

STRATEGIES TO
**ENGAGE
DISCONNECTED
YOUTH**



 POLICY STUDIES
ASSOCIATES



AS YOUTH-SERVING ORGANIZATIONS AND SCHOOLS SHIFTED SERVICE MODELS IN SPRING 2020 DUE TO COVID-19, A PERSISTENT CHALLENGE EMERGED IN REACHING AND ENGAGING SOME YOUTH.

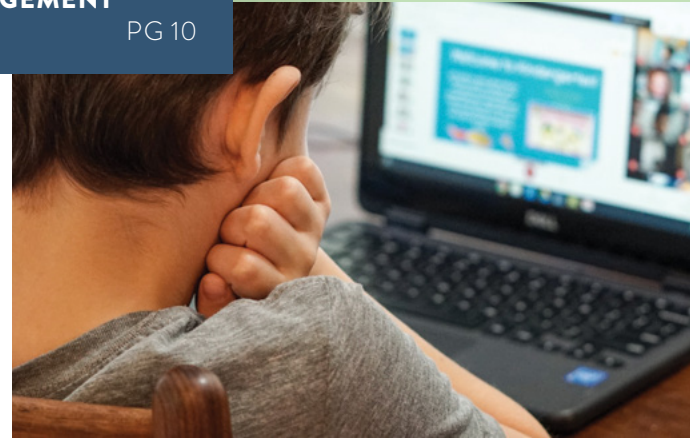
Some estimates show one-third of high school students are not regularly participating in online learning and there may be even greater levels of disconnection for young children (Goldstein et al., 2020). For some youth, the challenge is a matter of accessing technology. Across California, 20 percent of students—nearly 1.2 million—cannot access the internet at home (Johnson, 2020). For other youth, family responsibilities, lack of motivation, feelings of overwhelm or anxiety, or recent trauma may be at play. Younger children may be in transitional care with grandparents or another caregiver while parents work and some families are grappling with unstable housing or [homelessness](#) (Sawchuk & Samuels, 2020).

This brief, prepared by Policy Studies Associates (PSA) for the San Francisco Department of Children, Youth and Their Families (DCYF), is intended to guide youth program staff in developing strategies to engage the young people most at risk of becoming disconnected due to COVID-19 disruptions to in-person programming.

While the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) has undertaken a deep and concerted effort to provide laptops and internet hotspots, access and subsequent issues related to engagement in learning persist across the city. These issues of access and engagement intersect with and amplify existing inequities in learning, especially related to poverty, special education, and English Learner status.

The fundamental question facing the youth sector is:

HOW CAN WE ENGAGE ALL YOUTH TO PROMOTE SAFETY, WELL-BEING, LEARNING, AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN THE 2020-21 SCHOOL YEAR?



STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING DISCONNECTED YOUTH

Check-ins

- *Regular calls home*
- *Texts and email*
- *Home visits*
- *Offer Incentives*

Prioritize Mental Health & Wellness

- *Assess how the family is doing*
- *Employ culturally responsive communication practices with the family*
- *Ask youth how they are doing*
- *Take precautions and follow CDC and local health agency guidelines*
- *Take care of the mental health and wellness of staff*

Find Youth Through Other Hubs

- *Seek out friends*
- *Connect with food distribution centers, homeless shelters, and other city departments*

In-Person Programming

- *Stagger youth into small groups*
- *Hold in-person staff office hours*
- *Go outside*

Partner with Schools



WHO IS DISCONNECTED—AND WHY

Identifying youth who are not engaging in programming, and unpacking barriers to their participation, is an essential first step in developing effective strategies for outreach and engagement. As programs shift to virtual or hybrid models, it is natural to celebrate successes in delivering programming and interacting with young people through these new platforms. However, it is equally important to pay attention to who is not regularly logging in or actively engaged. Are there groups of youth that the organization aims to serve who are not represented in virtual programming, such as English learners, youth in foster care, or undocumented children? Consider:

WHAT does being connected mean in the organizational and program context? Defining what it means to connect with the young people served is a key initial step. There may be different types of connection expected. For example, an Attendance Works [framework](#) identifies levels of connection to remote learning opportunities, including:

- » **ACCESS:** *Does the program have reliable contact information for all youth? Do youth have access to devices and internet?*
- » **USE:** *Are youth logging in to remote learning platforms?*
- » **ENGAGEMENT:** *Are youth actively engaged with programming when they are logged in? Are youth building relationships with staff and/or peers?*

For a youth-serving organization, being connected might also mean access to resources beyond program activities (e.g., food, health services).

