Predicaments and Potential: Understanding Family Engagement

Great!
SCHOOLS.org

Introduction: From micro schools to missing children

There's long been a gap between families from disadvantaged backgrounds and their children's schools. Not only are their children more likely to experience inequitable treatment[1] and less access to resources[2], but they are more likely to face unfair disciplinary measures[3] and attend schools where few teachers share their lived experiences[4]. Between the pandemic and our country's reckoning with its history of racial injustice ignited by the Black Lives Matter movement, the distance between public schools and families has only grown. Enrollment, especially in disadvantaged communities, has dropped in many districts[5], as have attendance rates[6]. Microschools abound[7]; homeschooling has exploded.[8] The mysterious phenomena of "missing children" – students no longer enrolled in any school, including private schools or homeschooling – has spawned extensive reporting but few answers.[9] Educators have reported widespread disengagement and an uptick in behavior problems by students – especially those from disadvantaged communities, which may have contributed to the rise in teacher burnout and turnover.[10] Faced with mounting evidence that engaging families is becoming more difficult than ever, the need to better understand the experiences and concerns of these families, including how best to communicate with them, serve them, and ultimately learn from them, is more essential than ever. Ultimately it's the districts and schools that discover the best strategies for reaching and understanding disengaged families that will not only solve their institutional problems of

[1] Brian D. Smedley, "Inequality in Teaching and Schooling: How Opportunity Is Rationed to Students of Color in America," The Right Thing to Do, the Smart Thing to Do - NCBI Bookshelf, 2001, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK223640/.

[2] "Unequal Opportunities: Fewer Resources, Worse Outcomes for Students in Schools with Concentrated Poverty - The Commonwealth Institute," The Commonwealth Institute, April 13, 2021, https://thecommonwealthinstitute.org/research/unequal-opportunities-fewer-resources-worse-outcomes-for-students-in-schools-with-concentrated-poverty/.

[3] "Disproportionality in Student Discipline: Connecting Policy to Research | Brookings," Brookings, March 9, 2022, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/disproportionality-in-student-discipline-connecting-policy-to-research/.

[4] Andre Perry and Andre Perry, "Black Teachers Matter, for Students and Communities," The Hechinger Report, March 30, 2020, https://hechingerreport.org/black-teachers-matter-for-students-and-communities/.

[5] Enrollment declines higher in urban and high-poverty areas. "Declining School Enrollment Since the Pandemic | Brookings," Brookings, January 9, 2024, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/declining-school-enrollment-since-the-pandemic/.

[6] Sarah Mervosh, "Students Are Missing School at an Alarming Rate," The New York Times, November 17, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/17/us/chronic-absenteeism-pandemic-recovery.html.

[7] Thomas Arnett and Thomas Arnett, "Is 2023 the Year of the Microschool?," Christensen Institute, December 25, 2022, https://www.christenseninstitute.org/blog/is-2023-the-year-of-the-microschool/.

[8] Peter Jamison et al., "Home Schooling's Rise from Fringe to Fastest-Growing Form of Education," The Washington Post, October 31, 2023, accessed January 31, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/interactive/2023/homeschooling-growth-data-by-district/.

[9] Bianca Vázquez Toness and Sharon Lurye, "COVID School Enrollment Shows Thousands of Missing Kids, Homeschooling," AP NEWS, July 14, 2021, https://projects.apnews.com/features/2023/missing-children/index.html.

[10] "More than 80 Percent of U.S. Public Schools Report Pandemic Has Negatively Impacted Student Behavior and Socio-Emotional Development – July 6, 2022," n.d., https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press_releases/07_06_2022.asp.

attendance and enrollment, but evolve our education system to reflect the needs and wants of the people they serve.

In this report, we will trace the evolution of family engagement in K-12 education from its origins as an idea to a full-fledged profession with ever-expanding roles and responsibilities. We will also explore the lessons and limitations of the field, identifying best practices gathered from research and practice. Finally, we will share insights from internal GreatSchools research drawn from our platform that reaches nearly half of all K-12 households each year. Here we will focus on what families furthest from opportunity (including low-income, Black, brown, and Indigenous families) prioritize and are experiencing in their children's educational journeys, drawing on focus groups, user behavior on our site, surveys, and one-on-one conversations. We will conclude with recommendations for the field on how to best reach these families and continue learning from the schools and districts that are listening to parents and adapting their policies, practices, and programs to best serve them.

