



School Responses to COVID-19: ELL/Immigrant Considerations

By [Lydia Breiseth \(/author/lydia-breiseth\)](/author/lydia-breiseth) (2020)



How can schools and districts ensure that ELLs and their families are included in all communications and school closure plans related to COVID-19? Here are some considerations that can help individual educators, schools, and districts.

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As the situation quickly evolves around community and school responses to COVID-19 (coronavirus), educators are juggling multiple concerns and questions. It is critical to keep the impacts of this situation on English language learners (ELLs) and immigrant students in view so that they can be included in all responses and plans.

We strongly encourage districts to look for ways in which to partner with families throughout this time of uncertainty and to draw upon the expertise of ELL educators, family liaisons, and community partners who work closely with these student populations and communities. Not only do they know their students well, they are an important bridge and source of continuity during a time of tremendous uncertainty.

You can find many additional resources, including in multiple languages, on our [related resource page \(/coronavirus\)](#).



Survey: School closures and ELLs

As educators of ELLs identify some key concerns about the impact of school closures on their students, we want to learn more about your perspective through [this survey](#) (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/RYQCS37>).

Access to essential COVID-19 information

All families have a legal right to important information from the school in a language they understand. Information that is most critical at this time includes:

- Basic information about the virus, how it spreads, and who it most affects, such as the elderly and people with certain underlying health risks
- What to do if you are sick
- Preventative measures such as hand-washing, not touching your face, and staying home if you are sick
- Information about [social distancing](https://www.redmond.gov/DocumentCenter/View/12810/Social-Distancing-Infographic-Sign) (<https://www.redmond.gov/DocumentCenter/View/12810/Social-Distancing-Infographic-Sign>)

Ensuring that all students and families have access to this information helps them stay healthy and contributes to better health in the community at large.

Recommendations

- Ensure that students who are still in school are receiving reminders on preventative measures regularly.
- Encourage teachers to use visuals, videos, and demonstrations with ELLs on steps like hand washing and that they check students understanding of that information.
- Ensure that families know to be especially careful with vulnerable populations such as grandparents who may be caregivers or live with their families.
- Ensure that families receive this key information as well. Keep in mind that families will have different preferences on how they wish to communicate:
 - **Phone calls and texts:** Many families may prefer to communicate via phone and text. If your school has not established regular communication with ELL families, this is a good time to start. You can find recommendations for getting started in our [ELL family outreach guide \(/immigration/guide/families\)](#). While in-person communication is always preferred, you may wish to experiment with apps that translate for families, such as Talking Points, which uses a combination of human and automatic translation. (Note that Google Translate is best for words and phrases, not extended conversations, and even with translations of specific words, the translations may not be perfect.)
 - **Translated information:** Many COVID-19 resources have already been translated into other languages. Check with your local public health office to see if they have information serving the immigrant families in your community. You may also wish to see if there are existing multilingual resources online, such as those compiled by [Colorin Colorado \(/coronavirus\)](#). **Note:** Families with lower levels of literacy may not be able to read written hand-outs. Make information available in a variety of forms if possible.
 - **Community networks and media outlets:** Some immigrant communities may have robust communication networks within parent groups, with local organizations, or through media outlets in their language. Collaborating with these networks can

provide a valuable two-way benefit both in sharing information and learning more about families questions, concerns, and ideas.

- ELL administrator Kristina Robertson writes, "Envision the strengths of families and work from that knowledge as you respond to this crisis. While multilingual families may need differentiated support from school districts, they also usually have built-in networks of support that help them keep each other safe and connect each other with important resources. Some may have had experience with health issues that makes them uniquely knowledgeable about how to maintain their safety. Respect their knowledge and ability to problem-solve in this situation."

Updates related to school closures

If schools are closed or closing due to COVID-19, its essential that ELL families have access to all updates in their languages.

