

## Let's not leave vulnerable families in the dark

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While many well-off and well-connected families complain of being inundated with information from their schools during the unfolding Coronavirus pandemic, the most vulnerable families are hearing nothing. Last week, the mother of an elementary-school student called [EveryDay Labs](#), an organization I cofounded that partners with school districts. She asked what homework her daughter needs to do while her school is closed. She learned from a friend that classes were cancelled but that students were still expected to complete homework. That morning she had walked to her daughter's school to pick up a homework packet only to find that the school was vacant. The district had alerted those for whom they had contact information that schools were closed. She had not received any of these alerts.

This mother is not alone. Many districts do not have digital contact information (email addresses and/or cell phone numbers) for 40% or more of their vulnerable families. Being in touch with families is more urgent now than ever and will only become more so as [over 100,000 schools](#) (and counting) are closed. With little notice or time for planning, schools and districts are scrambling to figure out how to best serve their students and families during this time. In addition to setting up systems for remote learning, districts are also trying to feed the [30 million students](#) who rely on them for at least one daily meal. More and more districts are setting up distributed sites where families can pick up meals and access other services families rely on schools for. Yet, in order for families to utilize these, they must first learn about them. And many families who need these services most are not learning about them because districts lack quality contact information for vulnerable families.

The best data on this comes from a [study](#) conducted by Georgia State University (GSU) researchers Tareena Musaddiq, Alexa Prettyman, and Jonathan Smith. Their study involved using email and text to communicate with families of K-12 students who were on track to be absent 8% of days or more in Atlanta region districts. By November-- only three months into the school year—they could not reach 46% of families by either SMS or email.

Normally, sparse coverage of digital contact information is not a huge problem. Schools and districts usually have many ways to contact parents, including face-to-face and mail-based communications. With mass closures, though, districts now must rely on contact information they collected back in August or September. Districts tend to have mailing addresses for the vast majority of their students (and some landlines), but neither is useful for communicating time-sensitive information. Landlines can be reached via robocalls, but they are typically hung up on within seconds. Even when they are not, communicating through automated messages requires time and attention, and are nearly impossible for digital content. Typically, mailings can reach 90%+ of families, but the unexpected closure of administrative buildings prevents the coordination needed for mass mailings right now.

Meanwhile, districts lack valid digital contact information for millions of vulnerable students. Even for families that had provided this information at the beginning of the year, many are no

longer valid. And this is particularly the case for the most vulnerable families. Those families most in need of information and resources from school districts are those for whom districts are least likely to be in touch.

Many parents—like the mother who called *EveryDay Labs* last week—are missing out on communication about school closures, distance learning options, food availability and other services. Nearly all families are contactable - [96% of American adults](#) own cell phones. Yet, at the moment, too many parents are falling through the cracks. Many districts are aware of this problem, but lack the capacity or resources to address it during this crisis. Others do not realize this problem exists because they have not had time or capacity to carefully examine their own data. Whatever the reason, a tragically high percentage of vulnerable families is missing critical communications from their schools when exactly when they are most needed.

Public officials should immediately launch public communications efforts encouraging families to update their contact information, and it should be easy to update this information. Districts could also use snail mail contact information (which is valid for 90%+ of families) to encourage families to update digital contact information. As three weeks of school closures turns into three months, districts and educators will need contact information to support struggling families and to keep students learning. Unless we act now, the existing inequities of our K-12 schooling will be even further exacerbated over the coming months.