

# Marci Galinkin, on Family Engagement

Bet Shraga Hebrew Academy, Albany, NY

## ***What is family engagement like at Bet Shraga, and how does the school cultivate partnerships?***

“Still working on fine tuning that in Covid! We’re about a month into school. Compared to the spring, we can be more thoughtful about our parent engagement. The immediate strategy is keeping the lines of communication open, all the way up and down, “opening the door” virtually, and having meaningful conversations. We are trying to have an outdoor Shabbat with parents and students. Parents have always been able to volunteer for opportunities--now the job is to promote virtual volunteerism, which might look like researching socially-distanced activities for students, field trips, and scouting out creative indoor venues.”

## ***How has the whole idea of family engagement changed during the Covid era?***

“Primarily, our families want reassurance. We have a whole range of parents, from those who don’t step foot out, to those who are really out and about. As one of our teachers has put it, “If I have 10 kids in a class, I have 10 different ways families deal with the guidelines”. As a community, we are focused on the logistics of making sure this reopening goes well. For example, we instituted a code of conduct for the whole school community. We asked everyone to agree in writing to abide by the New York State protocols, and they did. Parent voice and perspective on the reopening committee helped us take this step. Our parents have been a major resource during Covid. They may have various talents and skills that we can tap into -- sharing tech skills, writing compliance documents, researching materials for prepping the campus. We work together to think out of the box and make things work smoothly.”

## ***What do you think are the critical practices of a school trying to strengthen their family engagement?***

“Definitely focus on community: allowing parents to feel connected and involved, though not physically present in their child’s education. Our school is already a natural community, and we’re still challenged to maintain that sense of community around the Jewish holidays and Shabbat. Everything looks different, we’re not able to do things the same way and we have to be flexible. We’ve had some good surprises come out of our efforts. We discovered that Back-to-School Night actually worked better virtually than live. We held it as a series of Parent Cafes in cohorts. Parents tuned in; they could see better, and they didn’t have to choose which class to visit. There is a feeling of gratitude, less push-back, fewer challenges because parents recognize that we’re all doing our best. A whole lot of lemonade has come out of our lemons!