a **family guide** to
DISTANCE LEARNING

∞ CPRL | Center for Public Research and Leadership

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
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Your partnership with your school is critical during distance learning. When your child experiences most schooling at home rather than in a classroom, your family's relationship with the school changes. You may have a greater window into what and how your child is learning, and you are likely to take a role that you rarely or never play during in-person schooling. And, you're likely to perform your usual roles in new ways.

Your family is up to the task. This new school year provides an opportunity for you to forge a stronger partnership with your school--the kind that can help you and the school make distance learning work for your child and all students.

This guide provides a starting point to use when creating intentional partnerships in this new setting. It includes:

- **Roles** for your school, district, and family
- **Key terms** that schools often use when talking about distance learning
- **Steps** that you can take to **prepare** for distance learning, to **support** your child in distance learning, and to **advocate** for your child when distance learning is not going well
- **Linked resources** throughout this guide to help you get started

We use **Family** to mean any adult caretaker working with a child during distance learning.
We use **Your Child** to refer to children attending elementary, middle, and high school.

Across the suggestions that follow, you will see a number of key ideas about how to make distance learning work for your family:

Create trusting **relationships.**	Create and uphold **routines**.	Approach teachers and school staff as **partners in learning**.	Exercise **flexibility and patience**.	Celebrate **success**.

Use this guide to work with your school to help your child have the best distance learning experience possible.

These ideas come from research and from surveys and focus groups with families across Connecticut about how to navigate successfully this new journey. Without their contribution, this guide would not be possible.

School-Family Distance Learning Commitments

Distance learning is most likely to be rewarding and successful when your school and your family share key commitments:

Set-up & Routines

Setting up a space for learning and establishing routines

Community & Connection

Creating school-family community and connection

Learning & Growing

Helping your child learn and grow

Adapting & Improving

For everyone, getting better over time at distance learning

School-family distance learning partnerships work well when...

	The district and school...	**Families...**
Set-Up & Routines	• Set and communicate clear expectations for distance learning • Ensure students have devices and stable and strong internet connections • Create and communicate schedules • Set up and manage online learning platforms	• Set and communicate clear expectations for distance learning • Create a learning space • Set and support daily and weekly routines • Support your child in using online learning platforms
Community & Connection	• Build relationships with the family • Help families and students feel comfortable asking for help • Support students' social and emotional development • Build students' relationships with their classmates • Celebrate successes	• Build relationships with teachers and other adults at the school who work with your child • Communicate relevant information and ask for help • Care for and support your child's personal growth and social and emotional development • Celebrate successes

School-family distance learning partnerships work well when...

	The district and school...	Families...
Learning & Growing	- Set and communicate clear learning goals - Teach students in rich and engaging ways - Provide feedback on student work and progress in clear/accessible formats - Support families in understanding students' learning goals and key assignments - Provide opportunities for student-to-student collaboration	- Stay up-to-date on your child's work and learning goals - Help your child stay engaged in schoolwork - Encourage your child to take ownership over learning - Monitor your child's progress - Ask teachers for support and share information about your child's learning experience
Adapting & Improving	- Gather information on how teachers are teaching and students are learning - Ask families and students for ongoing feedback and insight into how distance learning is working - Improve and ensure equitable access to technology, instruction, and social and emotional supports - Partner and problem solve with families	- Recognize that change and improvement are part of the process - Be extra patient with your child and yourself - Provide feedback on how distance learning is working - Connect with other families to share what works - Seek better ways to support your child's learning style and needs

Key terms about distance learning you're likely to hear:

Asynchronous versus **Synchronous Instruction**
These words are used to describe whether learning happens in real time or not.

> **Asynchronous:** Asynchronous instruction does *not* happen in real time. For example, your child may learn through prerecorded video lessons or game-based learning tasks without interacting with a teacher.

> **Synchronous:** Synchronous instruction happens in real time. For example, your child may attend a video class where your child interacts with a teacher and, in some cases, classmates.