WHO is disconnected, or at risk of becoming disconnected? Grounded in this definition of connection, a next step is to identify who is disconnected from services, and the proportion of the target population which that represents. Consider whether individual participants, and any youth populations, are disconnected. Do all these disconnected youth share common characteristics or experiences, such as residing in public housing, family status, or age?

Continued...

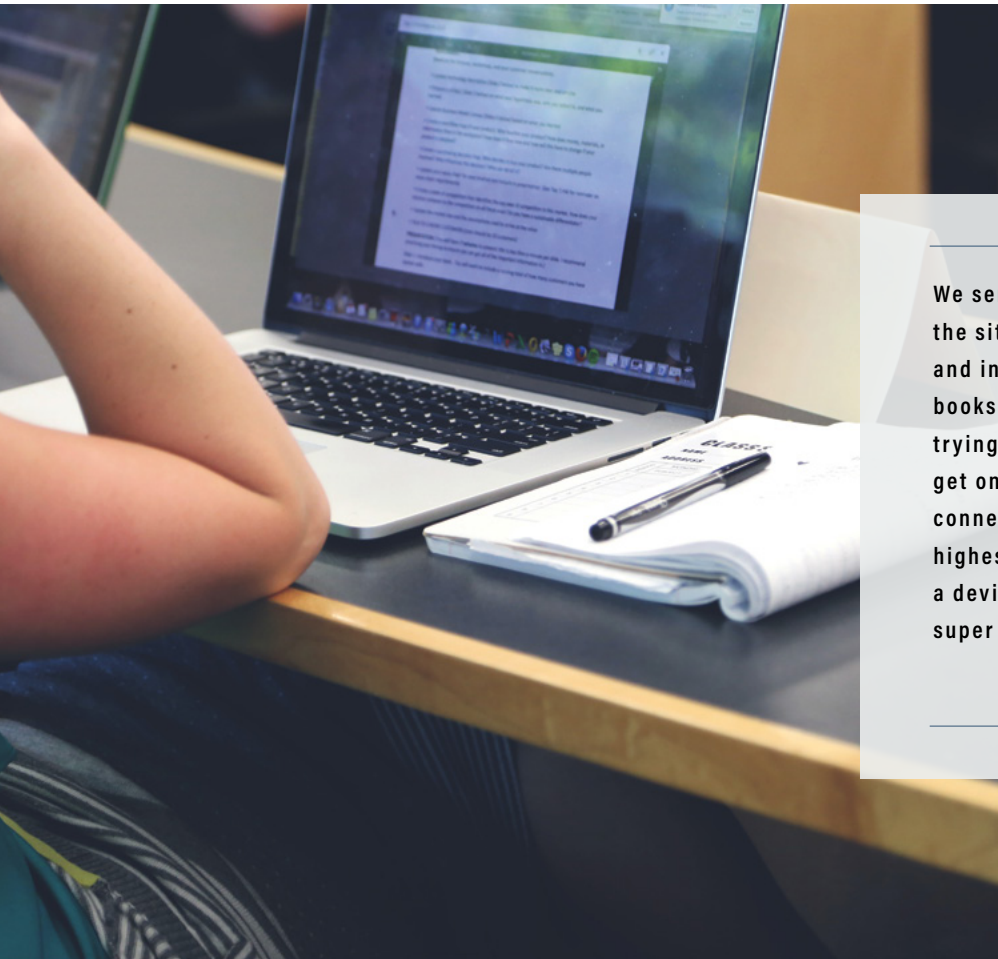
...continued from page 2.

WHY are youth disconnected? Reach out directly to those young people and families who are not actively engaging with program activities to assess what factors might be limiting their engagement. Are there technology barriers? Are they aware of the programs and services being offered? Are they experiencing instability or trauma at home? Understanding the reasons for becoming disconnected allows for better tailored and responsive outreach strategies. For example, the program might need to help connect families to basic services, or implement alternative methods of communication.

