**Creative Ways Churches Can Minister to Families and School Personnel in the New School Year**

The local school districts have decided how they are reopening for students this year. The districts have chosen a wide variety of solutions that impact the children, their families, the teachers, school personnel and the administrators at various levels. After several meetings with school personnel and church leaders, we have identified multiple gaps that individuals, small groups, and churches can address to have a Kingdom impact in their communities. After school starts, we will reengage the leaders who participated in the first round of discussions to see what they learned and what additional gaps and responses they have identified.

**Two suggestions**: **First,** before you move forward with some of these responses, contact the local school(s) to see what they have identified as their priority needs. **Second,** before a church begins a response that directly engages children and adults, they should connect with their insurance company to see what limitations and/or suggestions they have for managing interactions. Any volunteers who will come into contact with children and teens should have current background checks.

The Southside public schools are utilizing virtual teaching and the Eastern Shore districts are offering two options: hybrid classes with two days in class and three days of virtual learning or all virtual learning. Some private schools have families that are struggling financially; so, you may consider a private school partnership.

**Gaps and Responses**

* [**Resources**](#Resources)
* [**Nutritional**](#Nutritional)
* [**Educational**](#Educational)
* [**Technical**](#Technical)
* [**Relational**](#Relational)
* [**School Personnel**](#SchoolPersonnel)
* [**Parental**](#ParentalIssues)
* [**Special Needs**](#SpecialNeedsChildren)
* [**List from Norfolk Elementary Principal**](#ListfromNorfolkPrincipal)

**Special thanks to the following for contributing to this article:**

Reagan Henderson Barrett, Marianna Boyer, Renita Burns, Carole Cook, Lindsay Evans, Vicky Sedaca Faircloth, Cassie Fraser, Jan Frost, Gale Hall, Phillip Herring, Julie Hunt, Vince Kornegay, Andrew Matthews, Deb Moreland, Melissa Muender, Dr. Sharon Phillips, David Sabatino, Antoinae (NayNay) Staton, and Kevin Tremper

**Resources**: As always, some children will lack school supplies.

1. Even though children are attending virtually in most school districts, they will still need crayons, pencils, paper, scissors, glue, notebooks, composition books, water paints and brushes, etc.
2. Children will also need backpacks for storing their personal school supplies.
3. Some children may need to printout assignments, but they may lack a printer, paper, and ink.

**What we can do**:

1. Individuals, classes, small groups, and churches can connect with the local schools to see if they are organizing school supply collections. If they are, you can help by donating as an individual or by organizing collections in your Sunday school, small group, or church.
2. If schools are not collecting, you can organize school supply collections and let the community know that you have a certain number of stocked backpacks to distribute on a first-come basis or by appointment only.
3. You can collect school supplies in bulk, set out tables with the various items and allow families to come and pick up what they need.
4. You may decide to help families that are fully quarantined because of high-risk family members. With these families, you may prepackage all the school supplies and drop them off on their front doorsteps or have them drive by for contact-free distribution.
5. Individuals, groups, and churches may volunteer to print out assignments for children. This service can be worked out through the local schools or through word of mouth.
6. Churches may take their current bulk children’s supplies and distribute them to families who do not have these supplies. Once the children’s department reopens, supplies may need to be individualized; so, children do not share supplies.
7. Families that are spending more money on school supplies may not be purchasing personal hygiene supplies; so, churches can provide toothbrushes, toothpaste, soap, shampoo, etc.

**Nutritional**: Children who receive free and reduced-price meals may not be receiving adequate food. Each school district is handling food distribution differently.

1. Some urban/neighborhood schools are letting their children walk to school to pick up their meals. In some cases, working parents are not allowing children to leave their homes during the day; so, these children are not receiving food and are not adequately nourished during the day.
2. Other schools are providing regular boxed options for families to pick up.

**What we can do**:

1. Churches with food pantries can discover which homes have school age children and add grab-and-go foods: Pop-Tarts, granola bars, Uncrustables, fruit cups, pudding cups, child-friendly yogurt, juice boxes, simple fruits, etc. These foods will provide easy to fix meals and snacks for children who may need to take care of themselves during the day.
2. Some groups or churches may provide bag lunches of sandwiches, chips, cookies, juice boxes, etc. for easy, outside pickup on a daily or weekly basis.

**Educational**:

1. Although some children will do well educationally through the at-home learning phase, many children will struggle to grasp new information and concepts.
2. Teachers will be looking for creative ways to connect with their students as they learn new information and discover new skills.
3. School libraries may be closed.

**What we can do**:

1. Volunteers are needed to be reading buddies, tutors, mentors, etc. for children. Most of these connections will need to be virtual; however, some churches may open and monitor space for one-to-one/two/three educational support sessions to help children struggling in reading, math, and other subjects.
2. Additionally, schools will not be hosting in-person field trips. Local experts can offer their skills, knowledge, and expertise by providing virtual field trip sessions. These could be prerecorded or live sessions that the teacher monitors. Schools require background checks; so, volunteers should check school websites and/or call the local school offices to find out how they can help.
3. New and struggling readers will need access to age-appropriate/grade-appropriate books. Individuals, groups, and churches may decide to connect with local schools for a book drive that schools can distribute to children. Details should be worked out with the local schools.