Recommendations

- Review the systems are already in place to communicate about closures and delays (i.e., weather delays). Will these suffice for this situation?
- Ensure that all information about school closures if available in families' languages. Notify families about how the district plans to communicate about school closures, as well as any plans to make up the days in the future.
- Explain why the district is taking these steps. Have COVID-19 cases already been identified within the district or community, or is this largely a preventative measure?

Unique perspectives and concerns



Teacher voices

"I think it's also important for ELs to continue to see us (remotely) and feel that connection in order to continue feeling safe."

- LeighAnn Matthews, ESL Instructional Coach (NJ)

Keep in mind that:

- Families may have a wide range of questions and concerns related to this crisis based on

their own perspective and experience. Ask cultural/family liaisons or family members who are active in the school community to flag any cultural considerations schools or districts should be aware of.

- Families may be concerned about the health of relatives overseas or the impact of travel restrictions. Schools can better tailor their response to this crisis by asking families to share their concerns and questions.
- Students may have high levels of anxiety with few outlets for support or discussion. Teachers who work regularly with ELLs may be able to identify key areas of concern among students, as well as some ideas for addressing those concerns.
- For many students who have experienced trauma, school and the daily routine of going to school can provide an important safe haven, both physically and emotionally.
- Disruptions to that stability may be particularly challenging for these students to manage. Share some ideas for managing stress with students and consider whether there are ways to provide remote support for students in partnership with colleagues or community partners in the event of closures.

Food security, health care, finances, and safety

For many families, school closures mean a loss of access to regular meals and snacks, medical care, and a safe place to spend the school day and hours before and after school. Many families will be unable to work if they can't find back-up child care. This tremendous uncertainty and upheaval comes at a time when many immigrant families were already facing hardship and [many immigration-related concerns \(/immigration/guide/issues\)](/immigration/guide/issues).

Dr. Jesse Bump, a Lecturer on Global Health Policy and Executive Director of the Takemi Program in International Health at Harvard University, notes that this crisis will undoubtedly shine a light on the longstanding cracks in our social safety net and the inequities that impact millions of families every day. "There is a thin thread that holds life together," he says, "and when it gets thinner, it breaks more easily." Those who were most vulnerable before the crisis will remain the most vulnerable throughout and after the crisis, he notes, including our English learner and immigrant populations.

Keep in mind that:

- Some immigrant families may not have access to medical care, insurance, sick leave, or child care.
- Even if they do have access to certain benefits, they may be afraid to access them due to their immigration status or the status of a family member.
- Students may play an important role as breadwinners in their family.
- Families may be sending remittances to relatives in other parts of the country or abroad.

- College students, who also may be contributing to their families at home, may be particularly vulnerable if housing and dining facilities are closed and if they are unable to work on campus.

Recommendations

- If the district plans to make meals available, ensure that all families have access to that information. (Teachers have reported that some districts are sending this information only in English.) Some families are unlikely to be able to pick up meals during the mid-day. (Many school districts are looking at how to address this issue, some in collaboration with community agencies and local businesses/restaurants. You can learn more about what your school district is doing in order to communicate that to families. You may be able to learn more about distribution sites through district, state, or news websites. The [non-profits focused on hunger \(https://www.impactmatters.org/top-lists/hunger/\)](https://www.impactmatters.org/top-lists/hunger/) on this list may also have updated information.)
- When possible, connect families with services/programs that can:
 - help alleviate hardship in the event of school closures, missed meals, or lost wages
 - provide medical care and support (especially if you suspect families are uninsured)
 - provide social-emotional and mental health support for students and families.
- Look for opportunities to create new local partnerships that can help address these needs.
- Learn more from the following from our guide on [how schools can support immigrant students \(/immigration/guide/basic\)](/immigration/guide/basic).
- Kristina Robertson notes that it's important to find ways to check in with students and families about how students are doing to the extent possible. Families may be under considerable stress and pressure from reduced income, threat of losing jobs or housing, and multiple children cooped up in the home. Older children may also have big responsibilities at home, including care for younger siblings. If educators are listening for stress or concerns from students, they can provide additional support for the family through their school community.
- Dr. Bump urges educators and advocates to encourage ELL, immigrants, and anyone under pressure from COVID-19 to reach out to make their needs known. There are and will be major distributional problems and an important part of the solution is for people to speak up when they need something — whether it's health care and services, food, or domestic goods. Speaking up will also make it easier to connect those people and institutions that are willing and able to help others.