STAFF

Are STAFF prepared to reach disconnected youth?

To effectively engage with youth in remote services, program staff themselves need to be equipped with the resources and skills to implement effective engagement strategies. Do program staff have reliable technology? Do they have digital literacy competencies? Are they ready and prepared to deliver programs using new models and platforms?



We sent out a survey to just check on the situation around access to a device and internet. And we're buying Chrome-books for the students who need it and trying to just help the other families get on, make sure they have an internet connection. [...] We're [focusing] on the highest priority students who don't have a device that they can use or [theirs is] super old and slow.

—Breakthrough San Francisco staff



HOW TO REACH DISCONNECTED YOUTH

The section below provides some ideas and examples for re-engaging disconnected youth, drawing on research, the experiences of DCYF-funded youth organizations in spring 2020, and promising practices from the fields of mental health, education, and youth development:

CHECK-INS

Schools and youth organizations are implementing multiple outreach methods to reach youth and check in on their well-being, including calling, texting, home visits, social media, and incentives. For example:

Regular calls home. Some programs that shut down in-person services as a result of COVID-19 put staff to work making regular calls home to check in on youth and families. For example, the Richmond District Neighborhood Center (RDNC) Academic Response to Intervention program has case managers call youth and their families regularly to check in on their wellness and connect them with resources.

Texts and email. Schools and programs calling home have found that many home phone numbers were disconnected, wrong, or had full voicemail boxes. Email and texting are good alternatives for reaching youth and families. The 826 Valencia After-School Literacy Program has staff send out personal texts to check in on older youth and uses blast texts to send newsletters with programming information. Breakthrough San Francisco emails parents regularly with program information to reach its younger youth. There are a variety of apps and tools to facilitate this outreach. For example, the Chinatown YMCA found that WeChat was an effective mobile application for reaching many families. Sending letters and post cards can be another alternative to reaching out to youth to keep them informed and stay connected.

Home visits. Success Centers San Francisco conducted home visits with youth who were not responding by phone or email. Within health and safety guidelines, staff visited homes and talked with youth about engaging in activities. As a result, in spring 2020, Success Centers leaders estimate that they were able to reach 90 percent of their youth and that 60-70 percent engaged in programming. Chinatown YMCA teen program staff dropped off care packages to youth as another way of connecting.

Offer incentives. Some programs have tried to increase participation by offering youth incentives. Offering gift cards or rewards for participation, such as invitations to special online social events might help attract some youth who have been reluctant to engage in remote learning.

Continued...

...continued from page 4.

PRIORITIZE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Whether calling, texting, or conducting home visits, social-emotional learning (SEL)-based outreach strategies focused on relationship-building and well-being of staff, families, and youth can help programs be successful in their engagement efforts:

Assess how the family is doing. Are basic needs being met? Do family members have challenges with health, employment, childcare, or food access that need to be addressed? What supports can agencies offer or what connections can they make with partner organizations?

The [Culturally Responsive Education Hub](#) at New York University Metro Center has created a [Tool for Educators to Listen to and Learn from Families During COVID-19 School Closures](#). The tool contains email or text scripts that can be used to reach out to families to understand their needs. The tool also provides a post-conversation reflection and action tool and follow-up messages and sample survey questions to send to non-responsive families. All sample conversation guides and survey questions are in English and Spanish.

Employ culturally responsive communication practices with families. When reaching out to youth and families, staff should employ anti-bias strategies to encourage strong communication that is inclusive, culturally sensitive, and increases connections and engagement with families and the community. [Critical Practices for Anti-bias Education Family and Community Engagement from Teaching Tolerance](#) offers strategies that assume good intentions among families and youth and recognizes and respects differences in family structures, backgrounds, and strengths that families bring. For example, use inclusive terminology (e.g., “Dear Families” instead of “Dear Parents”, ask for “caregiver(s) names” instead of “mother’s name” and “father’s name”) and recognize and include all of the central figures in the lives of each youth.

Ask youth how they are doing. When talking with youth, find out how they are feeling about school, about the pandemic, and other events and situations going on in their life. Determine if youth have opportunities for physical activity and socialization, and consider what programming might best engage them and address unmet needs.

