (e.g., if they're having difficulty with an assignment, or stressed about something stressful at home). One way to help students feel that level of comfort is to have a discussion circle daily, or on a regular basis. This will help create a sense of connection between the members of your class.
- Breaking your students out into small groups or partnerships to speak about their thoughts and lives, independent from the teacher. You're likely accustomed to assigning your students into small groups to discuss a book you've assigned or an experiment they've performed or to work on various projects. See if you can do the same thing with more free-flowing discussion. This can help students that may never meet outside of your classroom see what they have in common with each other.
- Make sure that your students know they can discuss and process their personal issues in your classroom when needed. As long as it doesn't disrupt your planned academics—for example, constant texting—it's important to allow your students to feel like they can be open and honest. Not only do your students need to be free to share what's on their mind, they need to be able to express their joys, emotions, and fears with each other. Celebrate this level of sharing when it occurs.

What are good practices for creating effective school discipline policies and procedures?

In order to put these ideas into action, there are practical steps that can be taken to recreate or update a school's disciplinary policies and procedures. While teachers cannot be tasked with taking all the responsibility for this type of action, it is certainly in their best interest to be informed as to the steps that will need to take place to improve policies and see measurable change (Nishioka, 2019).

The steps that will need to be taken are as follows (Nishioka, 2019):

- Identify prevalent issues within the school community. To do this, you'll need to get information from your students and their families. This can be done by hosting town halls, surveying individuals, and holding interviews. Additionally, you can speak with previously disciplined students about how their experiences made them feel. It will also help to obtain quantitative data to see if you can glean insight in an objective way. Compile as much information as possible about who your school has suspended or expelled in the past, and see if you can track demographic data as well as any information about what those students went on to do. Then, analyze all of this data, from the interviews and from the databases, to see if you can identify any clear trends, obvious issues, or potential solutions.
- Establish the reasons for having a code of conduct so that these can be made clear to students and parents. Write down the underlying purposes, rationales, and goals informing the code of conduct, and include that information in the final document itself.
- Identify modes of disciplinary action that are in line with the school's stated goals. As we have identified, exclusionary discipline practices generally don't help students grow, learn, or become better people, and they can be harmful and detrimental. Therefore exclusionary discipline policies should be reconsidered. Instead, consider forms of positive behavior interventions or restorative justice.
- Develop a specific procedure that all administrators and instructors will follow at all times regarding discipline, escalations, referrals, and any other aspects of the disciplinary system. This should include specific recommended durations for interventions or restorative actions, an appeals process, your notification system for all parents and guardians, and any other logistical considerations that could accompany an update to your disciplinary system.

- Make sure to nclude any protections for students with disabilities or special needs in the code of conduct.
- The code of conduct your school writes should be made available to all students upon matriculation and also freely available on your school's website for full transparency.

Section 3 Key Points

- You don't have to completely overhaul your entire disciplinary system all at once. You can start small, with the most important step of all: Listening without bias.
- Helping your students learn self-control and self-discipline can make a big difference in how they behave.
- Teaching your students how to apologize effectively and to be open to accepting apologies is a key part of restorative justice.
- Your school should be systematic and transparent about setting up a new code of conduct, if that is needed.

Course Summary and Conclusion

Exclusionary punishment does not work to deter problem behavior and it is more likely to result in adverse outcomes for the student and the community. This has led to a shift toward more positive interventions that foster understanding, empathy, and relationship building. Ultimately, more constructive practices will increase school safety, promote greater learning, and improve student behavior overall.

If anything is clear from the data we've gleaned, it's that exclusionary discipline has been the norm in many school settings, and students have suffered significantly as a result. This form of discipline is ineffective, and it often alienates those students who may need the greatest amount of support. Through alternative options such as positive behavioral interventions and restorative justice practices, we will be able to lessen discipline disparities, enhance long-term educational success, and promote a healthy school climate.

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Part 3:

Introduction

One of the most important factors that schools can prioritize in order to improve student outcomes is to provide a basis for a strong, meaningful relationship between schools and parents. Why? One reason is simple: Doing so creates an effective support system for students to continue focusing on their learning goals while at home.

However, new research is showing us that the benefits of thoughtful and worthwhile parent-teacher relationships go far further than raising students' grades (although it does help achieve that goal). Studies demonstrate that when parents participate in their children's schooling—and when parents are involved in school and are active members of their child's academic community—the children and their families benefit in surprising ways. For example, researchers reported that the children of actively-involved parents had higher levels of self esteem, better child-parent relationships, and even better health outcomes. In addition, the parents involved were able to have a significantly more positive attitude toward school initiatives and events.

While teachers and parents alike have to put effort in to achieve this type of partnership, the benefits are mutually advantageous. With greater parental support of a student's scholastic aims, teachers can spend more in-class time leading activities that benefit and excite the entire classroom instead of assisting individual students. Since familial involvement is such a critical predictor of student success, it's important that teachers have strategies to help connect with families, engage with parents, and boost the idea of parent advocacy for their children.

Case Study: Parental Involvement and Student Academic Achievement in Chile

A 2019 study out of the Department of Psychology at the Universidad Autónoma de Chile, in Talca, Chile, may serve as an eye-opening introduction to the importance of meaningful relationships between schools and parents. Researchers realized that there was a lack of recent school-and-parent relationship studies in Chile, so they set up an analysis of 16 elementary schools there—involving 498 parents and guardians of students in the second and third grades. Through their analysis, the researchers were able to identify parents with low, medium, and high involvement (Lara and Saracostti, 2019).

The researchers then found that the children's academic achievement correlated strongly with their parents' levels of school and community involvement. The neighborhoods the researchers chose for their analyses exhibited high levels of socioeconomic vulnerability, and were located in three disparate regions of Chile. The researchers also looked at various forms of parental involvement, ranging from parental support at home to parental involvement activities at school. A cluster analysis revealed, in this case, that students whose parents were heavily involved in both the home and at school tended to have better social and educational outcomes. This agrees with international literature on the subject—and shows that one simple way to boost student achievement is to begin by focusing on strong family involvement (Lara and Saracostti, 2019).

Section 1: The Importance of Parent Engagement in a Student's Education

To learn more about why students benefit so dramatically from higher levels of parental engagement, it will be useful, first, to establish precisely what parental engagement and parental involvement are. What do these terms mean? What types of actions help a parent engage—and why is this an initiative worth investing in?

In this first section, we'll discuss a definition of parental engagement as well as student success paradigms, practical examples of the type of parental engagement that results from meaningful relationships between families and schools, and why both teachers and parents (as well as students) seem to benefit from these simple yet strategic practices.

What is parent engagement or involvement?

To start, the CDC offers a concise definition of parent involvement or engagement in schools:

> **"Parental engagement in schools occurs when parents and school staff work together to support and improve the learning, development, and health of children and adolescents." (CDC, 2018)**

In other words, a child's education is far from just about the time and effort that the student personally invests. Research is showing that for the highest chance of student health, happiness, and success, every child's education should be a whole-family project. This is very different from past models of education, where a child's classes and homework were very much considered to be separate from a parent's daily tasks. This

shift in the expectation for parental involvement has come about because of many studies that have delved into the benefits that occur after parents get involved with their child's education. Research shows us that prioritizing the importance of a parent-school relationship in service of the child boosts nearly every metric of student success, as we will explore later (CDC, 2018).