The history of family engagement

Once signifying a vaguely mysterious family obligation[11] of the Victorian Era, the phrase *family engagement* seems to have acquired its current institutional meaning in the early 1960s. For instance, *Young Children*, a magazine for early childhood educators, advised its readers that "Family engagement is likely to be more successful if teachers tailor [the activities] to the interests and expertise of family members."[12] Since then, the phrase has come to signify a multi-faceted endeavor within the education and social services sector that seeks to connect families with the institutions designed to educate, monitor, and serve their children.

Within the world of education, family engagement has been called upon to address a vast range of issues. This includes efforts aimed at individual children, including

---

[11] An example of the previous meaning of family engagement comes from the 1903 novel Between the Acts: "Mr. Bretherton knew at a glance that it was "the Gipper," the very scholar who had refused his invitation to a walk owing to a most important family engagement." "Between the Acts : Nevinson, Henry Woodd, 1856-1941 : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive," Internet Archive, January 24, 2007, https://archive.org/details/betweenacts00nevijala/page/52/mode/2up?q=%22family+engagement%22.

[12] "Young Children : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive," Internet Archive, 1964, https://archive.org/details/performingarts0000unse_g3g7/mode/2up?q=%22family+engagement%22.

enlisting parents to provide support with early reading, math, learning disabilities, study skills, and college applications, as well as improving their children's school attendance, helping with new education standards or curriculum, and implementing better screen time and eating habits at home. Family engagement also has often served as the one-stop shop for providing non-educational resources to families including food, clothing, and access to low-cost services such as internet or transportation.

Family engagement has evolved to be more than a delivery mechanism for individual services. It has also been charged with supporting broader institutional goals. This includes recruiting parents to create more positive and cohesive school cultures as well as contributing to fundraising and volunteer efforts in classrooms, schools, or districts, and helping with institutional goals like improving test scores and attendance. Finally, it also serves as a channel where parents make their voices heard: the family engagement phone number is often the first stop for parents with complaints or concerns about a practice, policy, or experience at their school or district.

The birth of a new profession

Deployed as a social service, educational tool, communication channel, and community-building strategy in public K-12 schools, family engagement – once the bottom bullet of many teachers' to-do lists – has grown beyond the classroom to the school, district, state, and eventually federal level. This, in turn, has spawned a new professional field, complete with a cadre of experts and researchers who find mounting evidence that successful family engagement, because parents are so key to children's educational success,[13] can provide the golden key to unlocking numerous educational challenges.

Underlying many of these efforts floats the unspoken goal of mobilizing parents to become "involved" in a model considered ideal in America's K-12 schools, where schools often count on parental labor for both at-home tutoring and in-school

---

[13] William H. Jeynes, "The Relationship between Parental Involvement and Urban Secondary School Academic Achievement - A Metastudy," Urban Education 42, no. 1 (January 2007): 82–110.

volunteer hours. "Involved parents" help with homework, ferry their children to after-school activities, show up for school events, volunteer, and join parent clubs and associations that fundraise for key educational provisions. Those parents who cannot or choose not to play this role (whether because they are focused on providing basic needs to their children in the form of housing, food, and medical services or because it's not a role parents play in their children's education in their country of origin) often become the focus of family engagement efforts. Over the years, family engagement experts have attacked the challenge of engaging these "hard-to-reach families" from many angles, including efforts to close the digital divide, provide wraparound services on school sites, host national and regional conferences to share best practices, and create media toolkits.[14] Despite the myriad initiatives of these well-meaning professionals, the target families remain — mythically — "disengaged."

Demystifying the "hard-to-reach" family

Historically, the education system has approached these families – typically identifying them by race, income, and home language – as *problems to be solved*.[15] In the vernacular of this deficit-based framing, these "disadvantaged," and "minority" families have children whom educators characterize variously as "disengaged," "at-risk" and "vulnerable" and who are linked to a variety of professional problems for educators, including the achievement gap,[16] chronic absenteeism, and suspension disparities. The reality, however, is that the assumptions and nomenclature defining these families often reveal more about our society's biases and structural shortfalls than the capacities or engagement of the families themselves.[17]

Educators bemoan the irony that the parents who show up (and complain) most are typically the ones whose children are already succeeding in the system, while

---

[14] Flamboyan Foundation, "Connecting with Hard to Reach Families - Flamboyan," Flamboyan, August 30, 2019, https://flamboyanfoundation.org/resource/connecting-with-hard-to-reach-families/.

