



Kathleen R. DeCataldo, Esq.
Assistant Commissioner
Office of Student Support Services
89 Washington Avenue, Room 318-M EB
Phone: (518) 486-6090
Email: StudentSupportServices@nysed.gov
Web: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/sss/>

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To: BOCES District Superintendents
Superintendents of Public School
Districts Principals of Public Schools
Charter School Leaders
Principals of Private Schools

From: Kathleen R. DeCataldo 

Subject: Supporting Students and Families Disconnected from School

The State Education Department recognizes and applauds the exceptional work that you and your colleagues are doing to support our students at this unprecedented time of crisis and disruption. We commend your acts of kindness and compassion, and your ongoing efforts to ensure that New York's students and their families remain engaged in the learning process.

Continuity of learning is critical; young minds must remain active and engaged during this extended time away from their classrooms. Distance learning is not the same as classroom learning – but it does support the kinds of consistent and active thinking that will enable our students to successfully transition back to school when it is finally safe to do so.

Schools and school districts continue to provide vital nutrition services to students in need. Some have even joined with local community partners to supplement school meals with bags of groceries, age-appropriate books, and hygiene products. We are, quite literally, all in this together.

Despite these creative and considerable efforts, however, we have not been able to successfully connect with all families. There are students and families throughout the State who have not accessed distance learning materials or free meals, and who have not responded to schools' efforts to communicate with them. There are, of course, many reasons why families may not have accessed these vital services. Some may be struggling with technology or access to technology. Some may be caring for multiple children while working one or more jobs. Families whose home language is not English may find it difficult to communicate with their children's schools and teachers. Some may be sheltering in locations other than their known address and are not therefore receiving school or district communications. And some may have disengaged from their school communities entirely due to the additional stressors caused by the pandemic, including fear of contagion, job loss, food insecurity, sickness, or the loss of a loved one.

Certainly, no one is to blame for these barriers – but we must all work to overcome them. Schools and districts must therefore continue to explore additional ways to reach these students and their

families.

Simple solutions are often the best ones. A phone call, for example, is typically the easiest and most direct way to offer resources and assess student needs. When families do not respond to phone calls, texting may be an appropriate alternative. Districts may also consider providing regularly scheduled “virtual office hours” (via telephone and/or internet-based platforms) for students to connect with their teachers and school counselors. Of course, to be effective, all of these interactions must take place in a language that students and their families can fully understand. To communicate with individuals who have difficulty with English, you may wish to seek the assistance of trained translators and interpreters; the [Department’s Regional Bilingual Resource Networks \(RBERNs\)](#) can direct you to appropriate translation and interpretation resources. Additionally, the non-profit organization [Talking Points](#) is temporarily offering free access to translation resources during the COVID-19 crisis.

You should also continue to utilize your district’s health and mental health professionals to engage with students and families. School counselors, social workers, nurses, and psychologists have the skills, knowledge, and training to assist in these outreach efforts.

When you are unable to reach families through traditional methods, you should attempt to connect with them through the emergency contacts listed in your school records. Additionally, local community centers, faith-based organizations, community-based organizations serving immigrant communities, and homeless shelters may be able to assist you in connecting with and supporting the well-being of families who depend on their services.

For a variety of reasons, some students are experiencing increased isolation now, and may require additional human interaction. We know that extended periods of isolation can place children at risk in a variety of ways. Some districts have sought to address this problem by fostering and building upon the social interactions that take place between and among students and their classmates.

The loss of opportunities for learning and employment, as well as food and/or housing insecurity, are primary family stressors that increase the risk factors for children, including increased risks for domestic violence and child abuse. It is therefore essential that schools and districts proactively engage with, and provide support to, families in need. Schools and school personnel are well-positioned to connect families with crucial community services and resources that will provide them with the support and help they need to continue to ensure the well-being and safety of their children – and we hope that you will continue to utilize these resources.

The Department has shared our concern for the safety and well-being of at-risk children with the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS). We urge schools and districts to reach out to their local departments of Social Services (LDSS) with any questions or concerns related to child welfare. You may find the LDSS point of contact (POC) for your area through the following link: [LDSS POCS](#). The Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Neglect, the hotline to report child abuse and neglect, should be contacted **only as a last resort**, after you have exhausted all other strategies to connect with students and families.

The following resources can help to support the engagement of students and families who are disconnected from their learning communities:

[New York State Parent Portal](#)

- The Department has worked with the New York State Council on Children and Families, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), and other State agencies to develop resources specifically for families. The Parent Portal includes tips for staying safe and healthy as well as ways to have fun during self-isolation. Other resources include parenting in a pandemic, activities to do inside and outside, such as participating in daily video chats with families, recording yourself reading a favorite book or message, and more.

[New York State Community Schools Technical Assistance Centers](#)

- The Community Schools TACs are available to support districts in many areas, including family and community engagement.

[New York State Center for School Health- COVID19 Resources](#)

- Provides several resources on health-related topics for both school health professionals and educators. Includes mental health resources, resources for teaching remotely, and how to support families.

[New York State Technical and Education Assistance Center for Homeless Students](#)

NYSTEACHS provides information, referrals, and trainings to schools, school districts, social service providers, and families