

# A TIME TO ACT: A FRAMEWORK TO ACCELERATE LEARNING

## STUDENT AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

In April 2021, JerseyCAN released [A Framework to Accelerate Learning](#) through and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. This document focuses on one element of the Framework – Student and Family Engagement – and highlights New Jersey schools and districts who exemplify promising practices in action.



### The Opportunity: Meeting Students and Families Where they Are

Students and families need personalized support to move past the challenges of the pandemic and realize the full potential of a quality education. New Jersey districts and schools are receiving significant new federal funding to boost these efforts through evidence-based programs and strategies. JerseyCAN’s [Framework to Accelerate Learning](#) outlines a robust research base and includes strategies and examples of such initiatives in practice, as well as New Jersey-specific policy recommendations, which can help to inform local plans for these funds.

### New Jersey Districts Leading the Way

The following New Jersey districts and schools are authentically engaging students and families as partners through innovative actions and activities.

#### A commitment to communication and whole-child engagement: [Cresthaven Academy](#)

Educators at Cresthaven Academy are focused on their mission to support the whole child. They elevate joy as a core value and have continued their beloved dance parties (with masks and social distancing), virtual field trips and many other activities that boost students’ social and emotional well-being during remote learning and back in person. Cresthaven meaningfully engages parents and implements their input. In order to serve scholars and families best during the challenges brought on by the pandemic, leaders utilized surveys and other communications tools in English and Spanish as well as multiple parent-teacher conferences. They also recommend communicating important information and messages “seven times in seven different ways” to reach all families. Leaders created a communication tracker to monitor the touchpoints and feedback with each scholar to ensure the proper responses and support are in place to meet individual needs. Schedule adjustments and other flexibilities have been provided in response to family feedback. ★ View this [video](#) and our brief on [Data for Understanding Student Learning](#) to learn more about this inspirational work! ★

“After asking our parents about their needs, we listened and implemented Monday Flex days. Mondays are when scholars can engage in asynchronous co-curricular activities and can also receive additional small group or 1:1 help with their teachers. Every Monday, parents receive an update from their child’s teacher on work completion and participation, with an opportunity for scholars to make up work that may be missing.”

**Megan Gerity**, Director of Curriculum and Instruction

#### Relationships, innovation and passion driving a culture of success: [West Side High School](#)

Inspirational leadership is the keystone of West Side High School’s success with student engagement. Principal Akbar Cook’s powerful ethos of “Match My Fly” – encouraging others to match his energy and passion – fosters a school culture where educators continuously innovate to meet student needs. Prior to the pandemic, gun violence and other student safety issues led Cook to create the “Lights On” program to provide a safe place for students to gather outside of school hours. It now runs year-round and averages 400 students from all over Newark. When the pandemic hit, West Side faced numerous other challenges — Principal Cook and his team worked quickly to address significant connectivity issues, mental health needs and food insecurity for West Side students and families. The West Side team had to quickly revamp “Lights On” to provide meals to go for families as well as boxes of produce. Cook estimates they’ve since fed

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Now that the world is opening back up, how are we going to better prepare these kids for the new world, the new normal? The new normal is not just doing the compliant part, but going beyond the call of duty. One thing we've got to do is figure out how to maximize this summertime. If there's anything COVID has taught us, it's that education has to be revamped – summer is a perfect time to start.”

**Akbar Cook**, Principal

10,000 families and continue working to address persistent child hunger. Further, West Side recently employed the [Kinvolved](#) platform, which translates all communications into multiple languages, to reach parents through text notifications. Since they have begun using Kinvolved, the West Side team has noticed a greater response from parents. Cook is also incorporating proven practices to combat learning loss, including mentoring, partnering with Khan Academy and planning for summer camps to maximize learning time while offering students a fun and safe place to go.

★ [View our video](#) to see this incredible work in action! ★

### A focus on social and emotional wellness: [Collingswood Public Schools](#)

At Collingswood Public Schools, building relationships through social and emotional learning (SEL) and mental health awareness has been a top priority for several years. Leaders here know that successful SEL work is a multi-step process that begins with teachers and staff before it can be extended to students. Right before COVID hit, the district prioritized funding for a Counseling Coordinator who led a team to develop the new elementary SEL curriculum. This team included teachers, district leaders and clinical interns

to ensure students received the mental health support and skill development they needed to access academic instruction. Consistent implementation of daily check-ins, tiered supports and toolkits for students created a strong foundation. Almost a year later, school leaders say many families have praised the positive effects of the program.

★ To learn more, view this SEL curriculum [presentation](#) and our brief on [Educator Support and Innovative Staffing](#). ★



Students now have a common language when discussing their feelings and have a set of tools to work with, which will continue to be built upon in future classes. Many of the students that have a history of struggling with emotional regulation are also finding the confidence to ‘talk’ and the understanding of how to self-regulate.”

**Jennifer Johnson Floyd**, 2nd-Grade Teacher



Student input has been vital to knowing what they need equity wise, inclusivity wise. They help us identify weaknesses. This approach allows them to tell us what they need – which is necessary to make sure our school works for everyone.”

**Erica Holck**, Art Teacher

### Elevating student voice: [Logan Township School District](#)

Logan Township leaders believe that inclusivity and attention to student voice are key to authentic and successful student engagement. During the pandemic, checking in with students became more important than ever, and leaders emphasize that student response and feedback have been critical to understand and appreciate student needs during this difficult time. Logan students are encouraged to do their own research and help the district develop plans around issues such as bathroom safety, student workload and recess time. One such elementary student-led initiative was the creation of a sensory path. Students

created a video to get their peers to vote and provide input on the sensory path solution to ultimately share with school leaders for approval. ★ To learn more, see Logan’s “[Staff Sheet](#)” designed to help teachers ensure inclusivity in lessons and instructional resources, discipline practices and classroom management, and see our [video](#) and brief on [High Quality, Inclusive Curriculum, Instruction and Training, Effective Resource Allocation for Equitable Systems](#) and [Data for Understanding Student Learning](#). ★

JerseyCAN applauds these leaders across the state for showing how this work can, and must, be done. Looking ahead, JerseyCAN will support policy and programmatic solutions that will expand these efforts.