[15] Gill Boag-Munroe and Maria Evangelou, "From Hard to Reach to How to Reach: A Systematic Review of the Literature on Hard-to-Reach Families," Research Papers in Education 27, no. 2 (April 1, 2012): 209–39, https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2010.509515.

[16] Richard Gentry PhD., "A Lack of Parent Engagement Helps Create Failing Schools," Psychology Today, July 11, 2011, accessed January 31, 2023, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/raising-readers-writers-and-spellers/201107/lack-parent-engagement-helps-create-failing-schools.

[17] Gill Crozier and Jane Davies, "Hard to Reach Parents or Hard to Reach Schools? A Discussion of Home–School Relations, with Particular Reference to Bangladeshi and Pakistani Parents," British Educational Research Journal 33, no. 3 (June 1, 2007): 295–313, https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701243578.

the parents whose children are not thriving academically are "disengaged." But since the school system has tied funding to attendance and schools' fates to test scores, engaging families characterized as "hard-to-reach" has become an increasingly urgent goal for schools.

Framing that distorts as well as clarifies

With the rise of every profession comes the naming and framing of its intended audience. In the case of family engagement, the field's definition of these families is marked by both clarity and distortion. On the side of clarity, the field acknowledges that these families face multiple barriers. First, they tend to be busier than their more economically advantaged peers, juggling multiple jobs, long commutes, and navigating more single-parent or dispersed households. They also may have had negative experiences with schools as children, leading them to mistrust the system. Finally, they often lack resources – such as technology (e.g., internet access and computers) or educational materials (e.g., books and school supplies) – important for at-home learning. On the side of distortion, family engagement experts and school leaders often betray their biases in their deficit framing. Previously mentioned research speaks to the fact that parents who may seem disengaged with their child's school nevertheless are deeply engaged in supporting their children with their education. Moreover, multilingualism, cultural and class complexity, and histories of resilience in the face of limited resources, racism, and other challenges – all attributes common to these families – are often characterized as barriers to learning instead of benefits.

Moreover, the narrative about "hard-to-reach" "disengaged" "minority" families is often both inaccurate and misleading. Far from a small minority, they constitute a large portion of public school families no matter how you measure them. Nearly 49% of all public school students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch[18] – a proxy for a family having a low household income. Since 2014, nonwhite students have constituted the majority in America's public schools, a demographic trend that grows every year.

---

[18] National Center for Education Statistics, "Number and Percentage of Public School Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch, by State: Selected School Years, 2000-01 through 2021-22," n.d., https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_204.10.asp.

Early parent engagement literature tended to frame the issue in terms of parent blame[19] or government responsibility.[20] Subsequent research suggests that disengaged parents are, in fact, a misnomer.[21] "Disengaged parents" serves as a euphemism for those who are otherwise highly engaged (as a result of poverty,[22] low wages, food insecurity, unstable housing, incarceration, and a lack of health insurance) with the Herculean tasks of providing for their children's fundamental needs.

More importantly, research suggests they are far from disengaged in their children's learning or disinterested in their role as parents. Instead, they center their parenting experience in their lives. Though majorities of all groups say parenting is important to their identities, Black and Hispanic parents are far more likely to say that being a parent is *the* most important aspect of who they are as people compared to white and Asian parents.[23] They also report finding it more enjoyable. Similarly, low-income parents are far more likely to say parenting is the most important part of their identity compared to parents from other income groups,[24] despite also reporting experiencing more stress. Such findings suggest that though parents from low-income and historically disadvantaged groups experience a broad range of parenting challenges, their commitment to and investment in being parents is impressively high.

Finally, this commitment surfaces in how these parents spend their time. A national online survey of 5,456 parents found that when asked how many hours they spend directly helping their child with learning (e.g., homework, learning activities, having meaningful conversations) low-income parents reported spending more hours of

[19]Gentry, "A Lack of Parent Engagement Helps Create Failing Schools."

