



EAB

Retention Strategies Compendium

30 Engagement Strategies for Students and Families to
Ensure Retention during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Independent School Executive Forum

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How to Use this Resource

In order to retain enrollments amid the COVID-19 pandemic, independent schools will need to be clear about what they can provide to students and families outside of face-to-face learning. To address value concerns, independent schools must take extra measures to sustain a sense of community and highlight the unique value of the independent school experience. For independent schools across the country, community engagement now will be key to student retention later. This resource provides a collection of strategies to use over the summer months and into the coming school year to help schools to engage students and families for purposes of retention.

The following compendium is a picklist from which school leaders should select tactics best suited for their unique school community. Each tactic includes implementation guidance and benefits to retain students and families, and have been broken into six categories:



Maintaining Community Virtually

These tactics help build connections outside of the classroom by redeploying underutilized faculty and staff, hosting social events and offering resources for the whole child.



Parent-Focused Initiatives

These tactics center on parent engagement by utilizing parent associations and ambassadors, welcoming new and current parents to virtual school events, and conducting thoughtful outreach.



Sharing School Life

These tactics capitalize on the great work your school is already doing while in session by creatively leveraging existing content and events.



Tailoring Communications

These tactics focus on customizing your communication to meet the moment and the audience, and ensuring you are connecting with your community in meaningful and engaging ways.



Welcoming New Families

These tactics focus on engaging new families. This includes creating audience-specific communication, conducting individualized outreach, and sending invitations to existing community events.



Other Ideas for Retention

While these tactics fall outside of the main categories, they provide creative ways to engage both specific constituencies and the broader school community.

Retention Strategies Compendium

Maintaining Community Virtually

Tactic	Implementation Guidance	Benefits
Create Community Book Clubs	Establish book clubs for specific grades, divisions, areas of interest, or current events. These book clubs can be catered to students or parents, or even feature an “all-school book” to allow for a shared experience throughout the community focusing on a single theme (e.g. anti-racism).	Offering community book clubs to students and parents provides an opportunity to communicate outside of the classroom over shared interests. It also highlights the scale of your community and network by connecting students and families who have not yet met.
Offer Virtual “Story Time” Library	Redeploy front-office staff, extended-day staff, and other familiar faces from your school community to record themselves reading books for lower school students. Save these videos as a “story time” library.	A “story time” library offers students the chance to see familiar and beloved faces from their school community. It also provides engagement for younger children, showing how your school supports and educates students beyond the classroom.
Host Virtual Game Nights	Put on social events such as karaoke parties, Family Feud contests, scavenger hunts, and bingo nights for students and families.	Establishing time to gather outside of school hours allows students and families to engage with the community in ways that build positive regard for the school and maintain friendships, which are vital for retention.
Create Personal Training Plans for Students	Enlist your athletics department to create personal training plans for students. If you are unable to create individual plans for all students, consider creating training plans based on grades, interests, or activity level.	Creating personal training plans for students is one way to remind families that you care about the whole child, while providing structured exercise for students who may be missing it. This personalized attention underscores your care for each child’s unique needs and wellbeing, which is a hallmark of an independent school education.
Post a “Workout of the Day” from Athletic Coaches	Have athletic coaches or trainers record a workout or stretch of the day.	Creating daily videos from the coaching staff promotes an active lifestyle and maintains connections between students and community members outside the classroom. While athletic fields may not be in use, this is a good reminder to parents of the contributions of the athletic department to the school’s culture and the resources students will be able to access when in-person activities resume.

Parent-Focused Initiatives

Tactic	Implementation Guidance	Benefits
Host Neighborhood--Specific Parent Events	Hold virtual or in-person coffee meetings based on neighborhood. Leverage your parent association or parent ambassadors to help organize these efforts.	Holding events for parents in specific neighborhoods has several benefits for retention: it establishes connections and friendships among parents who are more likely to regularly see each other, and it allows you to know more about the specific needs and concerns of these groups (e.g. transportation, competition from local public schools), which allows you to tailor your actions and messaging to support these parents accordingly.
Hold Zoom Happy Hours for Parents	Recruit your parent association and ambassadors to organize events like Zoom happy hours, where parents can gather to connect outside of school-sponsored events.	These more informal events provide an opportunity for engagement among harder-to-reach families, as well as support already active parent partners. Such activities increase the potential for friendships among parents, a key retention lever.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

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Parent-Focused Initiatives Cont.

