



# **BEGINNING OF YEAR RELATIONSHIP BUILDING**

A Strategy Guide for Educators

# INTRODUCTION

**W**hether students are entering school for the first time, transitioning to a new grade, or navigating distance learning during a pandemic, trusting relationships between educators and families are always the foundation for a successful school year. With a trusting relationship – built intentionally, thoughtfully, and at the beginning of the year – educators and families operate as partners, ensuring students have what they need for success.

Educators are the experts on curriculum and pedagogy, and families are the experts on their children, from the earliest years to and through adulthood. At the Flamboyant Foundation, we have seen – and research shows – that families play [Five Essential Roles](#) in their children's education.



To ensure families have what they need to play these critical roles, Flamboyant champions REAL Family Engagement. [REAL Family Engagement](#) means:

**R**elationships with teachers built on trust, ongoing communications, and shared power;

**E**xperiences where educators challenge their own biases and promote racial equity;

**A**cademic partnerships that include grades and social-emotional development; and

**L**eadership in schools, school systems, and communities who create the conditions for meaningful engagement

Built from a robust body of research and more than a decade of experience supporting educators and education leaders with REAL Family Engagement, this guide provides strategies and considerations for ways to build strong, authentic, and trusting relationships with students and families at the start of the school year.

In this toolkit, educators will find:



Guidance on making authentic **Welcome Calls** in any format.



Reasons to use **Partnered Communications** for beginning of the year relationship building.



Example prompts to create **Student + Family Questionnaires**.



Considerations and ideas for hosting **Community Building Meetings**, such as Back to School Night.

”

[The beginning of the year] meetings kind of gave the opportunity to build a relationship before school even started so, once we started school, I got the same welcome feeling from [the teacher], and it just continued.

– Washington, DC Parent

## The School Leader’s Role

While this tool was developed for use by classroom teachers, leadership has a clear and essential role in supporting beginning of the year relationship building. Leadership’s charge is to create the conditions for meaningful engagement to thrive throughout the school – starting day one. For that to happen, the following should be true:

1. Family engagement is a living, breathing part of the culture, systems, and structures of the school.
2. The school community recognizes the assets and strengths of all students and families, interrupts bias, and challenges assumptions.
3. School improvements and innovations are informed by a diverse sampling of family input, especially from those historically excluded from decision making.
4. All families are given the opportunity to engage in a meaningful partnership based on trust and consistent communication, regardless of their child’s grade or classroom.

Throughout this toolkit, you will find “**School Leader Moves**” with tangible ways to create these conditions. You can also refer to the [School Leader Checklist](#) in the Appendix.

# OVERVIEW

I.	Guiding Principles for Beginning of the Year Relationship Building	5
II.	Strategy 1: Welcome Calls	6
III.	Strategy 2: Partnered Communications	9
IV.	Strategy 3: Family + Student Questionnaires	11
V.	Strategy 4: Community Building Meetings	12
VI.	Appendix	17
	A. Five Essential Roles	17
	B. Questions for Trust Building	18
	C. School Leader Checklist	19
	D. Welcome Call Planning Tool	20
	E. Challenging Assumptions Reflection Tool	22



# Guiding Principles for Beginning of the Year Relationship Building

Regardless of the strategy you choose, these principles should guide your approach to building relationships with your student's families.



## **Be authentic.**

Family engagement is people work— sharing yourself authentically with families will help quickly build trust and rapport. Creating a strong sense of shared humanity can help us feel connected.



## **Center on the student.**

Ask about hopes, dreams, and expectations. This is an incredible opportunity for the teacher, student, and family to align on what's most important to each of them in supporting the student's academic success.



## **Focus on what is important to the family.**

These conversations should emphasize building connections. Focus on the relationship while following the family's lead. Some families might want to share and get to know your background; others might want academic information. Many will want both!



## **Consistency is key.**

Relationships take time. These strategies will start the process of building relationships. Still, it is frequent and consistent communication that allows relationships to grow and sustain, especially if you do not have the opportunity to connect frequently with families in-person.



## **All families receive outreach.**

Every family deserves to have a trusting relationship with their child's teacher. Families should see that relationship building is for everyone!

# STRATEGY 1: WELCOME CALLS

Today, there are many ways to welcome families to your classroom! FaceTime, Zoom, Google hangouts, and traditional phone calls are all options for doing a Welcome Call. In the Appendix, find example [Questions for Trust Building](#) and a [Planning Tool](#).