Distance or **Remote Learning**
Distance or remote learning happens when your child uses digital, online, or other tools to receive instruction and interact with classmates who are not in the same room at the same time.
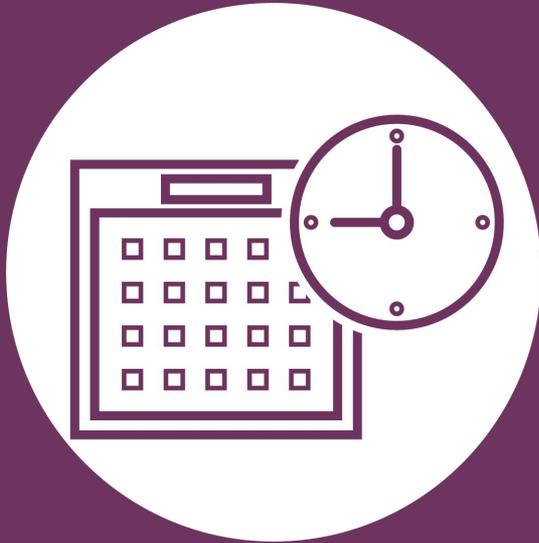
Learning Management System (LMS)
The LMS is an online system that is used to administer, track, report, and deliver education. Many schools use Google Classrooms as their LMS.

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)
SEL helps your child manage emotions, set and achieve goals, show empathy for others, create positive relationships, and make good decisions.

Set-Up & Routines

The district and school...

- Set and communicate clear expectations for distance learning
- Ensure students have devices and stable and strong internet connections
- Create and communicate schedules
- Set up and manage online learning platforms

Families...

- Set and communicate clear expectations for distance learning
- Create a learning space
- Set and support daily and weekly routines
- Support your child in using online learning platforms

Prepare

❏ Follow your district's and school's process for getting a device and for getting a stable and strong internet connection.

❏ Find an area that can serve as your child's special learning space.
   ★**Tip:** The space does not need to be a separate room or a permanent learning space. Create a sign or other marker to indicate that the area is a special learning space.
   ★**Tip:** Look for a space that has good light and that is as quiet and as free from distraction as possible.

❏ Gather books and school supplies. Put them in a box or in your child's learning space.

❏ Get the login information for your school's online learning management system (LMS) (e.g., Google Classroom) and other online learning platforms.
   ★**Tip:** Write down your child's passwords in a place where you can easily access them.
   ★**Tip:** If you are using Google Classroom, ask the teacher to set up a Guardian account for you so that you can more easily access your child's assignments and monitor progress.

❏ Learn how to use your school's LMS and online learning platforms.
   ★**Tip:** Check your district and school websites and your parent association social media pages for links to tutorials (e.g., Google Classroom parent resource).

❏ Take a virtual tour of the LMS and online learning platforms with your child. Your child may already be familiar with these platforms -- let them guide you.

❏ Talk to your child about digital safety.

❏ Map out your support system. List family, friends, and others who can help you and how they might help. List the school/district staff members who can help you and how they might help.

❏ Identify needs, including childcare, that might interfere with distance learning. Contact people in your support system who can help.

❏ Make a weekly home-learning schedule. Set goals for yourself and your child. Set a start and end time for the school day if your school hasn't already. Post the schedule where your child can see it.

Support

❏ Help your child wake up and get ready for distance learning at the same time each day.

   ★**Tip:** For younger children, consider using a timer and other strategies to help them complete morning tasks and ease into wakefulness and learning.

❏ Reduce distractions as much as possible. Turn off the television and video games, and silence cell phones when possible.

❏ Begin and end the day by checking-in.

   ★**Tip:** Ask your child what they learned and about their time working with their classmates and teachers.

❏ Have weekly family meetings to check in on how family members are doing and to plan for the week ahead.

❏ Create and post weekly and daily schedules where your child and family members can see them.

   ★**Tip:** Identify moments during the day when you and your child can spend time together (e.g., during lunch).

