

# *Engaging First:* SUPPORTING YOUNG LEARNERS THROUGH FAMILY ENGAGEMENT





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# *Engaging First:* SUPPORTING YOUNG LEARNERS THROUGH FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

*By Ivy Morgan, Director of P-12 Research and Data Analytics, Carrie Gillispie, Ed.D., former P-12 Senior Research Associate, and Antoinette Waller, former P-12 Research Intern*

## *Executive Summary*

The COVID-19 pandemic [widened](#) existing educational inequities for Black and Latino students, students who are [English learners](#), and [students with disabilities](#). Research shows that family engagement has a positive impact on student [outcomes](#); therefore, forging connections between schools and families as enrollment [rebounds](#) will be especially crucial to enhancing student learning and well-being in the wake of the pandemic.

Given that context, this report examines the perceptions and experiences of first and second grade parents and teachers with their school's engagement initiatives using a mixed-methods analysis of data from two nationally representative surveys, an online discussion board, and interviews with family engagement coordinators.

Using existing research on meaningful and effective family engagement as a guide, we examined parents' and teachers' perceptions about several facets of effective engagement: communication; shared decision-making; connections, trust, and mutual respect; and cultural inclusiveness. Where applicable, we discuss how responses differed by race or ethnicity, household income, multilingual status, and whether the parent has a child who has been identified as having a disability.

Parents and teachers had positive feelings, overall, about engagement opportunities at their children's schools, communication with their children's teachers, their role in schoolwide decision-making, and the cultural inclusiveness of their schools.

Yet, when we examined more specific engagement offerings, a more nuanced picture emerged. Notably, only about half of parents reported that their school communicated whether their child was meeting grade-level academic expectations, and of those who did not receive this information, nearly all of them said that it would be helpful if their school provided it. Many parents also noted that it would be helpful for the school to reduce barriers to engagement, such as conflicts with parents' work schedules and the lack of transportation and child care. Finally, parents said that they would welcome a broader range of opportunities to engage with their child's school.



### **Acknowledgments**

This report was written with support from Lisette Partelow, an independent consultant who specializes in K-12 policy issues.

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### *Introduction*

**The COVID-19 crisis was challenging for parents of young children, many of whom entered the school system as a parent for the first time. Family engagement is a powerful tool that school leaders can use to give these children and families a strong start.**

The COVID-19 pandemic [widened](#)<sup>1</sup> existing educational inequities for Black and Latino students, students who are [English learners](#),<sup>2</sup> and [students with disabilities](#).<sup>3</sup> Because of the racial inequities that are embedded in the fabric of our society, Black and Latino families of young children faced more [material hardships](#) than their White counterparts during the pandemic, even after controlling for income level.<sup>4</sup> Families of children with disabilities also faced more [material hardships](#)<sup>5</sup> and emotional distress at the height of the pandemic than those of children without disabilities, in part due to disruptions in access to preventive health care and [support services](#)<sup>6</sup> and networks.

Pandemic disruptions to early learning also created unique challenges for [early elementary students](#)<sup>7</sup> and their parents and [teachers](#).<sup>8</sup> The crisis forced parents of kindergarten-aged children to make [alternative arrangements](#)<sup>9</sup> for their children based on family needs and resources: Many kept their children in [preschool](#);<sup>10</sup> others opted to skip kindergarten, send their children to private schools with in-person instruction, or homeschool their children. Forging connections between schools and families as enrollment [rebounds](#) will be especially crucial to enhancing student learning and well-being in the wake of the pandemic, so we examined parents' experiences and interactions with their children's schools in the context of these challenges.<sup>11</sup>

Family engagement is associated with higher [early literacy](#)<sup>12</sup> and [math skills](#),<sup>13</sup> and increased likelihood of [graduating high school](#)<sup>14</sup> and [attending college](#).<sup>15</sup> Researchers have also found that interventions designed to help families engage with their children's learning at home lead to [better student outcomes](#).<sup>16</sup>

Yet despite the ample benefits of family engagement, many parents aren't receiving accurate information about their children's academic needs or engaging meaningfully in their school experience.<sup>17</sup> While only 32% of fourth graders scored at or above proficient in reading on the most recent [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#) (NAEP),<sup>18</sup> 90% of [parents think](#)<sup>19</sup> that their children are at or above grade level.

Effective engagement is a collaboration between families and the school. And [authentic family engagement](#) involves shared decision-making, trust, mutual respect, and should be asset based and culturally responsive.<sup>20</sup> It is particularly important for teachers and school staff to build relationships and share decision-making with families from [groups who have been marginalized](#) by an education system that upholds and perpetuates racism.<sup>21</sup>

Some of the most [effective](#) forms of engagement are programs that provide families with learning resources and activities to use with their children at home or that work with parents to develop a positive parent-child relationship, improve school readiness and ease the transition to school, or encourage their child's overall development.<sup>22</sup> Engagement strategies that mainly involve bringing parents into the school building tend to be less effective. Activities such as open houses and parent-teacher conferences or [one-off opportunities](#) to volunteer in a classroom or chaperone a field trip are not sufficient to improve outcomes<sup>23</sup> — and may conflict with parents' work schedules, or pose logistical or other hurdles for those who need child care, transportation, or do not feel welcome in the school building.

## Further Reading

- [Reframing the Conversation](#), by the National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFSCE)
- NAFSCE [Family Engagement Core Competencies](#)
- [National Alliance for Family Engagement](#) resources on re-framing how we talk about family engagement
- [Embracing a New Normal: Toward a More Liberatory Approach to Family Engagement](#), by the Carnegie Corporation of New York
- [Recasting Families and Communities as Co-Designers of Education in Tumultuous Times](#), by the National Education Policy Center and the Family Leadership Design Collaborative

After a brief discussion of the research methodology used for this study, we will highlight findings based on some of the themes outlined about what makes for effective family engagement. This report also highlights the responses and concerns of survey participants from specific groups: teachers, parents who identify as Black, parents who identify as Latino, parents of a student with a disability, parents with low incomes, and multilingual parents. Finally, it provides policy recommendations for schools, districts, state governments, and the federal government based on both the existing research on family engagement and our research findings.