The Collaborate for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has developed this [5 Minute Chats with Students](#) tool to help guide relationship-building discussions with youth. The tool provides a framework for structuring brief five-minute conversations that includes question prompts to draw out personal information and inviting feedback. Adapted examples include:

- » *I know things have been unusual lately: how have you been keeping busy lately?*
- » *Who or what has been on your mind a lot lately?*
- » *What would you say is your biggest source of stress right now?*
- » *What do you need most from me right now?*
- » *What do you think our program should be doing differently?*
- » *What is keeping you going/giving you energy/making you happy right now?*

Continued...

...continued from page 5.

The Search Institute has created a checklist for [Building Developmental Relationships During the COVID-19 Crisis](#) that provides ideas for ways youth program staff can: express care, challenge growth, provide support, share power, and expand possibilities. Adapted examples from the list include:

- » *Create personal videos for disconnected youth letting them know that they matter to you and you are thinking about them.*
- » *Tell them you believe in them and that you know they will get through this difficult time.*
- » *If you are operating an academic-based program, let the youth know you expect them to keep up with the work in the program and that you will hold them accountable.*
- » *Ask the youth to set a goal they want to achieve and then periodically check in on their progress.*



For home visits, the [Health Resources and Service Administration](#) offers tips and strategies that can be adapted to youth workers:

Take precautions and follow [CDC](#) and local health agency guidelines. Make sure staff assess their own signs or symptoms of respiratory infection and risks before deciding to conduct a visit. Staff should not conduct a visit if they are feeling sick or are at high risk for experiencing severe illness. Staff should assess the signs and symptoms of the youth and family members they interact with during visits. End the visit if a member of the family is sick. Maintain six feet of physical distance and remain outside if possible. Wear a cloth face covering and wash hands or use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60 percent alcohol if soap and water are not available.

STAFF

Take care of the mental health and wellness of staff.

The additional role of caring for others during this stressful time can take its toll on the minds and bodies of youth program staff. Staff should take steps to manage their own well-being and stress to facilitate their youth outreach. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has published [resources on coping with stress](#) staff members can review to manage their own personal needs.

The Center on Great Teachers and Leaders at American Institutes for Research has developed this [Educator Resilience and Trauma-Informed Self-Care: Self-Assessment and Planning Tool](#) to help educators assess their own self-care practices and create a plan to improve their own routines.

Continued...

...continued from page 6.

FIND YOUTH THROUGH OTHER HUBS

Traditional avenues for locating youth may prove challenging for those suffering the greatest hardships from COVID-19. The hardest cases may require more creative and coordinated efforts. Some examples:

Seek out friends. Some youth may only be in contact with their closest friends and extended family members. Can engaged youth be resources to connect with disengaged youth? Can staff recruit friends of disconnected youth to help deliver messages, care packages, or other resources?

Connect with food distribution centers, homeless shelters, and other city departments. Youth-serving organizations alone may not have enough resources and infrastructure to reach youth with the greatest challenges and barriers to participation. Can programs send information or advertise services through other outreach hubs, such as food pantries and homeless shelters? Have youth programs shared their program resources and events through other city government channels, such as violence prevention programs, housing assistance, and mental health services? What other connections can organizations make to reach disconnected youth and families?



Each participant, each kid, is a world, and there is no one-size-fits-all at all. You have the knowledge about that particular person to allow you to develop a plan with him or her. With some, Zoom works great because they are okay in these interactions; some are not. Some don't even want to talk, they just want to text. Some want to come to the office and see the counselor every two weeks because they need that. And some don't answer, so we have to go to their houses. For me, the key is that you don't put this on the participant. You are the adult, you are the responsible party, you are the one that has to find a way to get to them. I think that that is the secret sauce.

—Success Centers San Francisco staff

Continued...

...continued from page 7.



IN-PERSON PROGRAMMING

Despite every effort to reach out, some youth may not be receptive to engaging remotely. Opening doors to in-person programming for a targeted number of youth, or employing a hybrid program model taking in youth in small groups, may be the best strategy, if a program can partially re-open while meeting state and local health and safety guidelines.