However, the onus isn't only on the parents to make this magic happen. Schools and parents alike share the responsibility to commit to parental engagement. Schools need to try to create meaningful opportunities for parents to be involved in practical, effective ways; and parents themselves need to set aside time and mental effort to support their children's learning journeys in active ways (CDC, 2018).

The types of support required are multifaceted, and it's not about parents doing children's homework for them—a trope that is neither realistic nor helpful. Rather, parents working with their children synergistically to enhance learning objectives, the parent-child relationship, and the family-school connection can promote both educational goals and healthy behaviors among growing children and teens. According to the American Psychological Association, the more that parents get involved in their child's education, the more schools see higher attendance, test scores, and child involvement in school events. Greater parental involvement is also correlated with higher child health behaviors, such as safe or healthy decisions regarding sex, controlled substances, violence, or other problematic behaviors sometimes associated with adolescents (American Psychological Association, 2021).

The CDC agrees, calling parental engagement a 'promising protective factor' that can establish a likelihood of success in several different markers of childhood and teen safety initiatives. A solid relationship between parents and schools can reinforce student learning, making their school time more effective, and can also ramify children's ability to make good decisions both at home, at school, and in their own community. Parental engagement can also help children mature in enhanced behavioral ways, from confidence to improved social skills. Whether these positive outcomes come solely from parental engagement or the simple fact that parental engagement often coincides with other healthy behaviors and protective factors—e.g., students completing homework on time, or being involved with extracurricular activities at school—remains to be seen (CDC, 2018).

Is there a difference between parental engagement and parental involvement?

Engagement and involvement by a student's parents (and entire family) are two slightly different things, although both types of support are useful for a child's health, happiness, and academic success. Both are directly driven by meaningful relationships between a family and a school—between parents and teachers. We'll offer a working definition for both terms here (Waterford, 2018):

- We can think of parent **involvement** as practical parent participation in activities and events that happen at or around your school. When teachers pass learning resources to parents or send information about their student's competencies to parents, they're enabling parent involvement. Parent involvement actually tends to begin with the teachers; the primary responsibility of student growth still sits with the teacher, and the parent acts in more of an advisory capacity. Parental involvement is a great first step to engagement, and is vital in itself; engagement represents another step that parents must take on their own initiative.
- We can think of parent **engagement** as the magic that happens when parents step from an advisory role to one that is more like a partnership with their student's teachers. Parents have a plethora of information about their children,including important information that teachers would have no way of accessing. Both parents and teachers need to come together with their unique perspectives to help a child grow.

A school can try to spark more parent involvement, more parent engagement, or both. The approach that a school might take in each of these areas may differ slightly. A school that wishes to drive up parental involvement might send parents information about school projects and initiatives, student goals, and any needs that the school might have. The school might then simply tell parents how they can contribute toward these aims (Waterford, 2018).

A school that's working toward higher levels of parental engagement tends to start with listening. School personnel might invite parents to come in and tell teachers and staff about their children, as well as what their worries and dreams for their children are—and allow that information and sharing process to spark ideas for how parents and teachers can both work to support their students (Waterford, 2018).

In recent years, educators have been largely shifting their attention from increasing parental involvement to sparking parental engagement. However, as noted above, the road to engagement often begins with simpler involvement. A teacher might begin this journey by:

- Giving parents resources related to their child's educational journey
- Inviting parents to school-related activities or events
- Ensuring that parents have the tools and understanding to monitor their children's progress themselves
- Partnering with the parents to set unique, child-specific goals for students that work with the child's unique strengths and weaknesses

This takes effort on the part of both teacher and student, but also allows each party to rest, confident in the fact that they are not alone in their support of the child. The child will also benefit from this rich, multifaceted support system. If every child in a given class is benefiting in this way, the class as a whole will also be able to go deeper in its learning journey (Waterford, 2018).

How does parent involvement lead to student success?

It's been said that the most convenient and accurate predictor of academic achievement in young people isn't socioeconomic status or school reputation; it's the extent to which parents are involved in their child's education. Of course, there's a good chance that these factors co-exist; for example, a family of higher socioeconomic status might also be one in which the parents have more time and energy to be involved in their child's school life. However, this information also tells us that families of a lower socioeconomic status may be able to increase their child's achievement outcomes through strategies other than transferring to a higher-priced school or moving to a more expensive neighborhood (Waterford, 2018).

When a parent or both parents are involved in what their children are doing in school, children are aware that they have the home support and parental resources to achieve their academic aims. This can reduce a significant amount of pressure that children experience around school projects—allowing children the emotional space to get excited about their learning aims instead of being intimidated by them. In this way, parental involvement can foster a love of learning in their children that can last their child's entire life (Waterford, 2018).

This isn't just a theory: Schools that implement measures geared to increase parental engagement tend to see a change in their students and in their entire classes. It's not only beneficial for individual children to enjoy increased parental engagement; entire classes grow together when a team of parents gets more involved. Teachers who have focused on building parental engagement for their classes see better grades, behavior, and group motivation (Waterford, 2018).

In the past, working to increase parental engagement was a nice addition to academic endeavors, or a courtesy. Now, it's a very real aim that is seen as one of the best ways that teachers can work to promote a positive learning experience for students—both at home and at school (Waterford, 2018).

What are some practical examples of parental engagement and involvement?

Discussing parental engagement as a vague, amorphous concept does not do it the justice it deserves. Parental engagement is usually not a large, sweeping gesture—nor is it a one-time thing. Parental engagement in a child's learning journey consists of many tiny actions on the part of interested parents. It can look like:

- Parents talking to children about their educational goals
- Parents acting in support when children have difficulties with school or school-related projects
- Teachers and parents working together at school meetings or events
- Parents volunteering at school
- Parents reaching out to teachers to learn more about how they can collaborate to support their students

Of course, these are just examples. True parent engagement or involvement will depend significantly on what children need and what their unique learning experiences look like. For example, parents who are supporting students studying remotely might have a wildly different engagement strategy than parents who have children learning in-person. Fortunately, the benefits seem to accompany parental involvement and engagement—no matter what it specifically looks like in a given situation (Waterford, 2018).

Why is parent involvement and engagement important?

Right now, parental involvement and engagement are vital in education—and we're finding that we need to emphasize these factors because they're on the decline. Studies show us that in 2016, there was a drop in the number of parents who believed that a close-knit relationship between teachers and parents was effective. Over the past years, parents have shown increasing interest in remote communication with their teachers. Tools such as online student portals have become the mode of communication that parents prefer—and parents have become far less likely to take the time to attend school activities or even parent-teacher conferences (Waterford, 2018).

In-person parental involvement has declined dramatically in recent years. What families are missing out on is a vital and irreplaceable part of the student support system. Digital tools, after all, can keep parents apprised of their student's progress from afar—but it is no substitute for ongoing parental support and supervision as students make their way through school (Waterford, 2018).