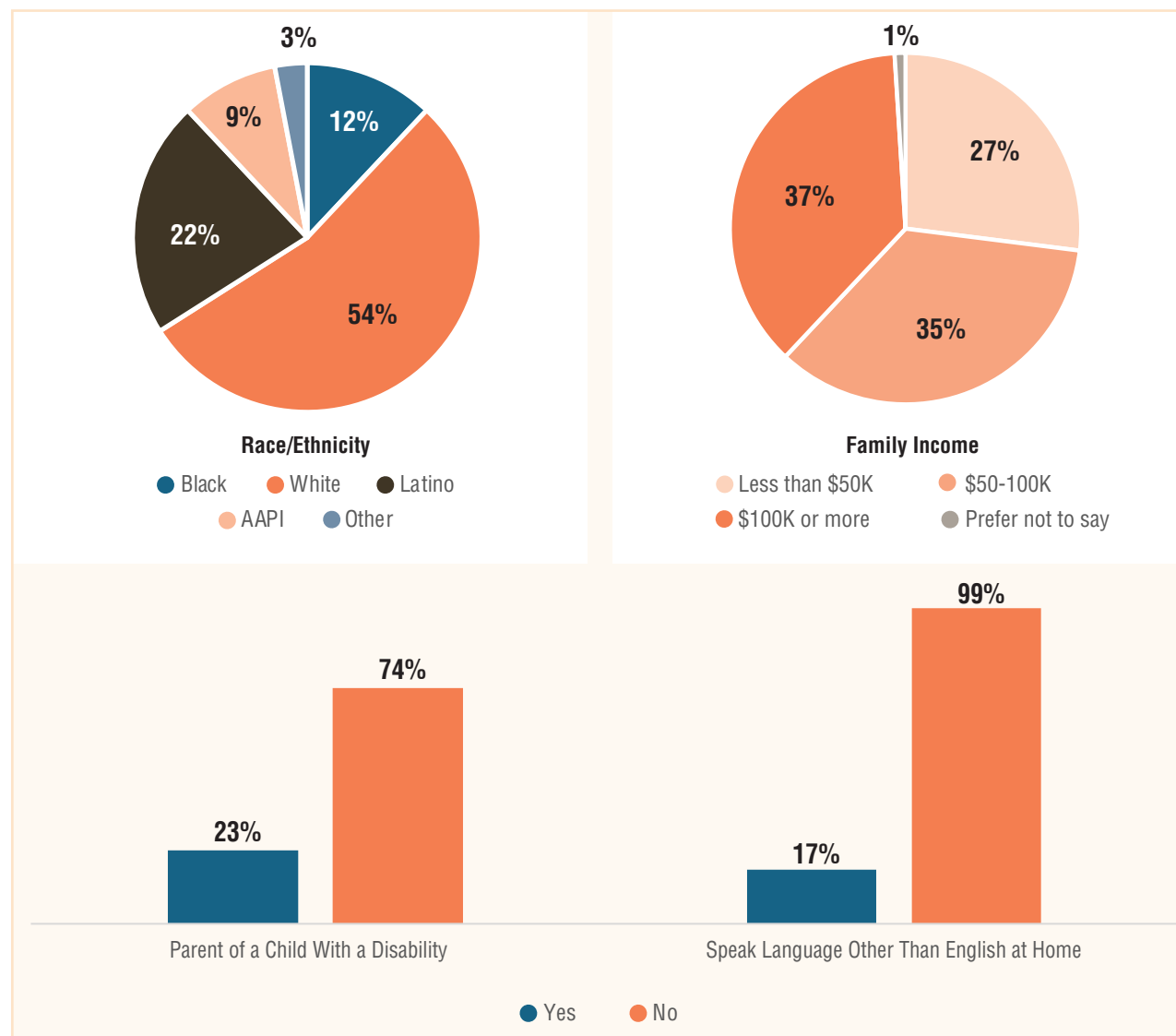
## Methods

This study is intended to inform policymakers and education decision-makers about how parents and teachers of first- and second-grade students are engaging with their schools and one another.

This study employed a mixed-methods design, comprising several forms of quantitative and qualitative data collection. EdTrust sponsored two nationally representative surveys of parents and teachers, one in January-February 2023 (which we refer to as Survey 1) and the other in August 2023 (which we refer to as Survey 2). Approximately 600 parents or guardians of first and second grade students and 300 first and second grade teachers participated in each survey.<sup>24</sup> In addition, we hosted a moderated online discussion board with 30 parents of first and second graders in November 2022.<sup>25</sup> In spring 2023, we also interviewed family engagement staff (including one district leader and four school-based staff members) from a school district in a suburb of a large Northwestern city, which we refer to as Luna School District. Their insights are featured throughout this report and provide specific examples of how some districts have addressed some of the challenges highlighted by the results of the polls.



**FIGURE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF SURVEY 2 PARENT RESPONDENTS BY DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS**



**Reading this figure:** 54% of parents who responded to the survey in Survey 2 were White.

**Note:** The breakdowns of parents' race/ethnicity, income, and English-speaking status were nearly identical in the Survey 1 and Survey 2 results, varying only by 1-2 percentage points per category. The breakdown of parents based on whether they had a child with a disability varied by up to 3 percentage points between the Survey 1 and Survey 2 samples.

## Findings

Parents and teachers painted a positive picture, overall, of their schools' family engagement efforts. But when we dived deeper into different facets of meaningful family engagement — including communication, shared decision-making, connections with parents and school staff, and cultural inclusiveness — we found significant room for growth. In the sections that follow, we highlight the extent to which experiences differ for Black, Latino, multilingual, or low-income parents, or parents of a child with a disability. The survey results detailed throughout are based on Survey 2 and highlight findings that diverge substantially from Survey 1 findings.

It should be noted that survey respondents often provide different answers to broad, general questions than to specific questions about certain criteria. For example, there is often significant [divergence](#) between respondents' views about the economy and their own household finances.<sup>26</sup> This effect may be one reason why parents reported satisfaction overall but had specific concerns about meaningful family engagement.

### Overall Satisfaction With Engagement

Parent perceptions of their child's school illuminate how families and schools are working together and where there is room for improvement. Overall, parents who took our survey provided a lot of positive feedback about schools' outreach and engagement efforts.

#### **Overall, parents of young learners feel positively about engagement opportunities at their children's schools**

Most parents (80%) said they are generally satisfied with their school's level of family engagement. Similar percentages of parents said that there are many opportunities for them to engage with their child's school and that the school actively communicates with them about ways to engage. Further, about 84% of parents said that they enjoy participating in school events.

About 9 in 10 Black parents were satisfied with the level of family engagement at their child's school. Most Black parents agreed that the school was doing a good job engaging with families (88%) and actively communicating about engagement opportunities (91%). Most also said that they had many opportunities to engage with the school (91%).

#### **Most early grade teachers are satisfied with the level of family engagement, but some said they need more time, professional development, and best practices to effectively engage with families**

Most teachers (86%) reported being generally satisfied with family engagement. However, they expressed lower levels of satisfaction with engagement opportunities and supports. Only 58% of teachers said their school carves out specific time for family engagement, and 73% were concerned that there is not enough time in the day to engage with families. Teachers also expressed a desire for additional professional development opportunities and access to research and best practices related to family engagement, with 66% and 59%, respectively, reporting these as areas of concern.

In addition, a sizeable minority of teachers said that their school's focus on family engagement is not integrated into schoolwide systems for training, accountability, and evaluation. Nearly 1 in 4 teachers said

their school does not give them any documents or evidence-based guidelines on how to engage with families — which are a must for setting the expectation and supporting teachers to engage with family. Further, about 1 in 3 teachers said that their school does not offer family engagement-focused professional development opportunities and regularly track and share data about family engagement; while 1 in 4 said that family engagement is not integrated into performance reviews or coaching.

## Family Engagement in Luna School District

**Teachers play an important role in family engagement.** Family engagement staff often provide resources and support to teachers to encourage and facilitate engagement, while leaving room for variability in how teachers engage with families. Cultural competence is essential for building trust between families and teachers, particularly when teachers work with families to support English learners or respond to implicit biases. These resources have helped family engagement staff to address educators' misconceptions and illuminate ways that evidence-based and effective practices can be supported and maintained.