Stagger youth into small groups. Community-based programs with their own space may be able to offer a hybrid approach of in-person and virtual programming. Dividing youth participants into small groups and rotate the group of students that can participate in person while the others participate virtually. The size of the groups will vary depending on how many students you can fit into your space while maintaining appropriate social distancing guidelines. School-based programs may not be able to offer this option until schools reopen and programs are allowed to resume.

Hold in-person staff office hours. Some youth may just need some occasional in-person interaction to feel connected again. Appointment-only scheduled drop-ins can allow for small group or one-on-one interaction that meets social distancing guidelines.

Go outside. If in-person programming is not permitted due to space constraints or closures, consider whether it is possible to offer some programming outdoors, such as in local parks where everyone can remain outside and socially distanced.

Continued...

...continued from page 8.

PARTNER WITH SCHOOLS

Continuing school, childcare and youth program closures during the COVID-19 epidemic demonstrates just how fragile and necessary our education, child, and youth serving agencies are to supporting a robust economic infrastructure, family security, and child safety. School-community partnerships are needed more than ever to ensure that all children and youth have equitable access to the care and development they need to thrive in the current environment.

Coordinate and share resources. Schools have resources and connections that youth organizations may not, such as learning tools and online platforms. Conversely, youth organizations have access to community resources and deep family and youth relationships that schools may not. This is an advantageous time for school and afterschool to rethink their partnerships, when flexibility, adaptability, and coordination are paramount. For example, at the RDNC Academic Response to Intervention program, the case managers coordinated with school wellness counselors to collaboratively conduct their outreach to disconnected youth. Youth programs should work to collaborate with schools to:

- » *Be involved in school-year planning, needs assessments, and staff training*
- » *Coordinate services and supports for youth and families, and coordinate outreach efforts*
- » *Coordinate offering instructional time, support, tutoring, enrichment, and SEL and/or trauma- informed care for youth*
- » *Share data*

The Afterschool Alliance has developed a [blueprint](#) for how afterschool and community programs can partner with schools to offer the full range of learning and developmental supports youth will need in the next school year.





HOW TO CENTER HEALING IN YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Prioritizing the engagement of disconnected youth can help minimize widened inequities in opportunities and learning that may occur as a result of COVID-19 disruptions, and program engagement strategies will be most effective if they are healing-centered rather than deficit-focused. As defined by Dr. Shawn Ginwright, Associate Professor of Education and African American Studies at San Francisco State University, healing-centered engagement is an asset-based strategy focused on the overall well-being of youth rather than on their trauma (Ginwright, 2020). As programs work to reach disconnected youth, consider the following strategies for outreach and forming connections:

START by building empathy. Reaching out to disconnected youth may be a difficult and emotional process for both staff and youth. Youth workers will need to be willing to take an emotional risk first. Youth workers can reach out by sharing their own stories first, thereby helping youth better express their emotions and developing their emotional intelligence.

ENCOURAGE young people to dream and imagine! Help youth to see beyond the current condition and strengthen their future goal orientation. Create activities and opportunities for young people to “play, reimagine, design, or envision” their future selves and who they want to be.

BUILD critical reflection and take loving action. Help youth critically reflect on the cultural and political context that has created the situations that are at the root of recent traumas—in doing so, youth come to realize that they are not to blame, helping to boost their confidence, self-esteem, and resiliency. Restore a sense of power and control by collectively responding with loving action to current events. Youth can create community action projects that address real needs (e.g., providing food, writing letters, finding ways to get more people connected to broadband internet).

REFERENCES

- Ginwright, S. (2020) The future of healing: Shifting from trauma informed care to healing centered engagement. *Medium*. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@ginwright/the-future-of-healing-shifting-from-trauma-informed-care-to-healing-centered-engagement-634f557ce69c>
- Goldstein, D., Popescu, A., & Hannah-Jones, N. (2020, April 6). As schools move online, many students stay logged out. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/us/coronavirus-schools-attendance-absent.html>
- Johnson, S. (2020). California moves to close digital divide as schools shift online. *EdSource*. Retrieved from: <https://edsource.org/2020/california-moves-to-close-digital-divide-as-schools-shift-online/629281>
- Sawchuk, S., & Samuels, C. A. (2020). Where are they? Students go missing in switch to remote classes. *EdWeek*. Retrieved from: <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/04/10/where-are-they-students-go-missing-in.html>