Why has this change come about? While 2020's pandemic certainly did not help buck the trend toward remote communication, we were seeing parents opt for digital communication tools instead of in-person involvement long before America was asked to shelter at home. Instead, the factors that likely spurred parental interest in quick digital updates were (and are) likely multifaceted (Waterford, 2018).

One thing that's increasingly clear is that it's key to establish a parent-teacher relationship early in the year. As the year goes on, parents are less likely to initiate involvement, instead likely feeling comfortable with the established status quo (Waterford, 2018). It is in everyone's best interest to let parents know that they are seen as partner's in their children's education, that their support is appreciated, and that they are vital and welcome participants.

It's also evident that some demographic groups are at higher-risk for low levels of parent engagement or involvement. For example, if a family is below the poverty line, if a family has older children, or if parents do not speak the language that the school personnel primarily speaks, those parents are far less likely to be proactive about their involvement in their child's education (Waterford, 2018).

What are the material benefits of parent involvement?

When parents and teachers are able to establish a working relationship to support their students, the effect can far outweigh the effort. Studies show us that students who have

engaged parents have higher test scores than their peers—but the benefits go deeper than that. The children of engaged parents have better school attendance, higher graduation rates, and even higher levels of self-esteem (Waterford, 2018).

Other benefits of increased levels of parental involvement and engagement may include:

- Higher grades
- A greater likelihood of pursuing post-secondary education
- More motivation in the classroom
- Better classroom behavior
- Better social skills

In recent years, educational researchers have performed over fifty differing studies on the effects of parental engagement on a student's educational outcomes. One thing they've found is that the earlier that teachers and parents establish a connection and a workable standard of parent engagement, the more that they are able to assist their students with growing their academic competencies and other skill areas. In other words, it's vital to start cementing this level of parental involvement and support in the early elementary years—years when parents might be quick to assume that they don't need to be instrumental (Waterford, 2018).

A recent study also found that increased parental engagement was correlated with decreased levels of absenteeism, as defined by a student who misses more than twenty school days within an academic year. In cases where students were experiencing absenteeism, teachers in the study responded primarily by engaging with the parents of these students with at-home visits. As a result, absentee rates fell by 20%. The study researcher posited that the healthy, two-way communication that grew between teacher and parent helped the students commit to attending school. Moreover, students tended to actively participate more in class discussions, knowing that their parents were very aware of what they were doing (Waterford, 2018.)

Do parents and teachers benefit from parental involvement and engagement?

Yes, parents and teachers benefit from higher levels of communication, involvement, and engagement as well. Here are a few practical reasons why (Waterford, 2018):

- Teachers who have an established rapport with parents can more easily prepare parents to help their students with their homework or projects. As students grow and the subject matter they study becomes more complicated, this support can be vital for parents to feel confident in helping their child
- Parents who are engaged tend to think more highly of the teachers educating their child, which makes them feel happy about their educational choices regarding their family
- Teachers realize that parents respect and appreciate them, which improves staff morale
- Teachers are able to have a more detailed knowledge of what a student is going through in their at-home life, which can help teachers choose lessons that can support a child's specific needs or interests
- Finally, entire classrooms of students tend to benefit when all parents are engaged—because each individual student will be equipped to perform better, the whole class of children can typically move more efficiently through their units—leading to less boredom, less frustration, and more time to work on fun projects or activities that everyone enjoys

Fortunately, it does seem like everyone benefits from higher levels of engagement. That doesn't mean that it's always easy, but it does mean that it's definitely worth working toward. In a later section, we'll discuss practical, effective strategies that teachers can use to drive levels of parental involvement or engagement. For now, we'll discuss what parent involvement might look like—starting with some of the most common practices involved.

What are the ingredients of productive parent involvement?

It can be very easy to say that driving up parental involvement is key for success. This might even be intuitive; but making it happen is the most difficult part. In later sections, we'll explore practical ways to increase parental involvement and engagement without making parents feel guilty, overwhelmed, or frustrated (Wolpert-Gawron, 2019).

Although teachers are generally aware of the benefits of effective parental involvement, they are not always sure how to best engage the parents. Practical strategies that can help a teacher increase the likelihood that a parent will be able to increase their

involvement in their student's progress—even if they don't feel at the outset that they have the time, talent, or ability to do so effectively include (Wolpert-Gawron, 2019):

- Compliment or praise your parents for being as involved as they currently are
- If appropriate, see if you can meet with parents on their own ground. Instead of asking them to come into school to meet you at your office (which, we have to realize, can easily trigger unpleasant memories of their own school days), meet a few parents at a local coffee shop so the entire experience feels much less intimidating
- Be very transparent about your purpose—why you are inviting your students' parents to be more involved. (The information in this course can serve as a good starting point for this type of purpose statement!) Remember that your students' parents are likely busy and overwhelmed, and exactly primed to be suspicious of additional claims upon their time
- Don't be afraid to let your personality shine through—so your students' parents see you as a human, not as simply their child's teacher. It'll be easier to form a partnership with your students' parents if this is the case
- Be persistent
- Keep it easy. At least initially, as you're trying to get parents involved and help them work toward engagement, make what you're asking them to do very simple. That will make it much more likely that they'll be able to chip in

If all of these to-dos seem intimidating, it's important to remember that, ultimately, everyone benefits from working to boost parental engagement and forging meaningful relationships between parents and teachers. In the beginning, as you first start to work toward these initiatives, there may be some growing pains—but it'll definitely be worth it.

Some common growing pains, challenges, or barriers to forming parent-teacher relationships are listed in the next section.

What are some challenges or barriers to parental engagement?

If parental involvement and engagement are so important, why haven't schools placed more of an emphasis on it until now? Why don't parents already know about it—and why aren't they taking the initiative toward more involvement on their own?

One excellent way to learn more about the barriers to parental engagement in your specific community is to ask your parents. Work with your school district to conduct a survey of your families, reaching out to a representative group of parents and guardians throughout your community (e.g., not just the parents who already happen to have high levels of engagement at your school). While making it clear that there will be no judgment or retribution for their answers (perhaps make the survey anonymous), ask why parents aren't able to engage more with their child's education. The reasons and challenges can differ highly from family to family and community to community, so taking the time to understand your local challenges is best. Once you have an idea of the barriers that stand between your specific school community and heightened levels of parental engagement, you can work with your school district to create actionable goals to reduce those barriers (Salin, 2017).

While it's best to conduct your own local research in this area, it's also good to know that there are very common, universal barriers to family engagement in a student's education. The most common barriers include (Salin, 2017):

- **Lack of time**. This alone was the largest barrier for parents—many reported that they had very busy schedules, which contributed to their inability to become more involved with their student's education.
- **Childcare**. After a busy schedule, this was the second most common rationale.
- Perceptions. Some parents found themselves worrying that the teachers and other faculty at their school might treat their children differently if the parents went out of their way to raise a concern.
- **Lack of information**. Other parents simply stated that they didn't have enough information from their child's school to be sufficiently involved.
- **A bad experience with their own schooling**. If parents have baggage from their own memories at school or even if they haven't had a good experience with previous children's educational opportunities, they will likely be leery of putting themselves in similar situations again.
- **Illiteracy**. If your students' parents aren't confident about their ability to be involved as a key source of support for their children, they'll have a hard time reaching out or feeling like they have a responsibility to do so.