## Types of Engagement Activities

We asked parents about the types of family engagement opportunities their child's school offers. Their responses show that most schools are missing important opportunities to connect with families and failing to provide basic information about whether a child is meeting grade-level academic expectations, which is something all schools should provide without exception.

### Parent-teacher conferences are the most prevalent form of engagement, but many parents lack access to them

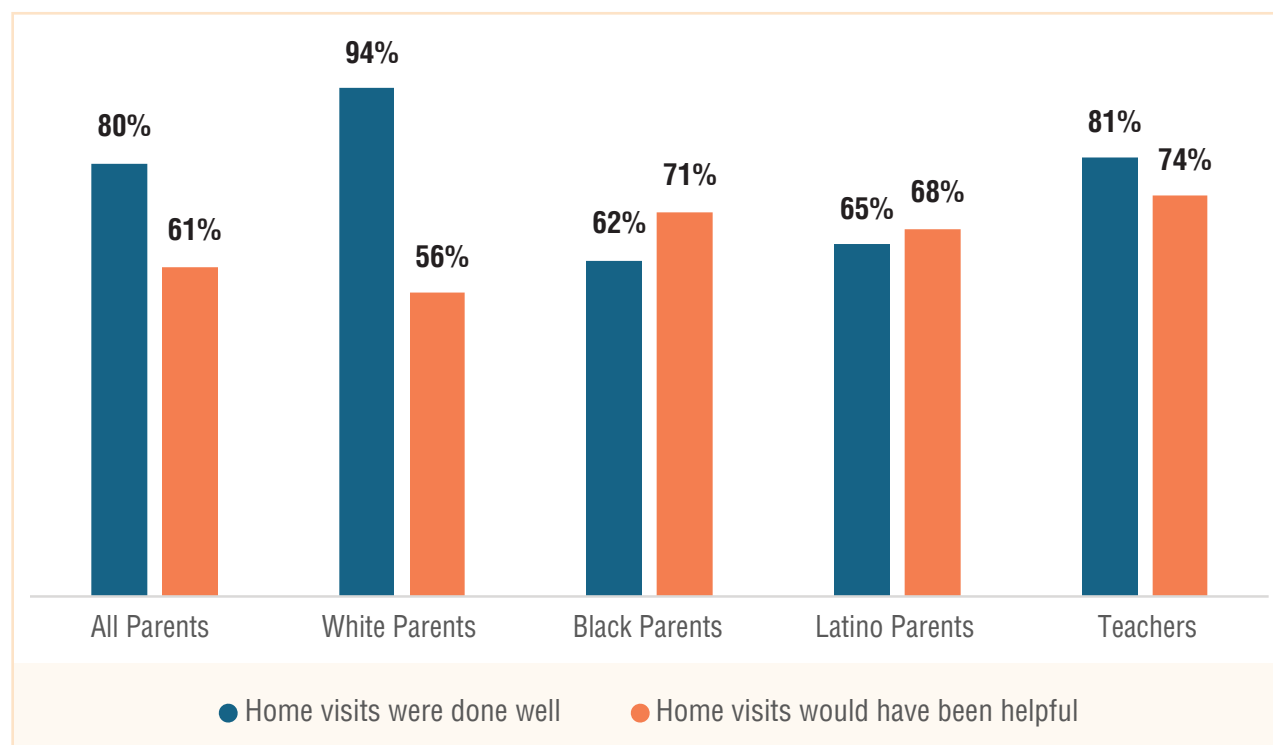
Only two-thirds of respondents said their school offers parent-teacher conferences, and just 59% of the parents who participated in Survey 2 said that they had an end-of-year conference with their child's teacher last school year. While it may be the case that parent-teacher conferences are offered, but parents don't know about them, that is not what the results of our poll suggest: 25% of teachers also indicated in Survey 2 that their school did not offer an end-of-year conference to reflect on students' academic progress or social-emotional development over the last school year. And only about a third of parents said that other direct forms of engagement, such as regular check-ins (via video chat, phone calls, or text messaging) with teachers or school counselors, social workers, or psychologists were offered.

### Few parents had access to home visits

Meeting with parents is important for relationship building, and [research shows](#) that a single home visit can lead to improvements in attendance and behavior.<sup>27</sup> Yet, only 10% of parents said that their school offered home visits last year. Of those parents and teachers who indicated that their school offered home visits, only about 80% thought the visits were done well — the lowest rating of any engagement resource or activity. And just 61% of parents whose schools did not offer home visits thought such visits would have been helpful —

also the lowest rating of any engagement resource. Black, Latino, and multilingual parents who had access to home visits were less likely than other parents to say that home visits were done well; and Black, Latino, and multilingual parents at schools that did not offer home visits were more likely to say that visits would have been helpful.

**FIGURE 2: PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS, BY RACE/ETHNICITY AND TEACHERS WHO REPORTED THAT HOME VISITS WERE HELPFUL OR DONE WELL**



**Reading this figure:** 80% of parents who had access to home visits reported that they were done well; 61% of parents who did not have access to home visits thought they would have been helpful.

*Only two-thirds of respondents said their school offers parent-teacher conferences, and just 59% of the parents who participated in Survey 2 said that they had an end-of-year conference with their child's teacher last school year*

### The most common engagement opportunities for parents are one-off events that are not strongly tied to student social, emotional, or academic development

About half of the parents said that schools give them opportunities to actively participate in school activities (e.g., volunteering, joining parent councils, and engaging in the school decision-making processes); or provide opportunities for them to attend book fairs and holiday events, or chaperone field trips. These were the most common engagement activities offered by schools, and the survey results were consistent across different parent groups.

*“I have volunteered at this elementary school since my daughter started there six years ago. I have helped with teacher meals, picture day, special events, classroom parties, and fundraising. I love the ability to be inside the school and interact with the students and staff.”*

– White mother of a second grader

### Parents’ and teachers’ concerns highlight the need for schools to provide more ways for parents to participate

Having a broader range of events and volunteer activities were among the top things parents said they want most from their child’s school. More than a third of parents (36%) said that a wider variety of events would increase engagement, while more than a quarter of them said that more events should be held outside of school hours (28%) and be more interactive (27%).

*“I understand that not all parents can volunteer and contribute the same ways. I would try to create different activities and events with different roles for parents to participate in. That way it gives parents the option to engage as much or as little as they prefer.”*

– Latino father of second grader

Teachers shared similar sentiments: They believe that hosting a wider range of opportunities or events (34%), hosting events that are more interactive (35%), and holding more opportunities outside of school hours (31%) would be some of the most helpful strategies to increase engagement.

## Family Engagement in Luna School District

**Family engagement staff use a variety of approaches to reach out to families.** They not only share information about school policies, processes, and events, but often help families overcome common barriers to participation in their child’s school — such as conflicting work schedules and the need for child care — by connecting families to community-based resources and services that provide child care and rent assistance, and/or providing lists of shelters, clothing and food banks.

### **Multilingual parents and Black parents also expressed a strong desire for more virtual engagement opportunities**

About half of parents — including 67% of Black parents and 66% of multilingual parents — said that virtual engagement opportunities increased at their school during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, two-thirds of parents indicated that they'd like at least some virtual programming to continue into the 2023-24 school year, when many of these activities were starting to revert to fully in person — including 83% of Black parents, and 77% of multilingual parents.