[20] Karen Bogenschneider and Carol Johnson, "Family Involvement in Education: How Important Is It? What Can Legislators Do?," Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars, 2004.https://www.purdue.edu/hhs/hdfs/fii/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/fia_brchapter_20c02.pdf

[21] IBID

[22] What persists in the data is the high rate of child poverty and lack of resources in many American families. While recent government subsidies to low-income families during the pandemic decreased the percentage of children living in poverty, experts note that current trends suggest that the rates are headed up, as many federal pandemic relief programs expire. According to the annual Census report, in 2022 child poverty more than doubled in the United States, the largest single-year increase on record.

[23] Parents who say being a parent is the most important aspect of who they are: Black 42% and Hispanic 38% vs White 25% and Asian 24%. Reem Nadeem, "Race, Ethnicity and Parenting in America: Survey Report (2023) | Pew Research Center," Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project, January 31, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/01/24/race-ethnicity-and-parenting/

[24] 41% of low-income parents compared to 27% of middle-income parents and 22% of high-income parents say that being a parent is the most important aspect of who they are. Reem Nadeem, "How Parenting in America Differs by Income: Survey Report (2023) | Pew Research Center," Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project, January 31, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/01/24/income-and-parenting/.

the week than their middle- and high-income peers.[25] This contradicts the picture painted by many educators who define disengagement solely based on showing up to school events or other school-based definitions of involvement. Thus, the negative framing of being "disengaged" in terms of the school system misses a fundamental reality for these parents: they are deeply engaged in parenting whether or not they show up at Back-to-School Night.

Lessons from the field

Given that this group of families represents nearly half the population of public school students and their children are becoming increasingly disengaged from those schools, it's essential to compile and synthesize research learning from different fields to understand the best ways to reach and ultimately serve them.

According to research on best practices from schools, there are no magic formulas. To date, no one intervention consistently or immediately guarantees that families will engage with schools or teachers. Literature reviews of 12 years of research on engaging "hard-to-reach" families across education, health, and social services in the U.S., U.K., Canada, and Australia concluded only that "complex issues need complex solutions which in turn need time to implement."[26] In another study of five schools successful in serving "hard-to-reach" parents, the researchers ended up turning the label on the schools themselves: "Evidence suggests that parents with lower socio-economic status (SES) are less likely to engage in their children's education and there is a tendency to label such parents as 'hard to reach'. However, in reality, these parents may find the school itself 'hard to reach'."[27] Finally, research suggests that improved parent-teacher communication can lead to better outcomes for students in the form of homework completion (40%), decreasing student distraction in class (25%), and increased classroom participation (15%), but the onus remains on teachers engaging parents individually.[28]

---

[25] GreatSchools Parent Insights survey, 2020.

[26] Gill Boag-Munroe and Maria Evangelou, "From Hard to Reach to How to Reach: A Systematic Review of the Literature on Hard-to-Reach Families," Research Papers in Education 27, no. 2 (April 1, 2012): 209–39, https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2010.509515.

[27] Laura Watt, "Engaging Hard to Reach Families: Learning from Five 'Outstanding' Schools," Education 3-13 44, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 32–43, https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2015.1122321.https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03004279.2015.1122321?src=recsys

[28]Kraft, M. A., & Dougherty, S. M. (2013). The effect of teacher–family communication on student engagement: Evidence from a randomized field experiment. Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness, 6(3), 199-222. https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/mkraft/files/kraft_dougherty_teacher_communication_jree.pdf

In an era of increasingly friction-free mass digital communications, it's worth asking: Why are schools not becoming more successful at reaching parents and what are they asking them to do? In part, the answer stems from the incorrect assumption that this is a monolithic group rather than a collection of groups from diverse cultural, linguistic, geographic, economic, and racial backgrounds. Indeed, national surveys suggest that "these parents" harbor widely different concerns and aspirations for their children. For instance, Pew research has found that Hispanic parents are far more likely than white, Black, and Asian parents to worry about their children facing everything from bullying, mental illness, and getting in trouble with police, to problems with drugs and alcohol, teen pregnancy and getting shot, beaten up or kidnapped."[29] Similarly, Black parents are more likely than white, Hispanic, or Asian parents to say it's "extremely important to them that their children be ambitious as adults."[30] Differing income levels also seem to affect both parents' worries and their parenting experience: Parents with relatively low household incomes are more likely to worry about mental health struggles, safety, and teen pregnancy than those with higher incomes.[31]

Since this group of parents is so diverse, it should not surprise us that the most successful parent engagement programs are extremely personalized. In fact, some of the most famous are based on one-on-one relationship building. For instance, research has found that home visits by pairs of teachers to family homes had positive outcomes on their students' academic achievement and attitudes in school.[32] Unfortunately, these programs are the most difficult to scale and maintain.