❏ Review the next day's schedule with your child the night before.

❏ Review the day's schedule with your child first thing in the morning.

   ★**Tip:** If another caregiver watches your child, review the daily schedule with that caregiver.

❏ Help or remind your child to set up their learning space each morning.

❏ Create ways for your child to communicate with you during the day.

   ★**Tip:** Identify times when it is best for your child to ask you questions.

   ★**Tip:** If you work from home, create a communication notebook where your child can write questions and you can respond.

❏ Track progress through the school day. Check off the day's classes or tasks as your child completes them. If you have an older child, have your child check off classes or tasks as they are completed.

❏ Celebrate moments when your child exhibits greater independence and responsibility.

❏ Check in on your child's digital safety practices.

   ★**Tip:** Periodically check in on what your child is doing. If your child's learning space is a separate room, leave the door open.

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Community & Connection
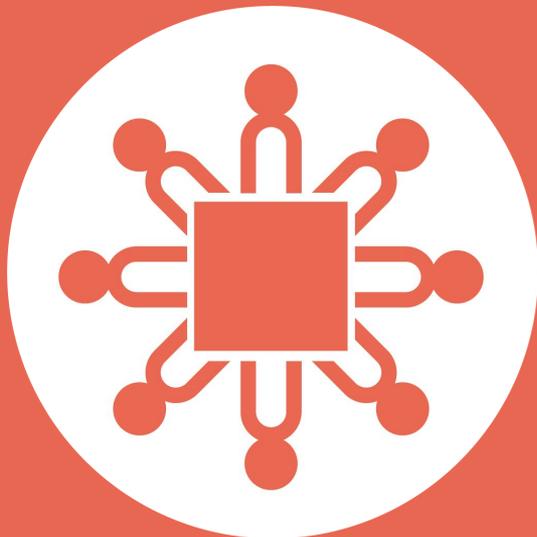
The district and school...

- Build relationships with the family
- Help families and students feel comfortable asking for help
- Support students' social and emotional development
- Build students' relationships with their classmates
- Celebrate successes

Families...

- Build relationships with teachers and other adults at the school who work with your child
- Communicate relevant information and ask for help
- Care for and support your child's personal growth and social and emotional development
- Celebrate successes

Prepare

❏ Introduce yourself to your child's teachers. Let the teachers know that you would like to be a partner in your child's learning. Send an email introducing yourself, your child, and any particular strengths and needs that your child has. If appropriate, offer to set up time to speak by phone or video.

　★**Tip:** Ask the teacher when and how the teacher prefers to be contacted.
　★**Tip:** Tell the teacher when and how you prefer to be contacted.
　★**Tip:** Ask the teacher how your child can seek and get help during after-school or evening hours.

❏ Create or find a contact sheet with information about who to contact at the school and district for technology, academic, and social support.

❏ If your primary language spoken is not English, contact the school about how to receive translation services to help you communicate with teachers, the school, and the district.

❏ Communicate any relevant student and family needs to your child's teachers and administrators.

❏ Talk to your child about how they feel about distance learning. Make sure your child knows how to ask for help from you and the teachers.

❏ Map out your support system. List the family, friends, and others who can help you and how they might help. List the school/district staff members who can help you and how they might help.

❏ Identify problems that might interfere with distance learning, and identify who in your support system can help. Contact those people to seek help.

❏ Help your child find ways to regularly connect with peers.

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Support

❏ Communicate questions and needs as they come up. Help your child communicate their needs to teachers and staff.
> ★**Tip:** Keep in mind that distance learning is new for everyone, including teachers. Approach conversations as partners, aiming to work together to make distance learning the best it can be for your child and other children.

❏ Have weekly family meetings to check in on how family members are doing and to plan for the week ahead.

❏ Have regular meetings (e.g., weekly) with your child's main teacher to ask and answer questions, check in on your child's progress, plan for the week ahead, and provide feedback on distance learning.
> ★**Tip:** If your child receives special services, set up a meeting once a week or once every two weeks with the staff members who provide those services.