The activities that parents most wanted to continue virtually included parent-teacher conferences (37%), online tutoring (34%), virtual PTA meetings (27%), and virtual study groups (23%). Black and multilingual parents were more likely to want virtual parent-teacher conferences to continue (47% and 48%, respectively). In addition, multilingual parents were more likely than parents who only speak English at home to want virtual programming — especially PTA meetings (35% vs. 25%) and study groups (33% vs. 21%).

The differing responses to these questions about continuing virtual activities suggest that schools should strive to learn more about the specific needs and preferences of parents — either through an engagement survey provided in parents' home language or discussions between family members and family engagement coordinators who are multilingual.



## Communication

Effective [two-way communication](#) is the foundation of meaningful family engagement,<sup>28</sup> and helps families and schools to build trusting relationships and work together to meet students' needs. To determine whether schools are meeting families' needs on this metric, we asked teachers and parents whether the communication they provide or receive is effective.

### Most parents and teachers rate their ability to communicate with each other highly

Most parents (88%) said that they know how to effectively communicate with their child's teacher. A similar share of parents (85%) feel that they know how to effectively communicate with school administrators (such as the principal or other staff) and could have a productive conversation with their child's teacher about a problem (83%). Multilingual parents, however, were more likely than parents who only speak English at home to say that not knowing how to contact or communicate with the school is a major barrier to meaningful engagement for them (22% vs. 8%).

### Family Engagement in Luna School District

**Language support is vital to family engagement.** Family engagement staff report that the district has implemented a number of interventions (including new technology, staff, liaisons, dual language environments, and a language policy) to support families who speak languages other than English.

*"It's not so much that it makes the office staff or my life easier, but I feel like it also gives the family some type of power to be able to be like, okay, I can really – I don't have to really cut what I want to say to you. I can really have a two-way communication."*

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*Multilingual parents, however, were more likely than parents who only speak English at home to say that not knowing how to contact or communicate with the school is a major barrier to meaningful engagement for them (22% vs. 8%)*

Teachers also feel pretty good about having what they need to communicate effectively with parents, with high numbers saying that they have the resources and skills they need to communicate effectively with students' families (86%) and agreeing that they can have productive conversations with parents who are upset about something that happened in their class (86%).

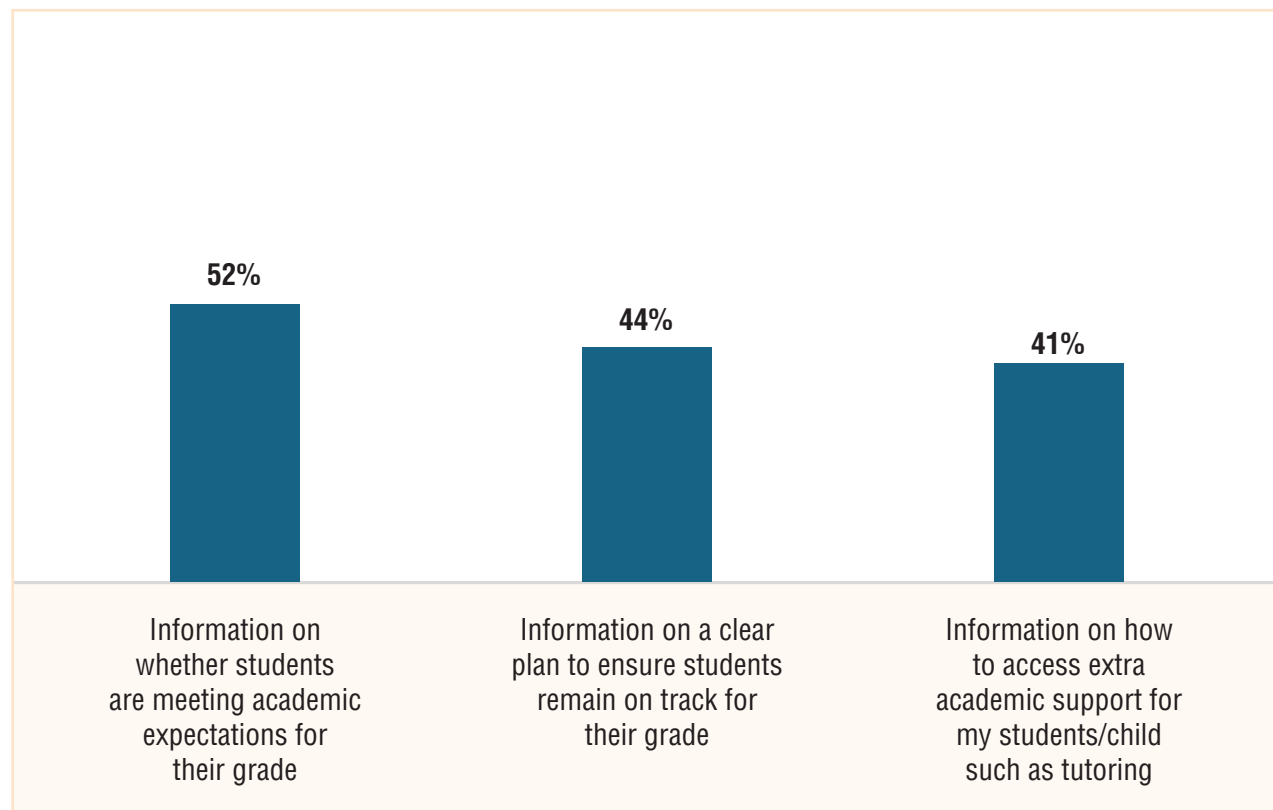
*"I am very satisfied with the way the teachers and staff communicate with me. I feel like they listen and are very respectful of my time."*

**– Black father of a second grader**

### **Only half of parents and teachers reported that schools are providing information about whether students are meeting academic expectations for their grade**

Specifically, 52% of parents and 51% of teachers (66% of teachers in the first survey) reported that schools provide this information. Further, only about 4 in 10 parents said they receive information about helping students remain on track or accessing extra academic support. The responses were similar across parent race and ethnicity, income status, child's disability status, and parent home language.

**FIGURE 3: PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS WHO REPORTED RECEIVING INFORMATION ON ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS OR ACADEMIC SUPPORT**



**Reading this figure:** 52% of parents received information on whether their child was meeting academic expectations for their grade.

## Many parents aren't getting important information about whether students are meeting academic expectations

When schools provide information on whether students are meeting academic expectations or a clear plan to ensure that students remain on track, nearly all parents report that they do it well (96% and 95% respectively). Of those parents who said that schools are not providing information on whether students are meeting academic expectations or information to help students remain on track, nearly all of them said that having this information would be more helpful and valuable to them than all other engagement options included in the survey.

*"Worst interaction was probably when I repeatedly asked for additional academic resources for the kid's class and [was] ignored. I understand there are challenges with adding things to the curriculum, but I wish there were some innovative solutions to these problems."*

**– White mother of a second grader**

## Yet, most parents are satisfied with communication about academic progress

Most parents (about 80%) at least somewhat agreed that their child's school communicates with them regularly about student academic progress; these results were consistent for parents of all racial and ethnic identities, income levels, and regardless of whether a parent had a child with a disability. At the same time, 30% of parents (including 38% of Black parents and 39% of multilingual parents) reported that they would like more communication from schools about students' academic progress.