What can we learn about engaging families with digital media?

[29] Details on percentages for each group on each issue can be found here: "Hispanic Parents among the Most Likely to Worry about Challenges Their Kids May Face; Particular Concerns Vary across Racial and Ethnic Groups | Pew Research Center," Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project, n.d., https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/01/24/race-ethnicity-and-parenting/pst_2023-01-24_parenting_02-06/.

[30] 42% of Black parents compared to 26% of White parents, 24% of Hispanic parents and 20% of Asian parents. Nadeem, "Race, Ethnicity and Parenting in America: Survey Report (2023) | Pew Research Center," January 31, 2023. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/01/24/race-ethnicity-and-parenting/

[31] Nadeem, "How Parenting in America Differs by Income: Survey Report (2023) | Pew Research Center," January 31, 2023. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/01/24/income-and-parenting/

[32] Fatih İlhan, Burhan Özfidan, and Sabit Yilmaz, "Home Visit Effectiveness on Students' Classroom Behavior and Academic Achievement," DergiPark (Istanbul University), n.d., https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/jsser/issue/45447/570403. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1213224.pdf

Research suggests that customizing information for parents can help support family engagement in schools. For instance, there is good evidence that customized text messaging can lead to significant academic and engagement improvements. For example, one text messaging program that sends parents educational tips[33] via their schools led to two to three months in early literacy gains in preschool children. Similarly, one family engagement text-based app with translation tools has been associated with academic gains and improved school attendance in a large urban school district.[34] Despite such gains with specific programs, the gap between families and educators persists in a system where declining enrollment and chronic absenteeism offer growing evidence that it is losing the fight for family engagement.

In this context, organizations that share educational information with parents at scale become particularly relevant. GreatSchools, a national nonprofit, offers parents and caregivers bilingual information and data to choose schools and support their children's learning. Annually, it reaches approximately half of all U.S. parents of school-age children, more than 40% of whom self-identify as having a low household income and more than half identify as nonwhite. As such, it is one of the country's largest platforms for reaching families with education-related information. In the years since the pandemic, the organization has undertaken a number of efforts seeking to reach, engage, and even mobilize families with low household incomes, living in disadvantaged communities, or who are historically underserved by the U.S. education system.

Deep listening to parents' concerns

Since 2019, GreatSchools has surveyed thousands of parents nationwide to learn about their goals, aspirations, and preferences for their children's education. These surveys revealed that parents of all backgrounds share primary aspirations, such as: for their children to learn the skills and mindset to "persist when things get

---

[33] Ben York and Susanna Loeb, "One Step at a Time: The Effects of an Early Literacy Text Messaging Program for Parents of Preschoolers," November 1, 2014, https://doi.org/10.3386/w20659. https://cepa.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/One%20Step%20At%20A%20Time%203_1_17_0.pdf
[34] Rina Park, "Engaging Families Leads to Student Academic Gains and Increased Attendance: How TalkingPoints Improved Outcomes in a Large Urban School District.," n.d., https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED627965.

tough and stay optimistic about learning." They also shared common definitions of success for their children. For example, the top two definitions of success for their children were: 1) To "learn from experience and be resilient in the face of difficulties;" and 2) To "find love, friends, and a positive community." However, they diverged when it came to how they interpreted the path to these goals and the kinds of information that they wanted to support their children's learning. For example, Black parents were more interested in information about how to navigate an inequitable school system than their white and Hispanic/Latine counterparts (28% vs. 17% and 18%, respectively). By the same token, Black parents expressed less interest in information about how to be a better parent (36% vs. 50% and 45%) although this was the most popular choice for all groups.