## Before the Call

- **Challenge Assumptions.** Research has shown that one of the most significant barriers to effective family engagement is deficit-based views about families, particularly when working across lines of racial or economic differences. During times of stress and trauma, our implicit biases can drive our actions. Consider using the [Challenging Assumptions Reflection Tool](#) in the Appendix to examine and interrupt your assumptions.
- **Include your colleagues.** Keep other colleagues who work with your students in the loop, such as a special educator or ELL teacher, support staff, or educators in your department—plan for how you will support others to connect with families during or after your conversation. Connect with partners ahead of your Welcome Call to consider how they – or their questions or wonderings – might be included.
- **Consider families' preferences.** Welcome Calls can take place as traditional phone calls or over a video platform such as Teams, Zoom, or Facetime. Welcome Calls should be scheduled in advance at a time that is convenient for the family. Texting or emailing families is an excellent way to organize Welcome Calls.
- **Prepare.** Families will have questions, so make sure you take a few minutes to review any recent updates or information from your school or district that families might wonder. Educators will not have all the answers, and that is okay! Your job is not to fix everything, but to help alleviate concerns, share what you can, and communicate when and how you will follow up to get them the information they need. Use the [Planning Tool](#) in the Appendix.





## School Leader Moves

- ✓ Provide class lists early
- ✓ Ensure the “what and why” of Welcome Calls are part of school-wide mass communications
- ✓ Message expectations to staff about logging and tracking Welcome Call data
- ✓ Line up translation and interpretation supports proactively and make sure all staff and families know how to access these supports
- ✓ Prioritize time for teachers to reflect on the impact of relationships with families after the first few weeks of school and plan next steps accordingly
- ✓ Analyze data to ensure equitable engagement regardless of race, gender, grade, teacher, etc.
- ✓ Put in place strong systems and clear expectations for internal communication between teachers who share students

## During the Call

- **Remove distractions – as much as possible.** To be able to do everything else listed here effectively, you will need to make sure you are in a space and place where you can actively listen and focus on this conversation.
- **Share yourself authentically.** Share who you are with the family, such as your background, interests, what you love about teaching, and what excites you about the new school year.
- **Listen.** Ask families to share about themselves and their student(s). See [Trust Building Questions](#) in the Appendix!
- **Provide answers as you can.** Preparing beforehand can help, but it’s important to be honest when you do not know an answer.
- **Ask and share hopes and dreams.** This is a critical part of a relationship building conversation with students and families, and signals you genuinely care about what they want for their child — now and in the future.

**SECONDARY TIP:** Include the student in the Welcome Call! Anything you ask the adults, also ask the student.



- **Invite families to stay connected.** Think about the cadence of your communication moving forward. Should the family expect a weekly call from you? A text? Ask what works best for them. Make a note of their communication preferences and share how they can stay connected.
- **Include the student.** This is especially important for secondary students. Allowing students to share in trust-building conversations with their families will signal aligned partnership and teamwork on their behalf.

## After the Call

- **Follow-up on next steps.** Doing what you say you will is critical for quickly establishing trust.
- **Share insights with your team.** This is especially important for departmentalized grades and for students who work with other staff in your building. Share insights to make sure everyone is on the same page.
- **Keep lines of communication open.** A strong Welcome Call will start the process of building a trusting relationship, but consistent communication builds a meaningful partnership. Relationships grow through frequent and positive conversation, so reach out to families regularly.



# STRATEGY 2: PARTNERED COMMUNICATIONS

**P**airing up for your beginning of the year relationship building can provide value to both the family and you! There are many reasons to partner up, such as:

1. A family might already have a strong relationship with another staff member. A familiar voice or face on the initial call can work to establish trust.
2. You have a co-teacher or aide with whom the family should also have a relationship.
3. The student receives additional supports or services at the school, such as through an IEP, so it makes sense to include the Special Education or ELL teacher.

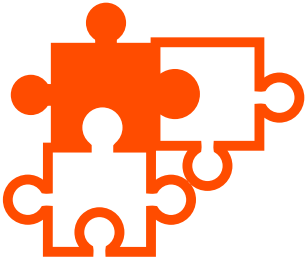
No matter the reason, employing this strategy can benefit everyone involved – especially the student and family! In the Appendix, you'll find example [Questions for Trust Building](#) to use in Partnered Communications.