[Data shows](#) that there is a mismatch between how parents think children are doing academically and how students are doing.<sup>29</sup> Altogether, this could suggest that communication focuses on progress that's being made, but not sufficiently on how much progress needs to be made to help ensure that students are meeting grade-level expectations.

## Shared Decision-Making

Shared decision-making is a critical component of authentic family engagement: It is a way to demonstrate that parents' expertise about their own family and community is valued; to ensure that a family's needs for their child's education are respected and heard; and to incorporate the opinions and ideas of those who will be impacted by school policies into the process of designing them. Here's what parents said when asked whether they have a say in school decisions that affect their children.

## Most parents agree that they can influence decisions in their child's schools

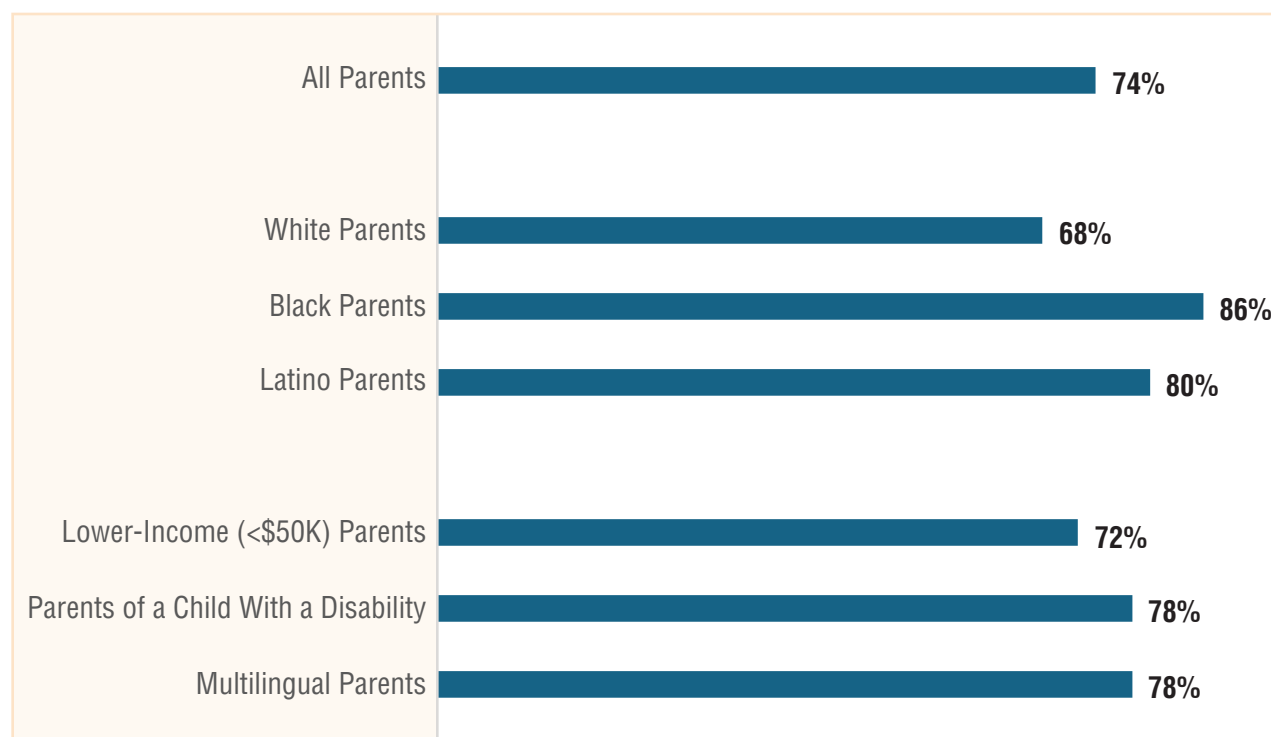
Three-quarters of parents agree that their child's school encourages their family to have a role in schoolwide planning, leadership, and policy and program decisions. Notably, Black, Latino, and multilingual parents were more likely than other parent groups to report that there were opportunities for parents to participate in schoolwide decision-making. In addition, three-quarters of parents agreed that they get a say in decisions about their child's needs at school.

Parents of students with disabilities were more likely than parents overall to report that they have a say in decisions about their child's needs at school (81% vs. 76%), and that the school encourages families to play a role in schoolwide planning, leadership, and policy and program decisions (78% vs. 73%). These more positive responses from parents of children with disabilities could be related to the legally mandated processes (for individualized education plans, through the Individuals with Disabilities Act) that require schools to engage with families to identify education services for students with disabilities.

## Family Engagement in Luna School District

**Family engagement staff aim to incorporate family voices into school policies and practices.** Using surveys, observation, informal conversations, and informational sessions, school staff collect feedback and information from families about their needs, challenges, and perspectives. Parents have had a say in major hiring decisions — including during the hiring process for superintendent and principals — and curriculum decisions.

**FIGURE 4: PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS WHO AGREE THAT THEIR SCHOOL ENCOURAGES FAMILIES TO PLAY A ROLE IN SCHOOLWIDE PLANNING, LEADERSHIP, AND POLICY AND PROGRAM DECISIONS**



**Reading this figure:** 74% of parents agreed that their child's school encouraged families to have a role in schoolwide planning, leadership, and policy and program decisions.

## While parents and teachers feel like they have a say in decision-making, few reported that their school offers them opportunities to provide input

Fewer than one-fifth of parents said that their school gave them opportunities to provide input about teachers' decisions in the classroom (17%) or during administrative and schoolwide decision-making processes (15%). Similarly, just 18% of teachers reported that there were opportunities for parents to provide input on teacher decision-making for the classroom and 23% (29% in Survey 1) of teachers reported that there were opportunities for parents to provide input on administrative and schoolwide decisions.

Multilingual parents had more opportunities to provide input about decisions than parents who only spoke English at home — both in the classroom (21% vs 16%) and schoolwide (20% vs 14%). In contrast, parents with lower incomes were less likely to report that their schools offered opportunities to provide input in classroom (15% vs. 21%) or schoolwide (11% vs. 16%) decision-making, compared with other parents. Black and Latino parents were more likely to report that their schools offered them opportunities to provide input in classroom decision-making, but not schoolwide decision-making (27% and 19% in classroom vs. 16% and 12% in schoolwide).

Although parents of students with disabilities reported higher levels of engagement with decision-making, they were less likely to say that schools gave them opportunities to provide input about decisions, especially in the classroom: 12% of parents of students with a disability reported having those opportunities, compared with 18% of parents without a disability.