Tactic	Implementation Guidance	Benefits
Conduct Outreach Calls to Current Families	Call all current families to ask how they are doing and if there are any ways the school could better support them. Use a pre-written script to ensure consistency between calls; redeploy currently underused staff members to help lighten the lift.	Individual calls to current families demonstrate concern for wellbeing, as well as help identify families that may need additional support or resources, such as financial aid. You can learn more about how one school conducted this strategy here . Calling families individually can go a long way to show that you care and remind parents of the importance of the close-knit independent school community toward retaining them.
Deliver Mugs and Coffee Recipes for New Parent Reception	Deliver branded mugs with coffee recipes (boozy and nonalcoholic options welcome!) in advance of a new parent reception, then welcome new families over virtual coffee.	Providing this small, fun token for new parents shows your individualized attention and effort and encourages parents to attend the reception. More importantly, it serves to remind parents of the welcoming community parents are joining within the independent school and reinforces this decision.

Sharing School Life Virtually

Tactic	Implementation Guidance	Benefits
Host Virtual Lecture Series from Popular Teachers	Ask popular teachers to record their favorite class lectures or those most loved by students. These lectures can be live-streamed or saved in a pre-recorded library of video lectures. Share these lectures on your website and email them out to new families.	In the absence of student shadow days, these recorded lessons allow new students to experience the talent of your faculty and the value of your educational offerings. The videos also get new parents excited for the academic rigor that their children will experience and reinforce the decision they have made to enroll them in the school.
Offer Virtual Shadowing for New Students	Pair new students with a current student ambassador, whom they can join for remote class, virtual club meetings, and divisional assemblies.	Virtual shadowing can help new students feel more connected and prepared for the fall. Reduce uncertainty during this unprecedented time by allowing them to meet future teachers and peers before school starts and retain them over the summer.
Share Classroom Materials with New Families	Share current virtual lesson plans with future families. These should be based on the current grade of the incoming student and can be paired with any additional resources provided to students in that year.	Sending current virtual lesson plans to future families highlights your school's ability to adapt to the new academic environment. It provides additional academic support for students who may have experienced a less rigorous spring and insight into your school's academic expectations for all incoming students. This is particularly important given the varying degrees of academic engagement across institutions and districts this spring.

Communications

Tactic	Implementation Guidance	Benefits
Evaluate Your Website's Accessibility for Essential COVID Information	Use EAB's Independent School COVID-19 Self-Web Audit to evaluate the effectiveness of your COVID-19 web presence.	Identifying areas of weakness in your communication around COVID-19 is critical. This audit assesses the content and accessibility of your webpage and provides resources to strengthen the identified areas for improvement. Clear and readily-available communication is important to making current, new, and prospective families feel at ease in during these unprecedented times.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

Retention Strategies Compendium

Communications Cont.

Tactic	Implementation Guidance	Benefits
Produce a YouTube Q&A with School Leadership	Put together a video Q&A with school leadership to answer common questions or questions asked directly from students about the coming year. You can replicate this with your dean of students, director of college counseling, or athletic director to tailor these Q&A sessions to specific concerns.	Producing a video Q&A with your head of school offers a more dynamic and engaging way to address common questions and concerns in your community. It also shows that school leadership is accessible and invested in fostering relationships with current families, which can help with retention efforts.
Leverage Social Media for Digital Engagement	Leverage social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok to drive engagement. You can do this through videos from school leadership, social media campaigns, and digital ads.	Increasing your presence on social media will allow you to capitalize on the amount of time students and families are currently spending online. Once again, keeping the school community visible and maintaining connections between students and staff all serve to keep families excited about returning to campus.
Create a Designated Landing Page for New Families	Develop a welcome page on your school's website that is designated for new families. This page should mirror the experience they might have had during a revisit day. Feature custom video messages from division heads and other community leaders, a virtual tour, and sneak peaks into your online learning platform.	Designating a landing page for new families ensures that they do not receive the same crisis-focused communication your broader school community has received. Schools should provide welcoming, celebratory communication to new families who visit your site. If they are having doubts about joining the community during the pandemic, this messaging will remind them that they are making a long-term investment in their child's education.