## School Leader Move

This strategy requires sharing information across your school. You and your leadership team should think through the systems and structures teachers need to coordinate these conversations.

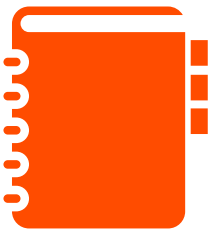


# Tips for Getting Started



## **Pick the right partner.**

It may be a special educator or ELL teacher. Other potential options for a great Partnered Communication include front office staff, a dean, an aide, or a specials teacher. Think about who the most beneficial person for the family and student to have a relationship with is, or who is best suited to help you build a relationship with the family and student. It can help to connect with the teachers or advisors your students had in previous years to hear about who already has a relationship with the family.



## **Plan the conversation.**

Since there will be two of you leading, it's important to discuss ahead of time who will lead what and any specific roles each person should play. Use the [Welcome Call Planning Tool](#) in the Appendix.



## **Connect!**

If your partner has an existing relationship with the family, they can set up the time to talk. Share the purpose of the conversation and ask the family for their preference of the day, time, and mode of communication. During the conversation, use the [Questions for Trust Building](#) as a starting place.



## **Follow the family's lead.**

While this strategy might work for some families and educators, it might not work for all. Be flexible and responsive to the family's willingness and ability to engage in these conversations.

# STRATEGY 3: FAMILY + STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRES

Student and family questionnaires or interest surveys are another way to collect useful information for all students and families in your class. It's essential to make clear to families that you value them and gathering this information will help you best communicate with them and support their child. These sample prompts can get you started on building your own family or student questionnaires. Additional [Trust Building Questions](#) can be found in the Appendix. No matter which questions you choose to include in a questionnaire, be sure to ask in the most user-friendly and direct way possible.

## Family Questionnaire Sample Prompts

- ☐ Student name
- ☐ Parent/Guardian name(s)
- ☐ Preferred method of contact: phone call, text, email, other
- ☐ Cell phone number(s)
- ☐ Email address(es)
- ☐ Student's before or after-school placement as relevant
- ☐ Are there any health concerns for your child I should be aware of? (Allergies, Asthma, etc.)
- ☐ Please describe your child as a learner.
- ☐ What are your hopes for your student this year? What is your dream for them in the future?

**TECH TIP:** Consider the technological savviness of families and provide various options to gather feedback, such as Google Forms.

## Student Questionnaire Sample Prompts

- ☐ Name
- ☐ Age/Birthday
- ☐ Who is in your family?
- ☐ Tell me about last school year. What did you like? What did you dislike?
- ☐ What is your favorite book?
- ☐ What did you do this summer that you enjoyed? What was most difficult?
- ☐ How do you feel about the new school year? What are you most excited about?
- ☐ What are you most worried about?
- ☐ What else do you think is important for me to know about you/ how you learn?

**Note:** consider calling out "distance learning" as appropriate in questions to differentiate between experiences and feelings about in-person learning vs. distance learning.

# STRATEGY 4: COMMUNITY BUILDING MEETINGS

**C**ommunity Building Meetings – online or in person – can be a meaningful way to begin building relationships with families, disseminate information, and allow families to connect with each other. At the start of the year, Back to School Night is the most widely used Community Building Meeting. Still, there are also Meet the Teacher events, Community Townhalls, and so many more ways to use Community Building Meetings at the beginning of the year.

**Community Building Meetings have a clear purpose that is communicated to families.** When families choose to spend their time attending events, whether online or in person, educators must make every minute count!



## Consider:

- What are the goals of the event?  
How are these goals responsive to families' needs and wants?
- How will families get information and resources that help them communicate high expectations, monitor and support their child's progress, advocate for their child, and guide their child's education? [see the [Five Essential Roles](#)]
- How is this information relevant to the family's child?

## Ideas:

- Connect families with critical school and community resources that are specific to students' and families' needs.
- Allow families to examine grade-level work and rubrics, and share strategies they can use to monitor progress and hold high expectations at home.
- Build families' skills with school systems like online grade books to monitor their child's progress and assignments.

### TECH TIPS:

- Zoom can be a great way to host virtual events. Get to know all the different ways to boost engagement including polls, the chat box, and breakout rooms!
- Social media is an effective way to reach families since so many are on the platforms already. Check with your LEA's social media policy before using this strategy.