Learning at home and staying connected

Just as there a wide range of approaches in how school districts are handling learning during these school closures, there is a lot of variety in approaches for ELLs. Due to widespread inequities in terms of access to devices and internet, some teachers of ELLs are taking it upon themselves to provide resources, materials, and communication. In recent days, examples of what we have heard teachers and/or districts doing include:

- Taking school supplies to migrant farmworkers who live in trailer communities
- Calling students to check in (one teacher said she called with Google Voice, which kept her phone number private)
- Sharing contact information so that students can stay in touch and also look for ways to practice conversation remotely
- Sharing strategy and activity ideas with families, as these [ideas from Reading Rockets \(https://www.readingrockets.org/article/when-school-closed-resources-keep-kids-learning-home\)](https://www.readingrockets.org/article/when-school-closed-resources-keep-kids-learning-home), [bilingual articles \(/growing-readers-reading-activity-ideas\)](https://www.growingreaders.com/growing-readers-reading-activity-ideas/), and [multilingual tip sheets \(https://illinoisearlylearning.org/resources/tipsheets/\)](https://illinoisearlylearning.org/resources/tipsheets/).
- Sharing tech-free ideas such as this [ESL home learning plan in multiple languages \(https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_T1jIYSp8QBpNJ5D8PPTQSp63Kulc0gN/view\)](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_T1jIYSp8QBpNJ5D8PPTQSp63Kulc0gN/view)

As you think about the situations of your students, what non-electronic home learning options can be offered to multilingual families? See additional strengths-based ideas in [EL Family Engagement During Coronavirus \(https://www.immigrantsrefugeesandschools.org/post/english-learner-family-engagement-during-coronavirus\)](https://www.immigrantsrefugeesandschools.org/post/english-learner-family-engagement-during-coronavirus) from Immigrant Connections.

Note: Students may be providing childcare for their own younger siblings and for others. If the school district is implementing any kind of distance learning, keep in mind that it is common for older children in immigrant families to [care for younger children so parents can work \(/immigration/guide/basic#sibling\)](https://www.immigration/guide/basic#sibling), particularly when there are increased pressures at home. This will limit their ability to engage in any distance learning and school district staff should be flexible with their schoolwork expectations.

Plans for e-learning



ELLs, Equity, and Technology

Learn more from these articles:

- [English learners may be left behind as remote learning becomes the new "normal" \(http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning-the-language/2020/03/coronavirus_english_learners_digital_divide.html\)](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning-the-language/2020/03/coronavirus_english_learners_digital_divide.html)

(*Education Week*)

- [Coronavirus is poised to inflame inequality in schools \(/news-headline/coronavirus-poised-inflame-inequality-schools\)](#)(*Hechinger Report*)

For students who do have access to a device and the Internet, there a number of activities and resources they can access, even without a formal district-wide e-learning plan in place.

If your school is exploring more formal e-learning options, consider the following:

- Do e-learning plans take ELLs and their families into account?
- Do families have access to information about e-learning?
- Do all families have access to a device/Internet?
- If there are multiple school-aged children, does each child have access to a device? (Also, some students may not have quiet places in which to work at home, especially if there are multiple children in the family.)
- Can access be made more equitable before or during a closure?
- How is the district addressing ELLs with special needs?
- Are local Internet providers offering free connections for families? Is that information available in multiple languages? (See note on registration below.)