Similarly, parents differed in how they interpreted information about their top three signs of a good school. Although a plurality of all parent groups reported that "evidence that students are improving academically year to year" was one of the most important signs of a good school (white 45%, Hispanic 52%, Black 46%), white parents put more stock in "surveys that show students and teachers feel there's a positive school culture" (white 32%, Hispanic 18%, Black 15%).

Black parents on the other hand, reported far more interest in the value of equity and diversity compared to their white and Hispanic/Latine peers. For instance, as one of the biggest signs of a good school, they were more likely to choose "having an antiracist curriculum" (Black 25%, white 13%, Hispanic 14%) and fewer "equity gaps" (based on test scores, attendance and suspension rates) (Black 28%, white 20%, Hispanic 22%) and a "diverse student population" (Black 18%, white 5%, Hispanic/Latine 6%). In contrast, Hispanic/Latine families were more likely to elevate safety issues in assessing whether a school is good or bad. For instance, when looking for signs of a good school, 20% of Hispanic parents chose discipline policies that are positive, not punitive compared to 14% of white parents and 13% of Black parents. Similarly, 21% of Hispanic families chose corporal punishment as a primary sign of a bad school compared with 18% of white parents and 7% of Black parents.

In 2022, GreatSchools also conducted two national focus groups with 13 Black and Hispanic/Latine families from low-income backgrounds to understand their level and means of engagement and their experiences in their children's schools. Chief among their frustrations with their children's schools was a lack of responsiveness to their children's needs and timely communication about important topics immediately relevant to their children.

Key concerns for parents were:

- **Safety:** From physical safety at school (violence, bullying) and getting to school (transit to school and safety of their own or the school's neighborhood) to online safety to learning to make informed decisions and not succumb to peer pressure, all parents mentioned safety as a priority.

- **Mental and emotional health:** All participants mentioned their child's mental and emotional health as a source of ongoing concern. Several mentioned that they wished their children's schools were more proactive about trying new mental health strategies and destigmatizing mental health issues because "It's different now." Parents also discussed the increasing amount of screen time and declining number of in-person social connections during the pandemic as sources of their children's mental health struggles. Parents specifically mentioned the children's needs in this moment including ways to learn coping strategies, access to more therapy, and open conversations without stigma.

- **Love of learning:** All parents expressed concerns about when and why their child stopped loving to learn. Every parent said their children expressed enthusiasm for learning, loved school, and seemed to be thriving in early elementary school, but that over the years their joy diminished, replaced by a spectrum of malaise, general disengagement, caring less, being unmotivated, being less curious, being less interested in the world around them and their futures. Parents reported this drop in engagement started as young as 3rd to 5th grade and continued as kids moved through middle and high school.

Notably, when GreatSchools asked parents how often or well schools addressed these topics, the answer was that they didn't.

In our content for parents, GreatSchools has repeatedly and consistently seen more initial engagement with social and emotional learning articles than academic learning articles. Since the 2016-2017 school year, GreatSchools has delivered a robust email program for parents of PreK to high school children in English and Spanish that shares grade-based information about parenting, academics, social-emotional learning, at-home learning resources, and more. Parent testimonials and subsequent parent interviews suggest that parents first engage based on their immediate priorities and pain points (social emotional and parenting issues, for instance), then later use resources that enable them to help their children more proactively (e.g., using math resources on a holiday break or reading an article about a developmental stage that their child has not yet arrived at). This strategy can inform schools' and districts' family engagement efforts. While a school may seek to increase student attendance, for instance, if it first engages parents' immediate worries (e.g., their child's mental and emotional health or online safety), then perhaps parents will be more inclined to engage with the school's priorities, too.

Finally, the organization has conducted extensive user research to understand parent mindsets in terms of how they engage with their schools and their communications preferences.[35] Black and Hispanic/Latine parents researching K-12 schools reported that they were looking for schools that provided both a sense of safety and a community to create a foundation for their children's success or thriving.[36] As a result, they actively sought information about safety procedures and policies like the school's emergency plan for natural disasters/school shootings, or bullying and disciplinary policies. They also looked for information that could match their children's interests and passions or could provide a social home for their child, such as clubs. Parents reported that this information was significant enough that

---

[35] Over 50 user research interviews of parents conducted in English, GreatSchools 2023.
[36] In interviews, white parents reported being more focused on curriculum and academic reputation because they assumed that all their prospective schools were safe. This finding aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs: that parents can worry about other things, once they assume their children are physically safe.

they wanted to be able to find it online as opposed to needing to email or call individual schools to get answers to their questions.