### Community Building Meetings allow families to connect with other families.

Community Building Meetings are just that – a meeting to build community! Design the event to intentionally make families feel encouraged and connected with other families. This can also include families (and students!) being the designers or leaders of the event.

### Consider:

- How will you foster a sense of belonging? Do families feel individually known and valued at the event?
- How are families connecting with members of the school staff and other families who can support them to help their child?

### Ideas:

- Add an icebreaker at the beginning of a Meet the Teacher event.
- At Back to School Night, break families into smaller discussion groups to practice using online learning platforms.
- Encourage families to stay connected to one another through a classroom listserv introduced at a Meet the Teacher event.

## A note on virtual Back to School Nights

- ✓ Consider school-wide, grade-level, and classroom-based conversations. Using Zoom Breakouts can make this possible.
- ✓ Plan to onboard families to any virtual learning platforms being used such as Remind, Clever, Google Classroom, etc.
- ✓ Share pictures or videos of safety protocols.
- ✓ Infuse moments of joy such as accomplishments from the previous year, personal celebrations, or anecdotes from students and families.
- ✓ Record the event and share it with entire school community so all families have access to the information.
- ✓ Use closed captioning and translation throughout the event to ensure greater accessibility for all families.
- ✓ If using Zoom or another online platform, send a reminder link for the event within 15 minutes of start time so families have it easily accessible.

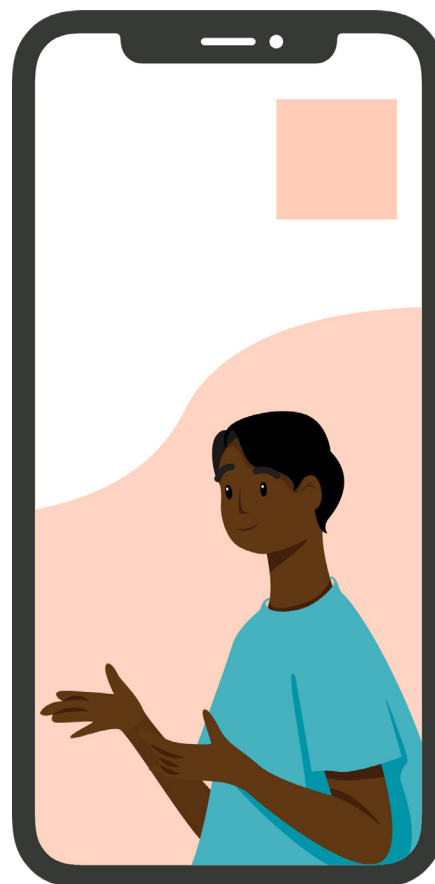
**Community Building Meetings provide actionable information and resources.** A staple of family events is discussing student data. These engagements should equip families with actionable information and resources so that they can hold high expectations, monitor and support learning at home, and advocate for their child.

## Consider:

- What will families walk away knowing or being able to do to support their child's growth?
- Do families have the tools and resources to take action immediately?

## Ideas:

- At Back to School Night, review the calendar for the school year, including key dates and family engagement related events.
- A teacher-family book club focused on age-relevant books. Families and educators discuss strategies for home and school.





## School Leader Moves

- ✓ Provide time for teachers to plan and host meaningful Community Building Meetings.
- ✓ Communicate expectations to staff and families for in-person or virtual events (based on CDC guidelines and the policies of your LEA).
- ✓ Ensure teachers are equipped with the training and tools to make Community Building Meetings meaningful.
- ✓ Provide templates and examples that include any expectations you have for the Community Building Meetings.
- ✓ Participate in Community Building Meetings and give feedback.

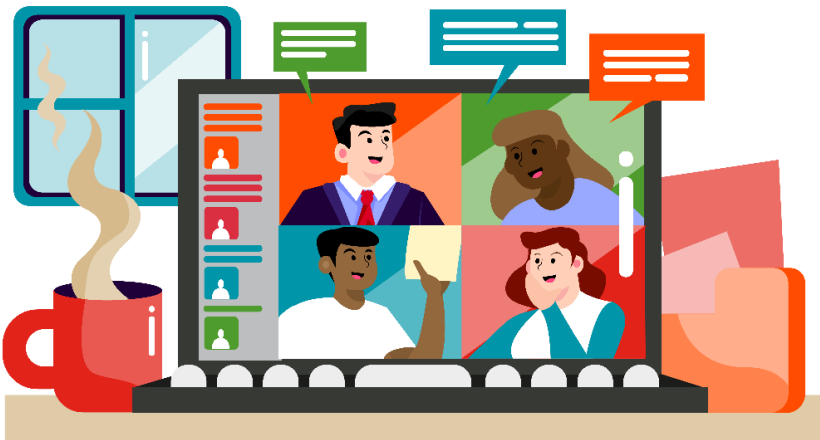
**Community Building Meetings are experiential.** Children and adults alike tend to better understand and retain information when they have a chance to practice things firsthand and get real-time support.