While there are certainly roadblocks to boosting parental engagement, most of them can be more manageable when you consider the parent-teacher relationship as a

mutually-beneficial partnership—not an antagonistic one. Fortunately, there are ways to overcome all of these barriers or at least make them easier to work around, as we'll discuss in the final section. Before that, however, we'll take a quick look at the research underlying parent involvement to see some compelling case studies and data that support your undertaking of this initiative.

Section 1: Key Terms

Parental involvement - Parental involvement usually manifests as practical parent participation in activities and events at or around school, as well as logistical support of a child's education at home.

Parental engagement - Parental engagement is the result of a mutually-beneficial partnership between parent and teacher, in which parents become an active participant in their child's education by offering up perspectives and ideas of their own.

Section 1: Reflection Questions

Would you say that the parents in your classroom are actively involved or engaged? What specific practices make you think that?

For parents in your class who are less involved or engaged, can you think of specific barriers that may be standing in their way?

Section 1: Conclusion

Parent involvement and engagement can take a great deal of work to initiate and sustain. Fortunately, there are many reasons to try anyway. Research is showing us that children, teachers, and parents alike benefit from investing in the family-school relationship. However, particular barriers tend to stand in the way of these relationships, from a lack of time to a lack of childcare.

Teachers can take practical and purposeful steps to boost meaningful relationships between schools and families, which will be summarized in Section Three. Before that, we'll take a look at some of the latest research and some promising case studies about parental engagement to gain confidence in the worthiness of this effort.

Section 2: Research and Case Studies about Parent Engagement

It's easy to be skeptical about the efficacy of boosting parental engagement. After all, dealing with parents can be tough. Much of the time, they're overly-full of strong opinions about the way their children should be taught. The rest of the time, parents can't easily be found. There are not enough parent-teacher relationships that occur in a symbiotic sweet spot that helps both school and family support their students in the best way possible.

In this section, we'll look at some of the latest studies analyzing both the efficacy of increased parental engagement and the best methods for promoting it. That way, when we discuss practical strategies in the third section of this course, we'll have a solid basis for understanding why the investment is necessary.

What does the research say about parental engagement?

In recent studies that have sought to dig into the best ways to build parental engagement, researchers have learned quite a bit about the real and perceived barriers to family engagement. On the other hand, they've also shone a light on the extreme, enduring importance of parental engagement. Here are some of the significant findings that three different survey-based studies conducted over the past several years have shown about parental involvement and engagement (Poth, 2018):

- One research team conducted a study of over 18,000 parents to, first, confirm that the biggest barriers to family engagement were availability of childcare, inconsistent treatment of students, and lack of time or information.
- A 2015 study found that over half of the half-million K-12 parents who signed up for the study's survey said that their preferred method of communication was a simple weekly text message with specific updates regarding their child. In 2010, the researchers in this study had sent out the same survey—and found that only 5% of parents wanted this relatively simple, sporadic level of communication. The conclusion? The numbers of parents wanting a low-level, relatively hands-off level of parent-teacher communication are rising. However, as we've seen, this practice isn't in the best interest of the child.
- Another study surveyed 30,000 parents and found that these parents wanted impactful and timely information—but not a flood of it. These parents wanted to

be kept informed about their child on a regular basis, but did not necessarily want an overabundance of non-essential information. From this we can surmise that we as teachers need to keep tabs on the amount of non-relevant one-way communications that we send to our parents.

These three surveys tell us that parents want information about their child and they are open to higher involvement or engagement—but it needs to be easier for them to become involved, and parents don't want all of the information. To boost engagement, schools need to assist with or at least be aware that parents are busy, parents have other children they need to support, and many parents have poor perceptions of school based on their own experiences. Finally, it seems that we are in fact living in a time where parental involvement is decreasing as many districts are embracing higher-tech, increasingly-digital options, and this needs to be addressed. It's important to find ways to connect with parents in a non-overwhelming way, regardless of the specific tools we choose to do so.

Have there been studies focusing on the best way to engage with the parents of students in our classrooms?

Other studies have focused less on the sheer importance of parental involvement and more on the how—as in, if a school already understands that this is an important initiative, what does the data say is the best way to get started?

Here are a few practical examples and pieces of data that shed a little light on this issue (Adams, 2020):

- One school in Colorado goes out of its way to cement family engagement by holding twice-yearly functions called GET Togethers—or 'Guaranteed Education Teams' events. These occasions are specifically distinct from PTA meetings at which school officials might present rationale for donations; they're also separate from school Christmas concerts or end-of-year musicals. The entire goal of the event is to show busy families the meaningful benefit of their support in their child's classroom. The event is jam-packed with practical tools to help parents support their children at home as well as occasions where parents are invited to give their honest feedback regarding the school's structure and overall experience.
- The school proactively designs these nights to be interactive and entertaining to attract parent interest. For example, one year, instead of having the teachers go

through what they were planning on focusing on in the upcoming semester, the school invited the young students to explain the updated homework policies—which naturally got their parents' attention far more than a presentation from the teachers. At another, the math teachers of the school taught fun family math games to parents, including games designed to be easy to play in the car or over dinner; at another, the school offered boundary and trauma workshops, which were topics that the parents had specifically requested to learn more about. As a result, these events were seen as high-value, and received extremely high attendance.

- Surveys tend to find that teachers consider it difficult to connect with their students' parents. Parents say similar (and opposite) things when surveyed. Therefore, the responsibility for parent-teacher relationships tends to turn into a blame game that distances both parties from beneficial interaction. At schools where the traditional touch points for parent-teacher interaction are few and non-interactive—such as the infrequent PTA meeting or the guilt-ridden volunteer opportunity—teachers can interpret a lack of parents' enthusiasm as a perceived lack of support for their children. On the other hand, parents can interpret the lack of apparent school effort into value-based parent-teacher communication opportunities as a closed door to their opinions and feedback. To combat this, schools need to take the first step and create opportunities that make their students and their students' entire families feel welcomed.
- Another school that has decided to invest strongly in meeting its community on a practical, engaging level has decided to put a significant amount of time and effort into the following research-based actions (Adams, 2020):
    - Sending out personalized invitations to events instead of mass emails
    - Putting significant effort into soliciting parental input on even smaller issues or 'fun' decisions
    - Communicating in as many regional languages as possible
    - Working to benefit the families active in their school community in practical ways—including fundraisers, free groceries, and tuition assistance
    - Prioritizing at-home visits to bring education or resources to a family's front door when needed

Actions such as these help parents realize that the school is on their side, and makes it much more likely that a parent will respond to requests for feedback or other partnership opportunities when the school asks.