Steps that schools and districts are taking include:

- Loaning devices and/or helping set up hot spots
- Coordinating with Internet providers or passing free wi-fi information along to families.

Teacher Kathy Evans notes that:

- ELL students may not be comfortable navigating online platforms, especially independently
- more students may have access to cell phones than computers, but assignments (especially if they are created for the computer) may be difficult to complete on phones
- students may rely on public Wi-Fi access for more of their internet usage
- students in more rural areas may not be able to get a signal even with reliable Internet providers and routers.

In addition, we've heard the following from our audience:

- Families may be reluctant to borrow devices out of concern about damaging them.
- Schools that provide devices may run into roadblocks with providing Internet connections.

- Families without technical access / devices will be unable to complete online surveys about technology access or obtain info about free wi-fi via email. (Phone conversations are an alternative.)
- Families may be reluctant to register with Internet providers and registration procedures may be complex. Some of the free Internet connections from providers may require a Social Security Number and no past due payments.
- Families may not have power or phone access.
- Teachers are getting mixed messages in terms of what they can / should do with and for their students.

Note: More on this topic will be forthcoming soon. See more here:

- [Dearborn and Dearborn Heights parents and teachers adjust to homeschooling children as schools shut down](https://www.pressandguide.com/news/coronavirus/dearborn-and-dearborn-heights-parents-and-teachers-adjust-to-homeschooling/article_aa2d85c8-6df8-11ea-a119-d36ad839ba1f.html)
(https://www.pressandguide.com/news/coronavirus/dearborn-and-dearborn-heights-parents-and-teachers-adjust-to-homeschooling/article_aa2d85c8-6df8-11ea-a119-d36ad839ba1f.html)



Distance / online learning for ELLs

Looking for ideas? Take a look at the following:

- [#ELLChat Archive: Distance Learning for ELLs During Coronavirus Pandemic](https://wakelet.com/wake/15261886-09e5-4574-8c25-532b136e2be5)
(<https://wakelet.com/wake/15261886-09e5-4574-8c25-532b136e2be5>)
- [Resources for Teaching ELLs Online](https://padlet.com/diane30/m7j8wz0v3qgb)
(<https://padlet.com/diane30/m7j8wz0v3qgb>)(SupportEd)
- [Webinar: Practical Resources and Strategies to Teach K-12 ELLs Online](https://getsupported.net/professional-development-webinars/)
(<https://getsupported.net/professional-development-webinars/>)
(SupportEd)
- [Teachers Share Their Online-Teaching Plans](https://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org/2020/03/20/teachers-share-their-online-teaching-plans/)
(<https://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org/2020/03/20/teachers-share-their-online-teaching-plans/>) (*Education Week*)
- [Strategies for Teaching Online in the Age of the Coronavirus](http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/classroom_ga_with_larry_ferlazzo/2020/)
(http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/classroom_ga_with_larry_ferlazzo/2020/)
(*Education Week*)

ELL educators are also sharing ideas via social media here:

- [Twitter: #ELLchat](https://twitter.com/hashtag/ellchat) (<https://twitter.com/hashtag/ellchat>) (you don't need a

Twitter account to browse those resources)

- [ELL Educator Group: Facebook group \(https://www.facebook.com/groups/415723858458945/\)](https://www.facebook.com/groups/415723858458945/) (Colorín Colorado)
- [ELLs at Home Idea Exchange: Facebook group \(https://www.facebook.com/groups/1135449216829708/\)](https://www.facebook.com/groups/1135449216829708/)