### Consider:

- What is the family experience at the event?
- How are families practicing and learning the content alongside the educator and fellow families?

### Ideas:

- An exhibition where families assess grade-level work with their student.
- College Night, where families and students analyze college applications.
- At Back to School Night, families log on and navigate the school's grade book, practicing how to check their students' overall grades, view assignments, and message the teacher. In middle or high school, students can teach families how to do this!



# CLOSING

**E**very back to school season brings a mixture of anxiety and excitement. Starting the year by intentionally and thoughtfully engaging families can change worries and fears into hope and trust. True, meaningful partnerships are not built in a single day (or single phone call!). It is imperative that you communicate with families in a proactive, transparent, and welcoming way at the beginning of the year, and continuously throughout the year as well.

When family engagement gets REAL, educators and families become true allies in educational excellence, schools foster a sense of belonging for everyone, and students succeed in school and beyond. As the year progresses, continue to look to Flamboyant Foundation to support you in your REAL Family Engagement efforts.

- Follow us on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).
- Sign-up to receive our [newsletter](#).
- Be on the lookout for new resources on <http://www.FlamboyantFoundation.org>

Questions? Reach us at [Communications@FlamboyantFoundation.org](mailto:Communications@FlamboyantFoundation.org)

# APPENDIX

## A. Five Essential Roles Families Play to Accelerate Student Learning



### **COMMUNICATE** HIGH EXPECTATIONS

An important way families can help their child succeed is to consistently communicate high expectations for their performance. Teachers can help families do this by sharing information about age appropriate milestones students should meet to be college and career ready.



### **MONITOR** THEIR CHILD'S PERFORMANCE

Families can support their child's success by regularly checking in with them and their educators on how they are doing in school. Teachers can support families doing this by consistently and proactively engaging with them about their student's progress and by being available to families in a timely way.



### **SUPPORT** LEARNING AT HOME

When families support and reinforce learning at home, their children do better in school. Teachers can help families support learning at home with their child through consistent academic partnership and ongoing communication like helping families create a series of thought provoking, content specific questions families can ask children at home.



### **GUIDE** THEIR CHILD'S EDUCATION

Families play a critical role in navigating their child's educational experience from preschool all the way through college. The school community can support families by connecting them to resources and activities for their child that supports their unique needs.



### **ADVOCATE** FOR THEIR CHILD

Families advocate for their children to ensure they get the personal attention, necessary supports they need to be successful in school. School leadership can support family advocacy by creating a feedback friendly environment. This could include a family feedback system where families understand how their feedback was used, expanded office hours for family conversations, or proactively seeking input from families about school policy decisions.

## B. Questions for Trust Building

Regardless of the selected strategy, here are some key questions to ask of the student and family during the beginning of year relationship building conversations:

### **For the family:**

- Tell me a little about your child – what do they like? What are their interests?
- Where did you see your child grow during the last year? What challenges did they experience?
- What are your hopes and dreams for your student - both for the upcoming school year and in the future?
- What was something that surprised you about your child from the last school year?
- From your experience, what are some ways to teach, motivate, or inspire your child?
- As your child's teacher, what are your expectations of me?
- What is the best way to communicate with you?
- What are your concerns or considerations about the upcoming school year?
- What's most important to you right now?
- Do you have what you need to support learning at home this school year?  
[Consider each of the [Five Essential Roles](#)]

Remember to thank the family member for their time and re-state any agreed upon or requested next steps.

### **For the student:**

- What are your hopes and dreams - both for the upcoming school year and in the future?
- What did you enjoy most and least about the previous school year?
- What expectations do you have as me as your teacher?
- What do you hope to accomplish at school this year?

## C. School Leader Checklist

This is a quick reference tool to ensure you are creating the conditions for meaningful, beginning of the year relationship building to thrive.