Have the schools that implemented these high-effort initiatives seen a return on their investment? So far, the answer would seem to be a resounding yes as indicated by the following (Adams, 2020):

- A recent study sought to probe the effects of active teacher outreach in 71 high-poverty schools and school communities. After implementation of teacher outreach, the study assessed the progress enjoyed by the students in these communities and found that student's math and reading scores improved drastically. The study concluded that meeting families consistently face-to-face, staying in regular touch, and sending helpful, accessible materials home for parents to help support their children seemed to work better than other interventions the high-poverty schools had tried before.
- Another recent study from the Center for American Progress in Washington DC says that consistent and frequent communication between schools and homes is the best way to help students enjoy more success. Initiatives out of the Center for American Progress are suggesting that policymakers for local school districts shift their focus to community-informed projects. According to these suggestions, schools should conduct more frequent parent surveys, higher technology experts to reduce frustration in remote parent-teacher communications, and provide extensive teacher training to help teachers be ever better resources for parents and young families.

If schools are struggling to spark parent interest in attending these types of events in the very beginning, there's some data and anecdotal evidence to suggest that the simple approach is the best. One principal initially tried conducting parent feedback meetings just before PTA conferences, so that the parents would in theory only have to show up on school campus once. Even with this convenience, only a few people attended the extra meetings. The principal took some time to rethink her approach, and then sent out personal invites to each family in her community for an evening event that included free pizza, dessert, and childcare. The attendance at that first meeting was abundant—and she used that time to very simply ask the parents in attendance what they would want to see in order to boost their own attendance. By implementing this very simple approach, this school district has enjoyed extremely high levels of parental involvement ever since (Adams, 2020).

Requests that parents made at that initial meeting included (Adams, 2020):

- More practical resources for them to both support their children in school and to enrich their family life (e.g., boundary workshops as well as homework support)
- Logistical changes to increase school accessibility, such as more strategic traffic patterns on the school campus
- The addition of more after-school programs to support working parent schedules

The school continues to encourage attendance at these optional meetings by keeping them fun and applying time-tested marketing strategies. The principal will go in and cover each teacher's class so the teacher has time to call all the parents to invite them on a very personal level. The office manager prioritizes a friendly, personalized hello to each student's parent in order to make the school feel more welcoming and less intimidating (Adams, 2020).

The State of Colorado recently passed legislation that established an Office of Family, School, and Community Partnerships. The head of this department spends much of his time holding informal coffee chats with the staff of school districts around the state in order to get as much real data as possible. As a result of this boots-on-the-ground research, the department head rolled out a campaign consisting of four elements to increase family-school partnerships. This included the creation of an all-inclusive school community culture, the building of inherently trusting relationships between school staff and student families, the design of capacity-building opportunities, and the dedication of all necessary resources to make the preceding three initiatives into a reality (Adams, 2020).

One of the first realizations that the newly-formed department made was that many of the family engagement initiatives that Colorado schools had been using targeted, primarily, affluent two-parent families. One of the first initiatives of the new administration was to create support systems designed to attract a more inclusive definition of family—one that more closely mirrored the actual populations of students attending Colorado schools (Adams, 2020).

Here are the results of a few more studies looking at the effects of parental engagement across the nation (Adams, 2020):

- One study, an analysis that dove into the performance of 100 Chicago schools, found that those with strong parental involvement were four times more likely to

achieve their reading initiatives or improve in a steady fashion; those same students enjoyed a ten-times-higher likelihood at improving in math.

- Another study out of Johns Hopkins found that students of families who enjoyed personal at-home visits from school faculty or staff had 24% fewer absences over the course of a school year when compared to their peers. These students were also more likely to read at the expected grade level (or above it) than students who did not receive home visits from their teachers. Why? The managing director of this initiative, based around D.C. area schools, theorized that "Many see home visits as a powerful way to start this process … to rebuild trust."

- An across-the-country model known as Academic Parent-Teacher Teams is used in over 25 states. This model encourages teachers to hold at least three classroom meetings with the parents of students in their classes to explain the academic goals of the semester, to share individual child performance data, and to suggest fun and powerful home activities. Included in this model is also a short conference involving the student, family members, and teacher that is meant to be a two-way conversation sparking a collaboration between family and school. This model is working very well so far: Researchers following its efficacy note that it seems to be promoting community, decreasing instances of disciplinary issues, and facilitating teacher-parent communication.

In addition to at-home or teacher-parent conferences to jumpstart the new year or semester, these types of programs are encouraging teachers to stay in touch with families on a personal level throughout the year. One principal makes sure this happens by designating time in her teacher's schedule to write positive postcards home to spark joy and interest regarding student education. Parents on the receiving end of these postcards—which also contain updated contact information for each teacher—feel more welcomed and believe that they have the resources to reach out when necessary. One mother commented that after receipt of such a postcard, she felt like she could text her child's teacher to alert the teacher that the child was having a rough morning—which helped circumvent behavioral issues later in the day at school (Adams, 2020).

One parent even said that because of the resources distributed by her school, she was able to learn how to communicate with her children better—including how to manage bedtime in a more efficient way, which had been a huge source of stress for their family. The school district had given community members access to free parenting lessons. As a result of this community outreach, the parent felt more supported by the school—and, as a side benefit, she had more time and energy (due to more strategic home and family

management practices) to be involved in her school community. Further, her school district had ensured that she had access to the parenting classes in Spanish, and had worked with her to get library cards for her entire family at the end of the six-week session (Adams, 2020).

Teachers involved in these efforts recognize that they require more of an investment, but are enjoying the effect that their work is having in the community. One teacher, who was volunteering with her school's new universal free school breakfast program, said, "I feel like we are meeting their basic needs more than me just meeting them academically" (Adams, 2020). It's important to note, however, that we cannot expect the entire effort of building meaningful relationships to fall on teachers without supporting teachers, too; most teachers report that they're already working at capacity. Administrations need to realize that if teachers are expected to invest in parental engagement, they need to give them the time and resources to do so.

What does research have to say about other benefits of increased family engagement in student education?

Recently, researchers have shifted their focus to study the roles and purpose of family engagement with specific regard to child- and youth-serving programs. Why? The past decade has brought with it massive advancements in brain science, diversity initiatives, mental health awareness, behavioral health programs, and child welfare awareness. Now, more than ever, schools have the knowledge that they need to help children across any background thrive.

Recent research has focused on the best ways to implement programs and practices that improve family engagement and the lives of the families in our care. Fortunately, the researchers studying these initiatives are finding that promoting family engagement appears to be a win-win for everyone involved. For instance (Youth.gov, 2018):

- Increased family engagement correlates with increased student outcomes, including student achievement, better teacher-student relationships, and fewer disciplinary issues.
- Family engagement at school tends to help families associate more with health care professionals, such as any school nurses or behavioral specialists that happen to be on campus. As a result, families are getting better health attention and care coordination, which can result in higher health outcomes.

- The children of families who are more engaged in their communities tend to show higher levels of behavioral and emotional strength, as well as enhanced relationships with both their peers and with adults.
- Parental involvement in school communities was found to lead to lower rates of high school dropout, higher incidences of completing high school on time, and higher overall grades.
- Researchers found that the youth in families who had higher levels of school and community engagement engaged in fewer risky health behaviors, such as alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, weapon use, and becoming sexually active..
- Heightened family engagement tended to lead to higher levels of positive health habits, such as physical activity in school.
- Studies seem to suggest that when teachers and other child support staff develop plans for student success with the involvement of parents, parents are more invested in those plans—and more dedicated to helping achieve them through means such as at-home support.
- Ultimately, researchers found that establishing a collaboration between families, schools, and other members of a child's community tends to increase the chances that the school will be able to identify and meet each family's unique needs in an effective and achievable manner.