Welcoming New Families

Tactic	Implementation Guidance	Benefits
Send Handwritten Letters to New Families	Use your current admissions staff, as well as staff who are currently underutilized elsewhere, to handwrite letters or postcards to all new families.	Handwriting letters or postcards demonstrates the level of individualized attention and care you give to your families. It's a small gesture, but it demonstrates the personalized touch of an independent school for new families and will get them excited about joining the community.
Host Individual and Group Virtual Welcomes for New Families	Create designated times to welcome new families to your school. These can take place in a group or individual format and should vary in timing to allow for differing family and work schedules.	Hosting virtual group welcome events allow families to connect with other incoming students, while individual welcome initiatives allow time to answer any outstanding questions or concerns. For group welcome events, consider curating events strategically around a shared interest (i.e. athletics) or a common neighborhood. This will help establish friendships, which is an important retention lever.
Create a New Student Newsletter	Create a newsletter specifically for new students. Rather than providing crisis-oriented communication, focus this newsletter on welcoming messages, upcoming virtual events, and the many resources available to them as new community members.	Creating a newsletter for new students ensures that the celebratory messaging and excitement of starting their next chapter at your school is not lost amid crisis communication. It also demonstrates a special level of attention to this segment of your student population that can help ease anxiety about coming to a new school during this uncertain time.
Invite New Families to Current Online Events	Invite newly enrolled families to current school online events, such as social gatherings, parent Q&A's, speaker series, and town halls.	Including new families in these events ensures that they already feel involved in the broader school community and highlights the many benefits you offer outside of the classroom, particularly in the absence of typical in-person activities.

SOURCE: EAB INTERVIEWS AND ANALYSIS.

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Welcoming New Families Cont.

Tactic	Implementation Guidance	Benefits
Deliver Gift Bags for New Families	Deliver gift bags filled with school swag and welcome packets to new families.	Sharing your excitement and welcoming new students to your community can help to build excitement for the coming year. Like personalized notes and newsletters, these gestures are a small but important reminder of what it means to join your school's community, especially for those who are concerned about making the transition while the student experience is virtual.
Invite New Families to Community Religious Gatherings	For schools with a religious affiliation, invite new students and their families to virtual community religious gatherings, such as Zoom chapel services.	Including new families in religious gatherings allows them to be a part of an important element of your school community and mission. This can be particularly valuable during these challenging and uncertain times and can help reassure families that they have made the right decision to enroll their child at your school.
Distribute Yard Signs for Newly Admitted Students	Deliver yard signs to new families that have messages such as "Home of a future [mascot]" or "Home of a new [school name] student."	Distributing these signs can help create a sense of excitement and a feeling of welcome among new families. As an added bonus, this initiative also promotes your school's brand to the larger neighborhood. You can take this strategy one step farther by constructing and sharing a plotted map of families in the neighborhood with current or future students. The goal of this strategy is to signal a sense of pride in enrolling at the school.

Other Ideas for Retention

Tactic	Implementation Guidance	Benefits
Distribute College Admissions Yard Signs	Acknowledge your senior class's accomplishments by surprising them with yard signs celebrating where they will be attending college in the fall.	Distributing college admissions yard signs will not only convey your pride and support for students' achievements but will also spread awareness about the accomplishments of your school's academic programming. This helps to show off the value of an investment in your school's academic experience to current, new, and potential families.
Conduct a Weekly Community Survey	Conduct a weekly survey on community engagement, including areas of strength, areas of weakness, and ideas for potential initiatives.	Conducting a weekly survey allows you to keep a pulse on community engagement and learn about any potential early stage concerns. It also serves to generate new engagement ideas and events families would be interested in. A survey allows your families to feel heard and see a tailored response to their needs for purposes of retention.
Distribute Virtual Care Packages	Create a virtual care package that you can easily distribute to students and families via email. This PDF can include tips for academic success, workout videos and exercises, book, TV, and movie recommendations, healthy recipes and cooking concepts, and ideas for self-care. You can find an example of one such virtual care package here .	Distributing virtual care packages is a low effort way to provide immediate entertainment, resources, and activities to the school community, all while letting them know you are thinking of them and their wellbeing. Including non-academic resources reminds families that you care about the whole child – an important aspect of an independent school education.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

Other Ideas for Retention Cont.

Tactic	Implementation Guidance	Benefits
Offer Volunteer/ Service Activities	Organize volunteer and service activities with community partners and local service organizations. Opportunities can be virtual or in-person, depending on your region, and can be tailored for students-only or entire families.	Fostering connections with your local community while giving students and their families and opportunity to give back, is a benefit for all parties. This is particularly true for schools whose missions include an element of service. These types of activities showcase the values of your school and the way in which you are instilling strong values in students, which will reinforce the strength of your school's education. Make sure to share the great work your community is doing by creating a social media campaign, which can in turn be used for recruitment purposes.
Organize Alumni/ Current Student Outreach	Match willing alumni with current students based on common interest. Alumni of all ages can participate by reaching out to current students about their shared work or personal passions.	Pairing alumni and current students over a shared interest allows current students to learn more about what a career or hobby in that area could look like. In addition to networking, this highlights the expansive alumni network at your school and the value that comes with access to those connections, which is an important retention lever for families. As a final bonus, this strategy keeps alumni engaged with the school community.



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