Speaking out against bullying and discrimination related to COVID-19

- Explain to students that:
 - anyone can catch coronavirus
 - certain groups of people are not more likely than others to have coronavirus.
- Use resources like [this comic \(https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/02/28/809580453/just-for-kids-a-comic-exploring-the-new-coronavirus\)](https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/02/28/809580453/just-for-kids-a-comic-exploring-the-new-coronavirus), available in multiple languages, for class discussions, as well as [these resources \(/coronavirus\)](#) for talking about coronavirus.
- Remind students of how to treat each other with respect, as well as school rules on bullying and discrimination.
- Ask administrators at the school and district level to make public statements regarding bullying and harassment.
- Note that federal officials are keeping track of this issue. According to [Education Week \(http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2020/03/coronavirus-bullying-schools-warned-education-department.html\)](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2020/03/coronavirus-bullying-schools-warned-education-department.html), "The civil rights arm at the U.S. Department of Education has urged schools to address the harassment of certain students amid ongoing concerns over the spread of the coronavirus."
- Share statements that other districts have made speaking out against bullying, such as the statement put out by [Seattle Public Schools \(https://www.seattleschools.org/district/calendars/news/what_s_new/coronav](https://www.seattleschools.org/district/calendars/news/what_s_new/coronav)

You can learn more from:

- [Speaking Up Against Racism Around the New Coronavirus \(https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/speaking-up-against-racism-around-the-new-coronavirus\)](https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/speaking-up-against-racism-around-the-new-coronavirus) (Teaching Tolerance)
- [Student Perspective: Coronavirus Racism Infected My High School \(https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/14/opinion/Racism-coronavirus-](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/14/opinion/Racism-coronavirus-)

Making the most of lessons learned

It is possible for positive things to come out of this crisis:

- better communication and collaboration among schools, families, and communities
- resourceful solutions for addressing different needs
- a push towards more equitable access for digital learning.

Professor Bump notes that this kind of crisis highlights our sense of community and resourcefulness as well as the good and generous nature of the American people. "People want to help each other out," he says, and this crisis will provide some very concrete ways to do so.

It is our hope that these ideas offer some initial first steps that you, your colleagues, or district and community leaders / partners can take on behalf of your English learners and immigrant students steps which may just have some positive impacts for the future.

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- [How to Support Refugee Students in the ELL Classroom \(/article/how-support-refugee-students-ell-classroom\)](#)
- [Introduction: Strategies for Engaging ELL Families \(/article/introduction-strategies-engaging-ell-families\)](#)
- [Make History Come Alive with Books! \(/article/make-history-come-alive-books\)](#)

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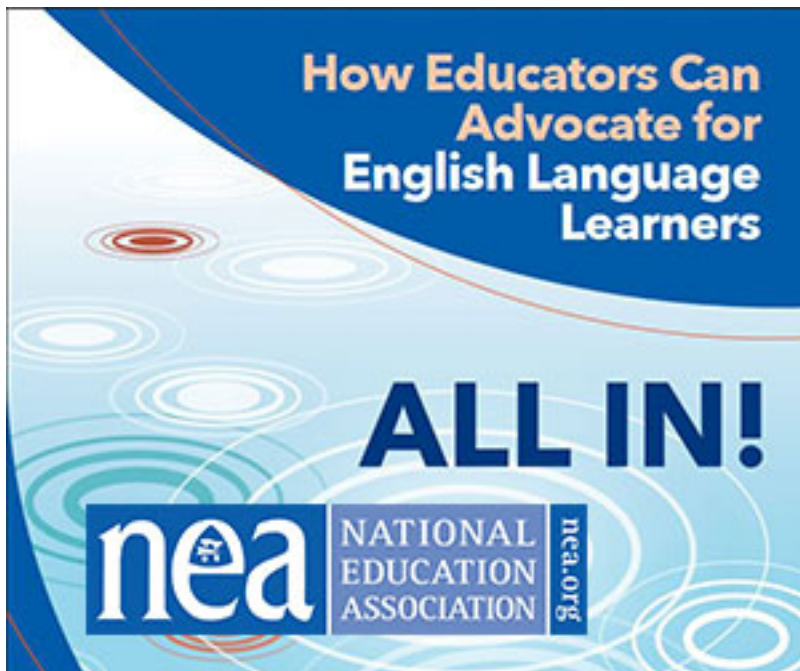


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