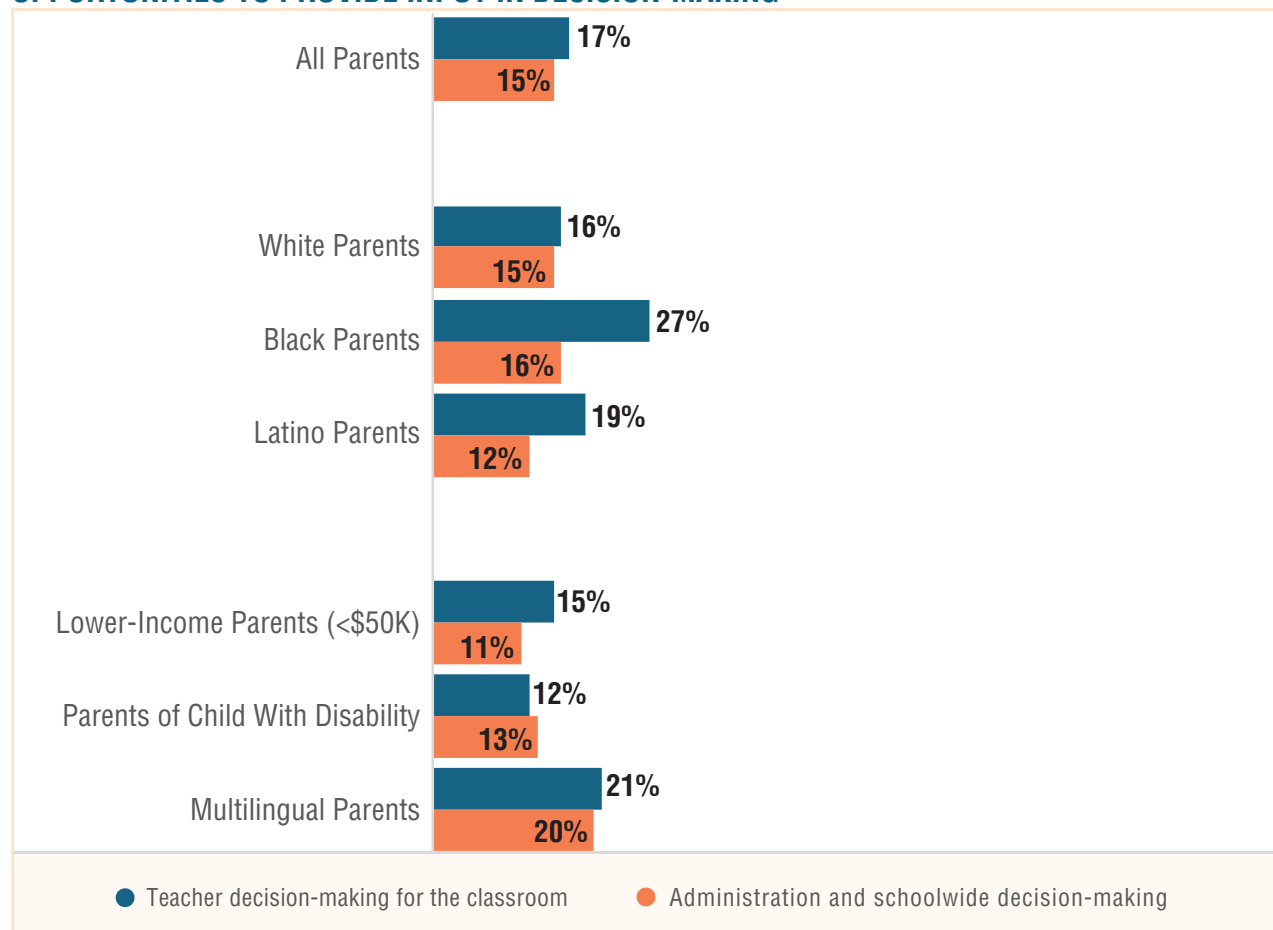
*“I don’t feel disrespected, but I also don’t feel completely listened to when I express my concerns. Meetings with the teachers and staff seemed rushed and not specific to my son’s individual needs. I have assumed it is due to having many other kids/parents to deal with and not enough time in their schedule.”*

**– White mother of first grader with a disability**

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*Fewer than one-fifth of parents said that their school gave them opportunities to provide input about teachers' decisions in the classroom (17%) or during administrative and schoolwide decision-making processes (15%)*

**FIGURE 5: PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS WHO REPORTED THAT THEIR CHILD'S SCHOOL OFFERED OPPORTUNITIES TO PROVIDE INPUT IN DECISION-MAKING**



**Reading this figure:** Just 17% of parents reported that their child's school provided opportunities to provide input in or support for teacher decision-making in the classroom.

*Building a school community where families, teachers, and staff have trusting relationships and mutual respect makes it possible for them to have important conversations and develop connections that allow families, teachers, and staff to work together as a team*

## Connections With Parents and School Staff

Building a school community where families, teachers, and staff have trusting relationships and mutual respect makes it possible for them to have important conversations and develop connections that allow families, teachers, and staff to work together as a team. Yet the parents we surveyed don't always feel [trusted](#)<sup>30</sup> or [valued](#)<sup>31</sup> by school personnel, and this can be a barrier to engagement.

### Too often, other parents can hinder parent engagement

About half of the parents we surveyed said that some parents who are involved with the school but are not welcoming to other parents are a barrier to engagement, including 47% of Black parents, 49% of parents of a child with a disability, 39% of Latino parents. Even worse, 20% of Black parents, 19% of parents with lower incomes, and 16% of parents of a child with a disability noted that this was a major challenge.

Parents of students with disabilities were also less likely than parents overall to say they feel accepted by (62% vs. 75%) or connected to other parents at school (55% vs. 63%). These findings show that sizeable proportions of parents perceive the behavior of other parents at the school as a barrier, which is an overlooked factor in family engagement research and literature.

*"In addition to his school being far from home, if I'm at work, I'm 20 minutes in the opposite direction, which means it takes me about 35 minutes to get to his school. Also, I don't really want to be involved. I don't have time for that. The PTA always came across as a fraternity-like organization in my mind."*

**– Black mother of a second grader**

### Multilingual and low-income parents feel less welcome by school staff than other parents

Many parents with household incomes under \$50,000 said they've had negative experiences with staff at their child's school. They were more likely than parents with higher incomes to say that school staff are not welcoming to parents (40% vs. 26% for high-income parents), and that they've had a bad experience with their child's school (45% vs. 26% for high-income parents). Parents with lower incomes were also more likely to note that a more welcoming attitude from school staff could improve parent engagement (25% vs. 16%).

Too often, families of [English learners face](#) deficit views of English learner parents, a negative school climate, and a lack of home language access.<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, families that spoke another language at home were more likely than families that spoke only English at home to say that the school's staff are not welcoming to parents (44% vs. 33%) and that they have had previous bad experiences with their child's school (46% vs. 35%). When asked what would help to increase parent engagement, parents who spoke a language other than English at home emphasized more respect from teachers for their racial, ethnic, or cultural background (22% vs 10%) more than those who spoke only English at home.

This points to the need to train staff to take an asset-based approach to parent engagement and to make time for additional, meaningful parent engagement activities.

### Feelings of not belonging are among the biggest hindrances that parents face

About 1 in 5 Black, Latino, and multilingual parents noted that previous bad experiences with their child's school were a major barrier to engaging with their child's school. And about 1 in 5 Black, low-income, and multilingual parents said that unwelcoming parents were a major obstacle. About 1 in 5 Black and low-income parents and parents of children with a disability also indicated that school staff seeming too busy to engage with parents was a major challenge.