Section 2: Reflection Questions

What practical methods have you and your school used to support families in your community?

If you were to conduct a survey of the parents in your classroom, what type of communication do you think they'd prefer?

In order to invest more time into your relationship with the parents in your classroom, what type of support would you need from your school's administration?

Section 2: Conclusion

The research is showing us that boosting family engagement or building meaningful relationships with the families of students in your class is likely far more about small, practical supportive actions—and less about once-a-year gestures. The research also shows us that investing in parental engagement is, in fact, an investment; it takes time.

However, surveys and studies also continue to reinforce the idea that increasing parental engagement is worth it for all concerned.

Section 3: Building a Meaningful Parent-School Relationship

Now that we've spent time learning about the reasons we need to invest in parent-school relationships, it's time to talk about the ways we can work to connect, engage, and sustain parental connection and engagement. This section will contain practical tips to support the parent-school relationship.

To start, we'd like to make a clear distinction between two types of communication.

What's the difference between one-way and two-way parent-teacher connection?

When you're working toward building an efficient, effective parent-teacher communication system, it's best to prioritize two-way communication over one-way communication. Why? There are several associations that each mode of communication has. For example, people tend to believe that one-way communication is (overly) authoritative and linear—and is limited in how much good it can do for either participant in these types of conversations (Waterford, 2018).

On the other hand, when two or more parties engage in two-way communication, the result is more interactive conversations. Both parties tend to feel like they're equals or partners, and the feedback contained in these conversations is more helpful and feedback-oriented.

It's clear that two-way communication will likely be the better use of your time. The difference may feel intuitive, but it's an important enough distinction that we'll offer up a brief definition here (Waterford, 2018):

- **One-way communication** constitutes a norm of information flow that goes in one direction: From the sender to a receiver (or group of receivers). For the most part, the sender does not expect or require a response from the receiver. (Think of a presentation without a question-and-answer section, and you'll get the idea). The purpose of this type of communication is typically to command, to persuade, or inform. The role of the audience is entirely passive. The role of the sender is entirely authoritative..

- **Two-way communication** involves ebbing flows of information back and forth between two people or parties. Both entities get to give and receive information. Both must listen; both are expected to offer commentary on the other's input as well as original information of their own. In the academic world, examples of two-way communication may be conferences and committee meetings at which multiple people get to speak.

There's a time and place for both types of communication, but when it comes to building parental involvement and engagement, two-way communication is the way to go. Parents will want to be more involved if they feel like they're equal partners in the parent-teacher relationship; if they feel like they're being talked at, ordered around, or that their own thoughts are not being heard, they simply won't show up to meetings (Waterford, 2018).

However, the parents of students in your class might not have the initiative to send information your way—or to upgrade the current one-way communication flow to a multi-directional stream. (Why? As noted above, they may not have the time or experience to do so; or, perhaps, their own poor experiences with academic faculty in the past make them less inclined to step up on their own) (Waterford, 2018).

Here are a few ways that you might find it easier to encourage two-way communication and parental involvement in your conversations (Waterford, 2018):

- Rather than sending your student home with a failing grade and a request that their parents help them study more, call the student's parents directly and see if you can work together to create an achievable plan of improvement for their child.

- Invite a parent to a volunteer opportunity or school open house to make yourself and your child's school seem much more approachable and familiar. If it's appropriate, perform a home visit, perhaps with another teacher if that would make you feel more comfortable.

- Use tech-based platforms—but in a strategic way where you make it clear that you're requesting parent-teacher communication or feedback. Setting up a quick Zoom call at the end of the day may be much easier for a parent to handle than a longer in-person meeting.

- Talk to your students' parents at the beginning of the school year about your communication plan. This might feel a little meta, but involving the parents from

the very start about everything, even the expectations that you have for your levels of communication, will convey to the parents that they're equal partners in your plans. Ask parents what their preferences for contact methods and frequencies may be, and use that information to guide how you support each teacher-parent relationship.

- Be proactive—particularly earlier on in the teacher-parent relationship—about sending the parents positive feedback about your student. If you establish your communication plans based around a positive or exciting event, the parents will naturally be more interested in this type of communication. Later, if you need to share something more challenging (or if the parents have something that they need to approach you about that could be sensitive), you'll be glad you began the relationship on more neutral ground.

- Many parents associate parent-teacher conferences with intimidating lectures—almost as if the parents were being assessed. Instead, make it a priority to keep these conversations about the child and keep them neutral or productive. It may help to begin these conferences by listening to parents' questions, observations and concerns rather than you doing the majority of the talking..

Meaningful Strategies for Sparking Parent Interest and Involvement When Teaching Remotely

Is parent-teacher engagement any less valuable if you're teaching remotely? As it turns out—of course not! The recent shift to virtual learning environments has only made it more clear that families have responsibility for a student's educational experience, too—and that at-home support is vital for a child's success.

Start by assuming that all parents want to support their children, but may not know how to do so effectively or efficiently while handling their job, the technology virtual learning requires, any other children in their home, or a number of other stressors and concerns. Then, apply any of the following strategies for boosting parent involvement and engagement while forming a remote community (Davila, 2020):

- **Resources, resources, resources.** We've mentioned elsewhere that a great way to spark parent interest in involvement is to start by providing them with practical, valuable resources. This is even more important if you're rarely able to be in the same space. Start to build your partnership by delivering on your end—send your

parents targeted tips, tricks, and tools to make remote learning manageable for them in their unique situations.

- **Remind your parents that they have access to a professional.** Parents in today's remote learning environments are swamped with the expectations and logistics that accompany managing their child's education. These parents need to know that you're able to help them—and that you're not there to heighten expectations in an already difficult situation or to assign impossible-seeming projects. Position yourself as a helpful aide in their child's learning journey—rather than as the one who is endlessly creating additional work for their family.
- **Create easy, accessible, and quick systems for informational exchanges.** Email can be overwhelming, texts can pile up, and not every parent has the skillset to understand Google spreadsheets. Talk with your parents to see what types of tech platforms will work for them, so that they're likely not only to read the resources that you send over—they're also primed to have a very easy, intuitive way to reach out to you first when they have a question, some feedback, or an idea to help support their child. This may mean that you have to have the availability and flexibility to communicate in several different formats—or have the persistence to find a versatile tool or platform that works for everyone in your class.
- **Over-communicate.** Send parents a weekly update on their platform of choice to let them know what their child is doing this week, when you'll be available for office hours, and how best to reach you if they ever need any help. Include a picture of a project their child worked on or an exciting class update. Even if this update goes ignored 95% of the time, your consistency will let remote parents know that they have you as a dependable resource when they do need guidance.

How to encourage parents to participate in problem-solving discussions and decision-making related to their child's education:

One reason that parents tend to shy away from speaking with teachers about their children is that no one likes conflict or confrontation. Speaking with teachers about problems or decisions relating to their child's welfare can hit very close to home or be perceived as an attack.