❏ Look for and celebrate successes.
> ★**Tip:** Celebrate moments when your child exhibits independence, understanding, and engagement in distance learning.

❏ Identify moments during the day when you and your child can spend time together (e.g., during lunch).

❏ Monitor and check in with your child on how they are connecting with friends.

❏ Encourage your child to participate in remote social activities.

❏ Participate in remote social activities open to family members.

❏ Keep your contact information updated with your child's teachers and the school.

Learning & Growing

The district and school...

- Set and communicate clear learning goals
- Teach students in rich and engaging ways
- Provide feedback on student work and progress in clear/accessible formats
- Support families in understanding students' learning goals and key assignments
- Provide opportunities for student-to-student collaboration

Families...

- Stay up-to-date on your child's work and learning goals
- Help your child stay engaged in schoolwork
- Encourage your child to take ownership over learning
- Monitor your child's progress
- Ask teachers for support and share information about your child's learning experience

Prepare

❏ Learn how to use your school's LMS (e.g., Google Classroom) and online learning platforms. Be sure you know where to find your child's upcoming learning goals, assignments, and due dates, and to see what work has been completed and turned in.
  ★**Tip:** Check your district and school websites and your parent association social media pages for links to videos and tutorials on how to use the LMS and online learning platforms.
  ★**Tip:** If you are using Google Classroom, ask the teacher to set up a Guardian account for you so that you can more easily access your child's assignments and monitor progress.

❏ Take a virtual tour of the LMS and online learning platforms with your child. Your child may already be familiar with the platform - let your child be your guide.

❏ Figure out how to monitor your child's attendance, engagement, and learning progress.
  ★**Tip:** If attendance, engagement, and learning progress are not clearly displayed on your school's LMS, contact the school or your child's teachers to ask where you can see that information.

❏ Talk to your child about how distance learning is a chance to learn in familiar and new ways.
  ★**Tip:** Discuss the ways the learning is similar to learning at school to build your child's confidence. Discuss your child's strengths.

❏ Communicate your child's strengths and needs to their teachers and ask for their support.

❏ Familiarize yourself with the grade-level standards (grades K-5, 4-9) and content that your child will be learning during the year.

❏ Set goals with your child for online learning.
  ★**Tip:** Set goals for attendance, finishing assignments, asking for help, and interacting with the teacher and other students during class.

❏ Help your child identify classmates who can answer questions about assignments or tasks.

Support

❏ Have regular meetings (e.g., weekly) with your child's main teacher to ask and answer questions, check in on your child's progress, plan for the week ahead, and provide feedback on distance learning.

❏ Post weekly and daily schedules where your child and family members can see them.

❏ Review the next day's schedule with your child the night before.

❏ Review the day's schedule with your child first thing in the morning.

❏ Track progress through the school day. Check off the day's classes or tasks as your child completes them. If you have an older child, have your child check off classes or tasks as they are completed.

❏ Help your child find answers to questions that come up during the school day. Help your child reach out to the teacher or peers for assistance.

❏ Reinforce what your child learns in class.
  ★**Tip:** When helping your child, try to use the same language and strategies the teacher uses in class.

❏ Regularly check your child's progress.

❏ Celebrate moments when your child develops a new skill, collaborates with others, and exhibits greater understanding and engagement in distance learning.

❏ Attend parent-teacher conferences to discuss your child's strengths and progress and to talk about how distance learning is working for you and your child.

Adapting & Improving

The district and school...

- Gather information on how teachers are teaching and students are learning
- Ask families and students for ongoing feedback and insight into how distance learning is working
- Improve and ensure equitable access to technology, instruction, and social and emotional supports
- Partner and problem solve with families

Families...