**Technical**:

1. Some school districts are providing Chromebooks; while others are encouraging families to buy laptops for their children.
2. Although Norfolk is providing portable hotspots for students, other school districts are not providing children with internet access.
3. Some teachers are struggling with the new technologies used for online classes.

**What we can do**:

1. Individuals, groups, and/or churches can collect laptops and Chromebooks for distribution through schools or at the churches. These devices need to be wiped clean of any personal items.
2. Churches can boost their Wi-Fi signal and allow people to sit in their cars in the parking lots and access the internet.
3. Churches can designate a large room where a family can gather around a table to access the internet.
4. Individuals can volunteer to mentor teachers in the online formats being utilized for teaching classes.
5. Individuals may volunteer to be the second adult in a room to help monitor the class or to help with shared materials onscreen.
6. Churches can open in the evening and allow families access to a printer to print off materials.
7. Individuals, groups and churches can publish helpful hints on how to use technology effectively to teach children online.

**Relational**:

1. Children miss their friends.
2. Children miss interacting with their teachers at school.

**What we can do**:

1. Churches can create small pod groups of children for playing and interacting with other children. These groups may work on schoolwork, crafts, games, etc.
2. Small groups of children could gather at a church for story time, music time, etc. led by an adult who is able to relate to children.
3. One church is allowing families to reserve a children’s classroom to have a playdate with another family that they spend time with. This gets them out of their own houses and into a room with lots of different toys. All toys should be thoroughly cleaned before and after each reservation.
4. Individuals, groups, and churches can invite families and school personnel to special church events.

**School personnel**: Teachers, administrators, bus drivers and support staff are all trying to figure out how to navigate the new set ups. These individuals are frustrated, and they need our encouragement.

**What we can do:**

1. Individuals, groups, and churches can write letters and send thank you/thinking of you cards to these folks to encourage them.
2. Some may choose to include simple gift cards to brighten their day.
3. Individuals, groups, and churches may adopt a school staff and take snacks, breakfast or lunch to the school.
4. Let them know you are praying for them and ask for specific areas for prayer.
5. Churches can set up support groups for teachers.
6. Churches can host Alcoholics Anonymous groups for those who are struggling with alcoholism.
7. Identify retired teachers and school personnel and encourage them to offer their services to a local school.
8. Individuals, groups, and churches can invite families and school personnel to special church events.
9. Individuals, groups, churches can go to a school parking lot and pray over the school, the children, the families, the teachers, and the administrators.
10. Churches can teach active listening skills; so, volunteers can really listen to what teachers and administrators are dealing with in their jobs.

**Parental Issues**:

1. Parents are struggling to be teachers and work.

**What we can do:**

1. Churches can provide parent support groups. A group may read a parenting book together to initiate conversations on healthy parenting during this pandemic.
2. Individuals, groups, and churches can reach out to their church families on a regular basis to make sure everyone is doing ok.
3. Individuals, groups, and churches can prost articles on how to cope during this season.
4. Individuals can become support persons for a family or two and call those families and listen to their concerns and pray for them.
5. Churches can teach active listening skills; so, volunteers can really listen to what parents are dealing with in their homes.
6. Individuals and churches can provide helpful Homeschool information to help families navigate the at-home learning model.

**Special Needs Children:**

1. During this time, special needs children are not receiving their IEP instruction.
2. Special needs children are not receiving socialization and communication interaction.

**What we can do:**

1. Churches can provide a special needs ministry; so, parents can have an evening or weekend afternoon respite.
2. Small groups and churches can host park and playground hangouts; so, children and families can get together in a socially distanced way.

**The following list is provided by an elementary school principal in Norfolk:**

**ONLINE/HUMAN RESOURCES**

A. virtual social and emotional well-being activities for children and families

B. online subscriptions that will help to create a culture of literacy in every home

example: programs@readtothem.org or readtothem.org

C. volunteers for the zoom room to help monitor children in the virtual classroom (apply to be a volunteer at [www.npsk12.com](http://www.npsk12.com)) – (Update: At present, this option is not available in Norfolk.)

D. mentor a student who is reluctant to participate in virtual learning by calling them, writing to them, mailing them comic books, short articles that they may be interested in

E. Developing a pin pal group where the school address could be used as the volunteers address (volunteer would call the school to see if a child has written to them and they could pick their mail up from the main office of the school)

**ACADEMIC BAGS:**

A. scissors

B. markers

C. dry erase markers

D. take me home books to create mini libraries at home

E. paint brushes for at home art

F. paint smocks for at home art activities

G. small stuffed animal for younger students

H. loose leaf paper

I. pencils

J. index cards

**HYGIENE BAGS:**

A. hand sanitizer

B. soap

C. lotion

D. deodorant

E. sanitary napkins

F. toothpaste

G. toothbrushes

H. wash cloths

I. wipes

**PE BAGS:**

A. jump ropes

B. pedometers

C. resistant bands

D. cones

E. wire waste baskets/trash Cans

**ART BAGS:**

A. colored pencils

B. pink thick block erasers

C. crayons

D. oil pastels

E. paint brush set

F. tempura paint pan set

G. construction paper

H. translucent tape

I. hole puncher

J. yarn

K. white paper/copy paper

L. pencil sharpeners

M. small white dry erase boards

N. markers

O. subject folders

P. coffee filters