## Cultural Inclusiveness

The U.S. school-age population is [racially, ethnically](#),<sup>33</sup> and [linguistically](#)<sup>34</sup> diverse and reflects a myriad of different cultural backgrounds and identities. Inclusive family engagement requires taking steps to ensure that parents who are not part of the dominant White, middle-class culture, and parents who otherwise have less power and influence at their school, have their voices heard and needs addressed. We asked parents and teachers in several different ways to tell us whether they feel their school is fostering cultural inclusivity and providing culturally inclusive engagement opportunities.

### Most parents and teachers say their child's school is culturally inclusive

According to the results of our second survey, most parents (80%) agree that the adults in their child's school are respectful of their family's customs and culture (this question was not included in the first survey), and that the school's staff communicates well with people from their culture (79%). In addition, most parents (85%) think that their child's school is welcoming to people from different backgrounds and cultures.

A high percentage of teachers (85%) also believe their school is welcoming to people from different cultures. And notably, in Survey 1 — which was conducted in January 2023, at the height of the book banning debate — nearly all teachers (96%) felt that their schools were welcoming. In addition, 80% of teachers agreed that their school regularly incorporates cultural diversity into school activities.

While most teachers agree that their school incorporates cultural diversity into school activities, many think their school isn't doing enough. Twenty-six percent of teachers do not think that their school's family engagement initiatives consider families' cultural backgrounds, and 25% do not think that their school gives teachers adequate support to communicate with families who speak languages other than English.

## Family Engagement in Luna School District

**Building cultural competence is an ongoing family engagement practice.** Family engagement staff have implemented measures to ensure that employees learn about unconscious bias, different ways that people from other cultures might interact and communicate, and strategies to support families from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Cultural events, meetings with families, family event nights, and resource collection and dissemination have also helped.

*“We have our own beliefs of what family engagement looks like and then we start those [family engagement training] conversations, [and realize], oh, I didn’t think about that. And it’s always thinking about what the needs of the parents or the families are. And our own biases about what we believe about parents and families and what they can bring to the table.”*

### **Among the parents who say schools are not inclusive, welcoming more people of diverse races, ethnicities, and cultures is most important**

While most respondents said that their schools are culturally inclusive, those parents and teachers who said that their school does not feel welcoming and inclusive of different backgrounds and cultures offered additional comments on what schools could do to improve in this area. Many of the comments shared common themes about belonging and safety: A number of them indicated that predominately White schools were not taking the needs or concerns of parents of different cultures, ethnicities, or races into account; even more troubling, some intimated that the schools might be unsafe for their child, on account of their racial identity. This highlights the need for schools to pay closer attention to how different groups of parents might be experiencing the school and find ways to engage with all parents, not just those with the most resources and cultural capital.

When asked what steps could be taken to make schools more welcoming and inclusive places, parents indicated that welcoming more diverse people or cultures was most important.

*“When there are meetings held, they need to include everyone and take into account everyone’s opinions, no matter their cultural background. They also need to check in on parents to make sure that their children are feeling welcome in many different ways, [even and especially] if they have a different background. Anyone could feel unwelcome, so I feel like this could pertain to any child or any parent. Teachers and administrative staff should constantly check in to make sure [children] are [being] welcoming and [feeling] Latino mother of a second grader welcome.”*

**– Latino mother of a second grader**

## While schools may be culturally inclusive, few parents and teachers think their school is making learning culturally sustaining

While many parents think their school's culture is inclusive, nuances emerged when parents were asked to consider whether instruction is *culturally sustaining*. Specifically, one-fifth of parents (19%) and one-quarter of teachers (25%) disagreed that their school regularly connects students' cultures and customs to what they are learning in the classroom. A sizeable portion of parents (on average, 12%) were unsure.

*"They need to incorporate more cultural diversity into their academic curriculum. Past and present and future cultural diversity and acceptance of everyone, no matter who they are, what they are, or where they come from."*

**– Latino mother of a second grader**

At the same time, parents and teachers have concerns about whether efforts to make learning more culturally sustaining are done well. About half of teachers (55%) and parents (46%) are concerned about whether schools are adequately incorporating students' cultures into the curriculum (Survey 2 only, this question was not included in Survey 1), and almost two-thirds of teachers (63%) are concerned that they lack the resources to accommodate students' customs and cultures in the classroom.



## 5 Things School and District Leaders Can Do to Improve Family Engagement

Family engagement is key to student success. When schools and families work together to support student learning, there are significant benefits for all. Although there may be many barriers to family engagement, effective school and teacher [outreach to families](#) can improve students' academic performance,<sup>35</sup> which is vital considering longstanding inequities, which have been compounded by the unfinished learning students experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Further Reading

Federal and [state policies](#) play a crucial role in shaping the ways in which families can engage with their children's schools.<sup>36</sup> Legislators and education leaders at the federal and state levels can provide resources (time and training) to support educators, so they can engage with families more effectively. Legislators and education leaders can also ensure that family engagement is prioritized in programmatic and grantmaking decisions. For more detailed state and federal recommendations, see our brief on "How Student, Family, and Community Engagement Impacts Students' Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (SEAD)."<sup>37</sup>

School and district leaders should implement evidence-based family engagement strategies that help families feel heard; give families opportunities to meaningfully influence the school's academic success, culture, and climate, and be partners in decision-making that impacts their children. District leaders should understand that, while context matters, there are core components of effective family engagement that should guide their efforts to improve family engagement. These [include](#) building trust between families and schools, rooting family engagement strategies in student learning and well-being, and ensuring that family engagement practices are culturally responsive — especially by training and supporting educators to engage with families that enable this work.<sup>38</sup>

### Further Reading

- A [report from Learning Heroes](#) offers resources and examples for school-based practitioners.
- See this [report](#) and [database](#) from the Brookings Institution for creative family-school engagement strategies from around the world that were developed during the COVID-19 crisis.

Family engagement should be part of schools' everyday work and must be incorporated into schoolwide processes in a systematic way. For detailed guidance on understanding the systemic barriers to meaningful, culturally responsive family engagement and identifying concrete actions to mitigate those barriers, district leaders can use the guidebooks created by the [Alliance for Resource Equity \(ARE\)](#) — a partnership between EdTrust and Education Resource Strategies. Specifically, district leaders interested in developing or improving their family engagement strategy should refer to the guidebooks on creating a [positive and inviting school climate](#)<sup>39</sup> (the actions to address key question 6.4: “Does each student attend a school that actively and meaningfully engages families?” are particularly relevant) and [student supports and intervention](#)<sup>40</sup> (the section on family and community partnerships is particularly relevant).

We also highlight five recommendations below, based on the findings of our polls, for strengthening engagement with the families and parents of young learners.

### 1. Collect and regularly review data to understand the needs of families and educators

Meaningful family engagement efforts at the local level should start with a clear understanding of families' needs with respect to family engagement. School and district leaders can conduct a survey before the beginning of the school year to learn about their needs. Surveys, like the ones conducted for this report, but smaller in scale and scope, may reveal findings that are specific to that school community. School- or district-specific surveys may also show results that differ from the findings pulled from far-reaching, general research and highlight other ways for parents and teachers to express their concerns going into the new school year.

## Further Reading

States should provide evidence-based guidance and funding to help district and school leaders engage families in school and collect and publicly report data about family and community engagement.<sup>41</sup> There are many publicly available examples of family engagement surveys that state and district leaders can use to better understand the needs of families and educators.