- Recognize that change and improvement are part of the process
- Be extra patient with your child and yourself
- Provide feedback on how distance learning is working
- Connect with other families to learn what works
- Seek better ways to support your child's learning style and needs in the remote setting

Prepare

❏ As a family, make a list of distance learning expectations. Include on that list the expectation that you all will get better at distance learning over time. Keep that list in a place where you all can look at it during moments of frustration.

❏ Identify ways that you all can manage stress and take care of yourselves during distance learning, such as getting enough sleep, eating healthy foods, getting exercise, listening to music, and getting fresh air.
> ★**Tip:** If your school does not set a daily start and end time to the school day, set one with your child and for your family.
> ★**Tip:** Help your family and child use beginning-of-day, mealtime, and end-of-day routines that worked well during in-person schooling.

❏ Connect with family support networks that may be able to provide you with strategies and tips for getting better at distance learning.
> ★**Tip:** Check with your school or district to see if there are social media pages focused on parent and family connections, support, and resources.

❏ Get a calendar of family-support and professional learning opportunities offered by your district and school.
> ★**Tip:** If you cannot attend a session, ask for a recording of the session, have a family member or friend attend, or ask other parents to share what they learned.

❏ Set goals and expectations with your child for online learning.
> ★**Tip:** Set goals for attendance, finishing assignments, asking for help, and interacting with the teacher and other students during class.

❏ Identify ways to recharge, reset, and exercise resilience during challenging days and weeks.
> ★**Tip:** Distance learning is hard, and some days will be more difficult than others. A number of resilience strategies can help, including acknowledging what you and your child have accomplished and looking forward to future goals.

Support

❏ Fill out surveys provided by your child's teachers, school, and district. Provide honest feedback on your distance learning experience.

❏ Have regular meetings (e.g., weekly) with your child's main teacher to ask and answer questions, check in on your child's progress, plan for the week ahead, and provide feedback on distance learning.
> ★**Tip:** Prepare for each weekly meeting by writing down your observations about how distance learning is working for your child. What is difficult for your child? What is your child doing well at?

❏ Have ongoing conversations with your child about progress toward goals. Talk about successes and what your child enjoyed that week. Talk about challenges and problem-solve together.
> ★**Tip:** In some cases, it may be helpful to email teachers, school counselors, and other staff to ask for help problem solving.
> ★**Tip:** Follow up each week on the challenges and how solutions are working. Continue to improve the solution.

❏ Attend family-support and professional learning opportunities. Share what you learn with your family network.

❏ Connect with other families to hear about what distance learning strategies work for them. Share what has worked for you and your child.
> ★**Tip:** Encourage older children to talk to their peers about what strategies work for them.

❏ Stay updated on the changes your child's teachers, school, and district make to distance learning.

❏ Read and listen to news articles about what is working for families and students across the country who are experiencing distance learning.

❏ Care for yourself.
> ★**Tip:** Uphold your beginning-of-day, mealtime, and end-of-day routines.
> ★**Tip:** Find opportunities for joyful moments, such as listening or dancing to a favorite song or stepping outside for a walk.

❏ Celebrate progress and achievement of milestones.

Advocate | Contact the teachers or school if...

Set-Up & Routines

- School and class materials are not in the primary language you speak (sample email)
- Your child needs a device and/or a stable internet connection (sample email)
- Your child has IEP or 504 needs that make learning from home impossible (sample email)
- Your child is not getting food service or other services or support (sample email)

Learning & Growing

- You are not receiving communication in the primary language you speak (sample email)
- The learning goals, standards and content, and key assignments for a class are not clear (sample email)
- You could use additional support understanding your child's class content (sample email)
- Your child could use additional support with a class topic (sample email)

Community & Connection

- You are not sure who to contact with a certain question or need (sample email)
- You are concerned about your child's emotional or mental health (sample email)
- You are not receiving communication in the primary language you speak (sample email)

Adapting & Improving

- You attend a family-support or professional learning opportunity that was really good (sample email)
- You are having trouble connecting with other families in your child's class (sample email)
- You notice a lot of families are experiencing the same challenges (sample email)

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