With this in mind, keep the following strategies in your toolkit to manage tough parental conversations with finesse—and to help empower parents to become your partners as you work to support their child (Raising Children, 2018):

- **Maintain a calm, positive approach.** Parents will rightfully be upset if their child is struggling. Before you introduce any suggestions or helpful measures to support their child, try to manage your relationship with the parent by being very calm and avoiding any triggering language that may cause frustration.
- **Show that you value the parent's input.** Parents can often feel that school staff discounts their opinions and information about their child. Starting your conversation by asking parents to describe the situation may help them feel more in control or acknowledged. If they need a prompt or guidance to keep the conversation on-point, ask the parents what their wants, needs, and concerns for their child may be.
- **Keep the conversation centered on support of their child—or on support of their family.** Ask the parents what resources they need, and focus on providing practical support. The tone should be something along the lines of 'How can we both/all help the student with this issue,' instead of going in with statements that resemble or could be in any way interpreted as accusations (e.g., 'You need to do better').
- **If the parent gets defensive or frustrated, use diffusing language and radiate calmness.** Sometimes a parent needs to get frustrations off their chest, and, unfortunately, a teacher associated with a parent's concerns about their child can receive the brunt of this negativity. As long as you feel safe, let the parent speak so they feel heard. Then, acknowledge what they have said—simple repetition is often key for this!—before re-centering the conversation on strategies to provide solutions and support for their child.
- **Take steps to identify the (actual) problem.** Parents, teachers, and students can often get bogged down in stress and confusion at school without taking time to consider what the root issue is. It may be worth scheduling a brainstorming session with a family just to figure out what a child's actual struggles may be, instead of working around them or making assumptions that could be inaccurate.
- **Choose a solution to try while you're still speaking with your student's parents.** Your time is valuable, as is that of the parents. Before you end the call or meeting, make sure that you've settled on an actionable next step—one that both you and

the parents can implement. Make sure, also, that you've talked about further communications and follow-up to re-assess the child's progress, health, or happiness, to ensure that the measures that you are taking as the child's support team are having a positive effect.

- **Connect again to discuss further steps.** Make it clear to the parents that your connection with them is not a one-off situation; you'll be there for them as long as their student requires support. Evaluate the effects that your actions have had, tweak as necessary, and take further steps to support the student if that is what all of you deem best.

In today's increasingly noisy, digital world, it can be difficult to harness parental attention or engagement. You have a great deal of competition, and the way in which you communicate best may be fundamentally different from the ways that your students' parents are used to receiving information intuitively.

We've found it best to start by assuming that your students' parents really do want to hear from you. We've found that this is usually the case—and the fact that it's sometimes difficult to do so or that a parent's receptivity to your communication plan is less than enthusiastic is largely due to the parents' shortage of time, rather than a lack of willingness on their part.

Your strategy will need to involve making it very easy and attractive for your students' parents to engage with you. Three fundamental ways to make this happen are being very enthusiastic yourself, having a proactive (and different) mindset about messaging, and going out of your way to involve parents, over and over, consistently—until the habit of involvement becomes so ingrained that you find you don't need to press as much any more.

Here's a little more information about each of these recommendations, as well as some practical guidance (Nixon, 2017):

- **Be passionate about what you do.** This is likely a no-brainer—and, as an educator, you are naturally passionate about helping students grow. It's what you do. However, your students' parents may have a more cynical view of the teaching profession, shaped solely by poor experiences they may have had in the past. If you can do anything to reverse this impression by being positive and enthusiastic about your students, you can make communication much more engaging and exciting for your students' parents. Being openly pleased about any time that a child makes progress will be magnetic for your students' parents.

Communicating that excitement with an in-person meeting to celebrate a milestone is much more compelling than a report card—or, if you don't have the time or resources to do so, send a quick video or photo message instead of communicating the information solely by text. If your students' parents begin to expect fun photos and interesting updates with your emails, they'll be more likely to open them and respond to them. It may also help to share your overall learning strategy with your students' parents, and clue them into the why behind each activity. This will help the parents associate productivity with your updates—making them much more compelling from that standpoint, as well.

- **Treat each message from family members differently.** Every family will have unique levels of familiarity with tech platforms, varied amounts of time, and different amounts of energy to expend on communication. While it's tempting to send a mass email or mass reply to several different families at once, it's much more personal and effective to send quick updates individually. It's even better to consider the specific way families prefer to communicate, and to try to accommodate their preferences. Regardless of the specific method, remember that today's parents all have full inboxes and mailboxes. Keep your messages quick, easy, fun, and private.

- **Involve your students' parents as much as possible.** You'll want to get your parents on board with two-way communication as early on as possible in the year to cement the relationship in support of their child. It may feel difficult to figure out ways to reach out to parents, particularly if they're busy, if you're teaching remotely, or if you or a specific parent is particularly introverted. Here's a quick strategy: At the beginning of the school year, brainstorm as many different types of brief, fun, and actionable content as possible (think: Staff introductions, new staff hirings, volunteer opportunities, classroom awards, resources for different academic modules you're introducing in class, parental events and networking activities, etc) and aim to send parents information on these topics on a regular basis (e.g., once a week) in addition to any child-specific updates you may have. Be sure to keep these brief and practical, and include a section for parents to give feedback or answer a specific question in order to indicate that you expect some level of response.

Practical Frameworks Your School Can Prioritize to Promote Family Engagement

The CDC has realized that promoting family engagement at school is one of the best ways to increase student health and success measures. Because of this, their experts have put together a framework to help families connect, engage, and sustain contact with teachers. This framework involves five different steps or resources to think about when you're first starting to prioritize this endeavor.

These include (Poth, 2018):

- **Finding the right communication tools.** This is an area where it's vital to think outside the box. Depending on the age and background of your students and their parents, everyone concerned might be more comfortable with physical paper documents, phone calls, in-person meetings and even social media tools. It's important to gauge that prior to jumping in, instead of simply assuming that one tool will fit everyone in your class. There are integration tools for teachers that you can find (such as BloomzApp or Remind) that include traditional features of messaging apps, have accessible applications, and promote easy sharing of files and video messages. Whichever tool you ultimately select, it's important to realize that finding the right tool can help reduce some of the more commonly-cited barriers to parent-teacher communication.
- **Shifting to focus on video.** CDC representatives and other experts on health and psychology have come to the conclusion that sharing information by video is more accessible, interesting, and engaging for all concerned. From making simple videos, to sharing quick updates about how students have been performing, to creating a more produced class project with the help of your students to share with their parents, the return-on-investment seems to far favor sending parents a link to a video over a paragraph of dense text. By using tools like Screencastify, Flipgrid, and Educreations, you can quickly record videos at special events, of yourself giving a simple update or announcement, or of resources for parents that they can use to help their children with specific support. This is a particularly excellent option if you are teaching remotely. One way to give some responsibility back to parents and provide an expectation of two-way communication is to have the family make a video. Specifically, you can use the video-sharing platform of choice to have your students' families make video introductions about themselves so you can learn more about everyone in your class—and so can your students' peers..