- ☐ Provide class lists early
- ☐ Ensure the “what and why” of strategies are part of school-wide mass communications to staff and families
- ☐ Message expectations to staff about logging and tracking beginning of the year relationship building data
- ☐ Line up translation and interpretation supports proactively and make sure all staff and families know how to access these supports
- ☐ Prioritize time for teachers to reflect on the impact of relationships with families after the first few weeks of school and plan next steps accordingly
- ☐ Analyze the beginning of the year relationship-building data to ensure equitable engagement regardless of race, gender, grade, teacher, etc. Consider both quantitative data and qualitative data.
- ☐ Put in place robust systems and clear expectations for internal communication between teachers who share students. Consider using cohorting in middle and high school.
- ☐ Provide time for teachers to plan and host meaningful Community Building Meetings
- ☐ Communicate expectations to staff and families for in-person or virtual events (based on CDC guidelines and the policies of your LEA)
- ☐ Ensure teachers are equipped with the training and tools to make Community Building Meetings meaningful
- ☐ Provide templates and examples that include any expectations you have for the Community Building Meetings
- ☐ Participate in Community Building Meetings and give feedback

## D. Welcome Call Planning Tool

Use this table to plan your beginning of the year relationship-building communication. If these communications happen with a partner ([Partnered Communication](#)), be sure to note who will take the lead in each section.

Component	Talking Points	Notes
1. Introduce yourself (and your partner if applicable) and confirm that this is still a good time to talk.		
2. Outline – quickly – the agenda and goals of the call. Ask if there is anything the family would add.		
3. Share: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Your background</li> <li>• Your interests</li> <li>• How excited you are to teach their child!</li> </ul>		
4. Ask: see <a href="#">Questions for Trust Building</a>		

Component	Talking Points	Notes
5. Share: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Your hopes and dreams for their student</li> <li>• Your expectations for engagement during the year</li> </ul>		
6. Ask how the family would like to stay in communication over the year and share all the possible ways they can connect with you.		
7. Share any critical school or district updates.		
8. Ask the family if they have any final questions or concerns they'd like to share.		
9. Thank families for their time and share any next steps based on the conversation.		



## E. Challenging Assumptions Reflection

Examining our beliefs about families is a critical component of REAL Family Engagement. When educators operate with asset-based beliefs about families, they are more likely to build successful academic partnerships with families. Conversely, when educators operate with deficit-based beliefs about families, they are more likely to limit communication and information sharing, thus limiting a families' ability to play the Five Essential Roles.

The table on the next page is a tool to spark a conversation about how our assumptions can influence our actions, and examine ways in which we can question ourselves, or others, when we find biased or negative beliefs about families are emerging. The table on the next page can be completed individually as a personal reflection or facilitated in a group setting, such as a team or staff meeting.

### **\*Reflection Stems to Challenge Negative Beliefs About Families**

- Whose voice is missing? Whose voice needs to be heard?
- What would the family/student say about that? What would \_\_\_\_ say if they heard that/about that?
- Who is this actually true for and how do you know? Can you identify someone for whom this is not true?
- How true would this be through \_\_\_\_'s eyes?
- We have heard your story about [a family, situation, circumstance, etc.]. What do you think their [i.e., the family] story is about [a family, situation, circumstance, etc.]?
- What does this mean for students' opportunities at your school?
- How can you think about supporting this student/family differently?
- Let's say you decide not to address this mindset where it exists? What are the implications of that decision?

Example Negative Beliefs about Families	What assumptions are being made about what it takes or what it looks/sounds like to support a child's learning?	How could this belief potentially impact an educator's actions?	What would you say to yourself/ask yourself (or someone else) if you were challenging this belief?*
<p>"Families aren't invested here."</p>	<p>Investment is when families attend school events, participate in the PTO, and volunteer to chaperone field trips. If parents aren't doing these things, then they are not invested.</p>	<p>If we operate from the belief that families aren't invested, we may limit communication and information sharing with families. We might stop trying to engage.</p>	<p>What are some of the invisible investments families might be making in their child's schooling?</p> <p>Who is this true for and how do you know?</p> <p>What would families say about that belief that they are not invested? Would they agree?</p> <p>What reasons might families have for not "showing up" in ways that we, as educators, hope they will?</p>
<p>"Families here are functionally illiterate, so they can't support distance learning."</p>			
<p>"Families don't have the capacity to support learning at home."</p>			
<p>"Families don't care."</p>			