

If you are an educator like me, March and April sure seemed to be an emotional roller coaster that lasted a lifetime. In a matter of weeks, the State of Missouri went from “Ah! Spring Break is right around the corner,” to “Wait... We won’t get to see our students in person for the rest of the school year?” This announcement delivered by Governor Parson on April 9th was one that shook the educational world leaving hundreds of thousands of parents, students, and teachers all across Missouri wondering, *how is school going to look for the next two months?* One thing for certain is that as educators, it remains our responsibility to ensure our students continue receiving curriculum and instruction, whether that is through printed materials or through online platforms such as Google Classroom, Canvas, Blackboard, etc. Although much of what goes on with our students and families from day to day is out of our control, there are ways in which we can maximize the potential of engaging students and families, regardless of their demographics and motivation. If you are currently struggling with participation and are looking to boost that engagement and create a successful learning environment during these unprecedented times, follow these five tips and tricks. When in doubt... COVID it out.

C	Communicate	Communicating to your parents that their child is valued, thought of, and at the top of your list of priorities is one major first step in building a successful virtual learning foundation.
O	Offer	Offering a reason to “show up” to online class outside of just academic work will boost your participation, engagement, and ultimately, rebuild your sense of climate and community.
V	Vary	Varying instructions, lessons, and assignments to meet a broad range of unique learning styles will increase the likelihood of success among your students. Students who are successful experience more motivation to continue being engaged and continuing to work hard.
I	Inquire	Inquire by asking for feedback. What is working well? What issues are families currently facing that might be getting in the way of their learning?
D	Determine	Determining which students may need some additional encouragement may just be the difference between half of your students participating and well over 75%. Just like with traditional school, how are you going to motivate the unmotivated?

1. **C - COMMUNICATE.** Perhaps now more than ever, communication is vitally important when it comes to engaging your students and parents. Students want to hear from you and parents want to know that their child’s teacher is doing everything in his or her power to make the best of an uncertain situation. Whether your district requires you to make a certain amount of contact with families or not, make it a priority. Call, email, send out broadcasts. Find the most efficient way for you and your families to connect and check in to see how they are doing. When communicating, remember that there may be more pressing issues going on than whether or not a child is completing the assignment you gave them. Focus on their overall well-being and view the child and family as a whole. As educators, we are responsible for ensuring that our students become well-rounded individuals who are healthy both physically and emotionally. Don’t forget to ask the simple question, “How is your child doing and in what ways can I help?”
2. **O - OFFER.** Let’s be honest, it is extremely rare to find a student who looks back on their educational experiences and remembers their teachers based on the lessons and assignments they delivered. You might also

find it rare for a student to say, “I really enjoy going to her class because of the work she gives us.” No. What students remember most is how they felt in your class, as well as the engaging activities with classmates and feeling of connectedness within the walls of your classroom. Offer your students a reason to “show up” to virtual class for something other than academic instruction. During these difficult times, many online educational platforms have stepped up to the plate in a huge way and are offering free access to their premium content for the remainder of the school year, some even into June and July. Be creative with this. Host a Quizlet Live session, GimKit money race, or Kahoot! Offer a day of the week just to Zoom or Google Hangout and simply touch base. Make coming to class enjoyable, memorable, and rebuild the sense of community with your students that was stripped away from the entire nation with our orders to stay at home.

3. V - VARY. We’ve all heard it time and again, differentiation is one of many key factors in determining successful student outcomes. During this online learning process, it is much more difficult to deliver a lesson and immediately know which students grasped the concept and which students need tier-two support. In other words, you are now more a facilitator than an educator. Be sure to vary instruction, lessons, and assignments so that all three tiers of students can experience success. No one knows your students better than you at this point in the school year, so rely on what you’ve discovered regarding their learning styles and meet them where they are. No YouTube? No problem! Type the letters “vd” right after “www.” on anything you’d like to convert and you can download instantly. The power of teaching in person may have been taken from you during this time, but the ability to provide quality material to ensure all students have a chance at success is very much within your realm and expertise as a teacher.
4. I - INQUIRE. Ask for feedback. Perhaps your district is already taking care of this, perhaps not. If not, take it upon yourself to find out what is working well with your families. Find out how much time it is taking students to complete lessons, and most importantly, find out what the most common issues are that your families are facing. Are there any issues that you can help alleviate? Keep it simple and stick to what you truly want to know. Finding out what is working well with families will give you insight on things to keep in mind and continue for future lessons, activities, and assignments. If it isn’t broken, don’t fix it. Finding out what struggles your families are currently facing will give you insight on how to work around those issues so that you are maximizing the total number of students who are experiencing success. Whether you use a Google Form, SurveyMonkey, or any other quick and easy resource, use the information to help you. One final note on inquiring: do not take any negative issues personally. Use it as constructive feedback rather than destructive feedback.
5. D - DETERMINE. After continuous communication, offering engaging activities beyond traditional assignments, varying instruction and assignments, and inquiring to find out what is working and what needs to go, determine which families need just a little more encouragement than others. Set a goal. Do you want at least 50% of your students engaged and actively participating in your daily assignments? Perhaps you’ve seen success very early on and 75% or more of your students were engaged but now your numbers are decreasing. Determine what efforts need to be made so that you can increase that participation each and every week. It is highly unlikely that you will experience 100% participation, but if so, congratulations! One important thing to keep in mind, regardless of your participation levels, is to not let your absentees discourage you from what is working well with those who are present. It can be extremely easy to focus your attention on those not

participating, leading to frustration and possibly the overwhelming feeling that you're working tirelessly for nothing. Remind yourself not to lose sight of those who are showing up, working hard, and aiming to please their teacher.

Just remember that you have always been there as a place for your students to come and be themselves and interact. Just because school buildings are closed does not mean the community and relationships you strived to establish are lost. Be there for your students and even if they haven't engaged yet, there may be a time when they need to. Know that you are doing the best you can and remember the principles of COVID that I have put here. These will help you in your journey, but remember at this unsure time, we are all learning.

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