- **Maintaining a class webpage.** There are many benefits to creating and sustaining a centralized location for class updates and links to different resources. It can give parents a simple one-stop-shop to keep tabs on what's going on in your classroom and, if you include a simple feedback form on the home page, give them a place where they know that they can provide feedback at their leisure. When families are aware that they have an easy-to-access, easy-to-use, and fun or entertaining location to connect with you and with other families in your classroom, it reduces the difficulty of staying connected. As an added bonus, in today's increasingly digital world, having and maintaining a webpage is going to be an increasingly necessary skill. Requiring the students in your class to take ownership over simple website maintenance tasks such as coming up with ideas for blog posts, taking pictures, conducting interviews or writing copy will go a long way toward enhancing their digital competency and leadership skills. Easily accessible and safe online tools to help you make this easy and fun are available, such as Edmodo, Padlet, and Kidblog.

- **Focusing on building a strong school community—and connections with your local community.** Sometimes the simplest strategy is the best: After all, if you don't have to reinvent the wheel, don't. See what types of activities and events are happening at your local parks, museums, and community centers. See if you can partner with a local business to have a parent's night out or a student activity on a weekend. You could invite a local community business to be showcased in your gym, or host a learning event on an evening in association with your local theater troupe. These can all be fun, interesting, and relatively easy ways to get your families interested in spending time on your school's campus or with other school families—which can build community partnerships and make it much easier for your families to feel comfortable investing in the parent-teacher relationship.

At the end of the day, it's important to remember, above all else, to act in a way that nurtures the parent-teacher relationship despite any hardships or frustrations that come your way. Even if all else fails, prioritize keeping your interactions respectful, receptive, and responsive. This means that you should go out of your way to be responsive to everything that the parents of students in your classroom say. Ideally, you should be able to provide feedback that soothes parents who may be frustrated or confused. And, of course, you need to ensure that all conversations you have are rooted in mutual respect.

There's an idea, too, that parents need to be enabled to be 'the child's first teacher,' so, if it helps, you could consider brainstorming a list of actions that parents can complete at home to help them feel more involved in their child's educational journey. As the child's teacher, you can work to create and support those home-based opportunities or make them easier to identify for the child's parents. The next time that one of your parents reaches out to you to ask what type of at-home activities they can employ to engage with their child's education, point them in the direction of one of the following:

- **Reading a story to their children.** It's a basic idea, but one that will have abundant benefits for the parent-child bond and the child's early literacy journey.
- **Completing a simple art activity.** This can do wonders for hand-eye coordination, shape recognition, understanding the simple logical flow of a project, and a child's sense of accomplishment.
- **Going out in nature or on walks around the child's community.** This will help children get a sense of their world and environment, can provide a visual familiarity for later studies in civics or biology or even architecture, and will provide physical activity for the child in a stress-free way.
- **Play freely and strategically.** Many traditional forms of play for children are educational in themselves--for example, playing with blocks, which can help with hand-eye coordination and recognition of visual patterns. Simply by taking time to play with their children, parents are helping form them in positive ways. Along the same lines, a seminar on the value of play could be an excellent choice for a valuable event that could boost parent participation or attendance at a school gathering.
- **Volunteering with their child.** While this isn't specifically an at-home activity, the act of going out and doing a little good in the world with their child will help the community and it will help parents and children alike have a better appreciation for their world - which will only help with educational endeavors the child will have in later years.

What are some strategic ways to get a parent to come to an event?

We mentioned above that the best strategies for getting parents to come to an event were usually quite simple: Feed them and provide them with free childcare. However, there may come a time where you need a few more nuanced tricks up your sleeve. Here, we'll help you brainstorm several different ideas that may help your parents decide

they're able to come—or, notably, that may help different groups of parents want to get more involved (Kerri, 2020):

- **Start by providing clear value to busy parents where they already are—on their devices.** Work with your school district's graphics, marketing, or outreach department to create social media posts and easy-to share, optimized-for-mobile graphics that explain learning goals and initiatives in extremely accessible, relatable ways. Use the same method to invite parents to your events: Reach out to them through social media, or in the same graphic or document as a very practical list or parent resource.

- **Try a new time.** Most PTO, PTA, or school presentations tend to be held in the afternoons or evenings. Instead, try a brand-new time, such as 9 a.m. At this time, many parents will already be at school to drop off their children. If you advertise free coffee and donuts at this early meeting, it's guaranteed you'll attract a whole new crowd of parents.

- **Put together a punch card or pseudo-loyalty program for parents at your school.** Have them punch their card (virtually, if that's easier) at each significant parent event or resource that you host (or that they access, read, or use in support of their child). Once they've filled out their punch cards, enter the parent in a raffle to win a fun prize!

- **Form a panel of students from your school to lead a parent-teacher meeting.** This is sure to be funny and engaging and the unique nature of the event will draw attention and a new crowd—at the very least, the parents and friends of the children leading the panel. Use the interest generated by this meeting to funnel parents into other types of meetings, programs, or to helpful resources they can use. (Hearing salient talking points and invitations from children can also help them hit home a bit more for parents, if that would also be helpful).

- **Use ongoing communications to talk up and advertise your meetings in a strategic way.** Take cues from savvy real-world marketing techniques and go further than simply announcing the date, time, and location of a specific event. Write a simple subhead for each event that makes it sound tantalizing—what, exactly, is going to be the practical benefit a parent can expect to learn or receive from an event? After the event has happened, refer to it often in your email or social media copy, talking about the high points or anything significant that occurred during your meeting.

- **If you have any local celebrities or very popular personalities at your school or in your community, see if you can work with them to attend or spread word about the meeting.** Note that 'celebrity' can be an extremely wide category; if you happen to know a TV star, that's great, but the owner of the local coffee shop might be just as effective an option.
- **Put together a door prize for attendance.** If you're a teacher, you know that your students operate better when there's a clear incentive. Adults aren't that different. Get local businesses to donate snack items or small local goods, advertise the fact that there'll be a door prize at your event, and follow through on it—and then repeat the idea next time so people have time to get excited.
- **Partner with other schools in your area to put together bigger events.** If there's one thing we've learned from the research surrounding parent-teacher relationships and the effects they can have on student achievements, it's that every community can benefit from strengthening these partnerships. Additionally, if you aren't drawing large enough crowds or your school doesn't have the resources you need to make these types of meetings interactive or momentous enough, team up with other educational communities. If parents hear that more and more people throughout their community are talking about a larger event, they'll be more likely to attend as well.

Section 3: Reflection Questions

Think about the practices you may already have put in place to help drive parental engagement. Are any of them similar to the practices we have listed here?

Do you think that any of the practices we have listed here would be easy for you to implement?

When it comes to communication practices with the parents in your school, do you have a positive association with the activities you perform? Why or why not? What could you change to enhance the experience for both you and the parents in your class?

Course Conclusion

When it comes to parent engagement, it's clear that schools, students, and parents themselves can benefit from any small steps that teachers are able to take. Fortunately, it does seem that even small steps can make a big difference, as long as they're intentional and practical. Research tells us that investing in parental engagement and

involvement is one of the best ways to ensure that children receive an ever-better education. While administrators and families alike all need to invest more in fostering meaningful relationships between parents and schools, it is likely up to teachers to take the first step.

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