Parents of enrolled students expressed additional needs, including wanting to be able to customize the method by which they receive communications (email vs. text vs. robocall vs. human call vs. social media), and the topics they hear about (upcoming events vs. emergencies vs. their child's progress), and the frequency they get communications (e.g., daily, weekly). Finally, parents consistently expressed a desire for more communications from people who knew their child and for more information about their own child, rather than mass messages from the school or school district (e.g., information about school-wide or district-wide events or policies).

From this scan of the literature and recent practices in the field, certain recommendations emerge:

- **Learn from responsive schools and districts.** We need to seek out the schools and districts that are actively addressing parents' primary concerns such as their children's safety, mental health, and access to rich individualized learning opportunities like career pathways, advanced classes, and clubs. How are parents invited to voice their biggest hopes and dreams for their children's learning? Where is their child's joy, wellness, culture, and strengths centered in the educational process? Addressing these larger concerns – such as mental health – may be the key to solving institutional problems like low attendance rates, but by focusing on the root cause schools and districts can reframe and see the problem through their parents' eyes.

- **Retire the "hard-to-reach", "disengaged" parents framing.** Instead, interrogate how the schools or districts may be "hard to reach" for busy parents. How are parents being gatekept from important decisions about their children's education? How hard is it for parents to get their questions answered about fundamental rules and regulations? How do they know about learning options and opportunities in their child's grade and beyond?

Deficit-based framing can help gloss over aspects of the system that create barriers to access for all parents and caregivers.

- **Reduce all the barriers.** Think about barriers across time, place, language, and process to engage parents who do not have access to resources and educational capital. Family engagement is not family engagement if it is not equitably accessible and relevant to the parents who typically do not "show up." This can mean making events accessible, offering food and daycare at in-person events, and asking parents how they want to be communicated with, but it also means creating regular channels like hotlines or emails designed to be responsive to parent questions so parents have a way to get their questions answered.

- **Use trusted messengers from all sources.** While teachers are still trusted messengers for parents, schools/districts often do not have the same pull or persuasiveness with less involved parents. Some parents, for instance, lack the knowledge to know how to navigate district bureaucracy because they are unsure what role districts play in their children's education. As online communities become more close-knit, sometimes trusted messengers are outside the parent's physical community in the form of writers, podcasters, and social media influencers. (This trend became most salient during COVID when a handful of anti-mask and anti-vaccine influencers captured the allegiance of many parents despite the schools' protestations to the contrary.)

Conclusion

Despite improvements in programs that engage parents with customized experiences and technology in schools, there hasn't been a tool or communication channel invented yet that acts as a silver bullet – or magic nudge – for reaching families furthest from opportunity. Reducing barriers with features like automatic translation and two-way communication goes a long way to help parents who have the will but not the way to engage with their schools. But there remains the growing problem of parents who have distanced themselves from the school system as a

choice. This active alienation from the system can take many forms – from the parent who ignores all school communications or stops dropping their child off until they become chronically absent to the parent who exits the system for a private school or homeschooling. There's still much to learn from these alienated families, especially in an era of increasing polarization and growing differences on what constitutes truth, whether in the curriculum (like the role of America's founding fathers or the reality of climate change) or in methods of finding it (how to assess a reliable source).

How do these parents regard schools as purveyors of knowledge? Does their current alienation from the system represent a transient moment in time in response to a historical need (the pandemic) or the beginning of a new normal for the school system? If a lack of trust is a fundamental motivation for these families, can communication repair it, or will the system itself need to respond more fundamentally to the increasingly diverse needs of increasingly diverse families? In the coming years, it will be important to track which districts and schools successfully re-engage their communities and which ones continue to struggle with family engagement. Such districts and schools can then become case studies for the rest of the nation to learn from.

GreatSchools.org
66 Franklin St, Suite 300
Oakland, California 94607
United States

 www.greatschools.org

Predicaments and Potential:
Understanding Family Engagement

March 2024