- The U.S. Department of Education has a series of school climate surveys — one of which is designed for parents. That survey includes questions related to family engagement that ask about cultural and linguistic competence, connections to the school community, and participation.
- The [5Essentials survey](#), developed by [UChicago Impact](#), also has survey questions related to family engagement, including questions on school communication about events and academic progress, belonging, and barriers to engagement.
- Panorama Education has developed a [survey](#) to understand family-school relationships, which includes questions about family engagement, barriers to engagement, and gives parents opportunities to say exactly what they want/need and elaborate on their answers to the specific questions asked.

Using survey data from the school or district community can help teachers and school leaders understand what parents perceive as barriers to engaging with their child's school and improve family engagement strategies so that districts can better serve all families. Schools can also use data to identify the resources families need most to support their children at home. Whenever possible, school and district leaders should review data that is disaggregated by race, ethnicity, home language, disability status, and income level to inform strategies for increasing equitable engagement practices.

But it's not enough to simply collect data. School districts should intentionally incorporate family perspectives into decision-making about school policies and act on feedback from families as they adjust the programs and policies being implemented.

**1. Provide supports to families (e.g., set clearer expectations, offer additional conference days, etc.) and create more opportunities to help parents understand academic expectations and whether their children are meeting them**

Research shows that family engagement is most effective at increasing student achievement when it's [linked to student learning](#) (e.g., discussions about academic expectations, how parents can be aware of their children's homework assignments and help their children engage with them, and, in later years, helping students choose courses and prepare for college).<sup>42</sup>

Too often, parents think their kids are on grade level, when, [actually, they are not](#).<sup>43</sup> This [disconnect](#) was made worse by the pandemic.<sup>44</sup> Parents are hungry for more information and might monitor how their children are doing more closely if they had accurate information about their children's progress and achievement.



## PROMISING PRACTICE: Prioritizing Listening and Supporting Families to Take the Lead at Teacher-Parent Conferences

The [Learning Community School](#) in Central Falls, Rhode Island, is a charter school that puts family engagement at the center of the school's core beliefs, which hold that families are the greatest assets in their children's lives.<sup>45</sup>

The school's commitment to making sure that family engagement is incorporated into all the school does is apparent in its revised format for parent-teacher conferences. First, the school collected data that revealed that educators were doing the majority of the talking during parent-teacher conferences. In response, the school developed a structured set of questions that parents can use at conferences and committed to letting families take the lead and talk first during every conference; the school trained teachers to spend most of the time listening, rather than talking. The result is extremely high participation rates in parent-teacher conferences (95%), an engaged community, high retention rates, and students who outperform their peers in the state.

### 2. Reduce barriers to engagement and think beyond old strategies that require parents to come to the school

Most parents and families want to actively engage with their children's schools, but old methods of communication and engagement create many barriers. For example, many families who took our survey cited child care, parents' busy schedules, and transportation as barriers to family engagement.

School and district leaders and teachers can mitigate these barriers by using multiple methods to communicate with families. Schools and districts that adopted [new approaches](#) to engage with families during the pandemic — including flexible scheduling for conferences and discussions of academic progress, home visits, the use of virtual meeting spaces, and text messaging — should continue using those methods, so that all parents have opportunities to get involved.<sup>46</sup> Offering child care at school events and vouchers for public transportation and/or ride sharing to parents would also help eliminate common barriers highlighted by parents in our survey.

The results of our survey also show a need to make home visits, which are an [evidence-based](#) practice, more widespread and effective.<sup>47</sup> Policymakers at the school and district levels must increase awareness of the benefits of home visits, as well as training and resources (time, as well as money for things like reimbursing transportation costs), so that educators can conduct home visits effectively.



## PROMISING PRACTICE: Authentic Relationship-Building Through Small-Group Advisories and Home Visits

As part of New Mexico's statewide [community schools initiative](#), state leaders held conversations with local communities, in which parents said that they wanted to be engaged in their children's learning but didn't feel welcome at school.<sup>48</sup> State leaders made relationship-building a priority in the state's community schools, providing resources for "advisories," which ensure that every student has a teacher-adviser who takes their attendance each day. Parents were immediately notified when students were absent, and advisers served as a primary and consistent contact person for parents at the school, for both academic and nonacademic supports. This advisory system is buttressed by other family engagement practices at community schools, such as home visits, offering communications in parents' native languages, community events, and opportunities for parents to lead student activities or share their expertise with groups of students.

### 3. Make sure that engagement strategies and the curriculum incorporate the language, culture, history, and lived experiences of all students and families in the community

Research shows that [cultural beliefs](#) influence parents' school engagement; thus, schools and districts should use culturally relevant engagement strategies to better reach all parents and families.<sup>49</sup> Schools and districts working toward equity must integrate family engagement into their equity work and agenda, as improving student learning and students' school experiences is nearly impossible without authentic collaboration with families. For staff, this [may mean](#) unpacking some of their own biases and presumptions about students and their families; developing an asset-based mindset; and recognizing and working to dismantle power imbalances between families and school staff, as well as between parents.<sup>50</sup>

*“Multicultural nights have been enlightening at other schools we have attended.  
Sharing foods and traditions of other cultures is fun and makes everyone  
feel included and welcome.”*

**– Parent who said they wanted their child's school to be more inclusive**

In addition, language barriers can prevent parents from engaging with their child's school. Providing high-quality translation services and documents in multiple languages are vital to creating culturally responsive family engagement opportunities. Schools serving large populations of Spanish-speaking students, for example, should consider hiring front office staff who speak Spanish and can help translate materials from English to Spanish.

Schools and districts should invite families to participate in school governance and decision-making and co-create policies. The families involved should reflect the socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the student population and include families of students with disabilities. School and district staff should make materials accessible throughout the process, including providing information in multiple languages and in multiple formats and having accessible means of incorporating feedback from families on how to improve the co-creation process.

### 4. Provide supports for educators

Educators play an important role in family engagement. To play that role well, teachers must be given the resources and time to learn about evidence-based strategies and implement them, as well as set up other structures and supports to facilitate engagement with families. This [includes](#) professional development; onboarding and new teacher orientation; evaluations and reviews; and data collection, analysis, and sharing.<sup>51</sup> Family engagement coordinators can support educators in a transition to more collaborative and inclusive approaches to family engagement and can help implement some of the other recommendations outlined in this report.

## Conclusion

Our survey findings suggest that while parents and educators are generally satisfied with family engagement efforts in their schools, there is room for improvement — especially with respect to minimizing barriers to engagement, helping families engage with their child’s learning, making learning more culturally inclusive, and providing supports for teachers to partner with families. We hope education leaders at all levels will use these findings to encourage and improve family engagement and build collaborative relationships among teachers, families, and school districts in ways that address all families’ needs. Because when schools and families join forces to support student learning, the results can be transformative.



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# The Education Trust

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EdTrust is committed to advancing policies and practices to dismantle the racial and economic barriers embedded in the American education system. Through our research and advocacy, EdTrust improves equity in education from preschool through college, engages diverse communities dedicated to education equity and justice, and increases political and public will to build an education system where students will thrive.

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