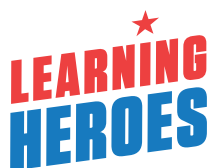


Improving Public Education:

# PARENTS AS CHANGE AGENTS

A Research Synthesis



Populace

January 2020



*Learning Heroes and Populace have each been investing in significant research to deeply understand parents' views and actions in support of their children's success and the role of schools, out-of-school settings, and homes in promoting that success. Our interconnected findings, supplemented by survey data from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, yield provocative and powerful implications for the field in working toward a more effective and equitable system of education — one that delivers on what parents want for their children.*

*We welcome and encourage you to share your thoughts and perspectives on our shared data as we explore a collective approach in supporting parents as education change agents.*



**Bibb Hubbard**  
Founder & President  
Learning Heroes



**Dr. Todd Rose**  
Co-Founder & President  
Populace

## OUR COLLECTIVE CHALLENGE

The public education system currently does not have a systematic, effective way to engage parents and guardians in understanding and acting upon information about their children's academic achievement and developmental progress. Research on large-scale systems change suggests that creating new sources of information (often called feedback loops) that contribute to a system's goals is one of the most powerful levers to shift a system's purpose and values.<sup>1</sup> We believe there's an opportunity to improve outcomes for students by engaging parents and guardians more effectively. Core to this is equipping parents with a broader set of information and actions they can take to advocate on behalf of their children's success.

Parents' actions can catalyze the system to be more responsive in meeting the needs of their own children and, ultimately, all students in a way that aligns with their definition of success. That is the collective call to action in this report.

## SHARED VALUES

Learning Heroes and Populace believe that parents and guardians are key to improving schools for all students, especially students who are most disadvantaged in our current system. With parents and their children at the center of school improvement efforts, the nation's education system can build upon the important but as yet insufficient progress we've seen over the past two decades.

We share a set of core values that underlie this report:

***Every young person enters adulthood ready to contribute and thrive in a changing world. We believe in a broader definition of student success that combines a strong academic foundation with the mindsets, skills, habits, and agency to succeed in college, career, and life.***

***We envision a future in which student outcomes improve dramatically and educational inequities are diminished, with a focus on historically underserved students.***

# KEY RESEARCH INSIGHTS

01

***Parents want their children to have a fulfilling career and pursue their passions over outperforming the competition — they don't view success as a zero-sum game.***

But parents are stymied in helping their children realize this aspiration because they believe that society values fame, power, and fortune above all. If parents understood that the majority share their views and values, they might engage in a range of different approaches to support their children's pathways from an earlier age.

02

***Parents expect schools and out-of-school settings to partner with them to educate their children in a more holistic way.***

They view academic, social, emotional, and cognitive development as deeply linked—a view confirmed by science.<sup>2</sup> We have a window of opportunity to design schools that better reflect both parents' expectations and how children actually learn.

03

***Most parents assume their children are on track for success, based on the limited information available to them.***

Academically, 9 in 10 parents of public school students, regardless of race, income, and education level, believe their child is at or above grade level in reading and math<sup>3</sup> — despite national data showing that barely 40% of students are proficient or above in those subjects.<sup>4</sup> Parents base this confidence on report card grades, the primary source of information that schools provide them about their children's performance.<sup>5</sup> Developmentally, parents value a variety of skills, habits, and mindsets for their children's success that are not captured by existing measures. Parents and guardians deserve a more holistic, accurate picture of their children's progress so they can be their children's most effective education advocates.

# AN EXPANDED VIEW OF STUDENT SUCCESS

Given the rapidly changing environmental, economic, social, and cultural conditions that children face, parents expect schools and out-of-school settings to work with them to educate their children in a more holistic way in order to lead purposeful and fulfilling lives.

Parents believe it's important for their children to gain more than academic knowledge to be successful. They want their children's schools to develop a range of skills and habits that parents refer to as "life skills."

Learning Heroes' *Developing Life Skills* report found parents of K-8 public school students prioritize a mix of social, emotional, cognitive, and academic skills for their children, including: respect, self-esteem, confidence, problem-solving skills, social skills, and responsible decision-making.<sup>6</sup> Eighty-six percent say developing social and emotional skills in school is a top or high priority for them.<sup>7</sup> More than 9 in 10 believe schools have a role in reinforcing the development of these "life skills."<sup>8</sup>

- Parents rate mental health, above even reading and math, as important for their children to have a successful future (Figure 1).<sup>9</sup>
- About 8 out of 10 parents of K-8 public school students say it is very important or absolutely essential that their child's school has high expectations for both academic progress (80%) and social-emotional development (78%).<sup>10</sup>

**FIGURE 1—Top 5 Skills Parents and Teachers Value for a Successful Future\***

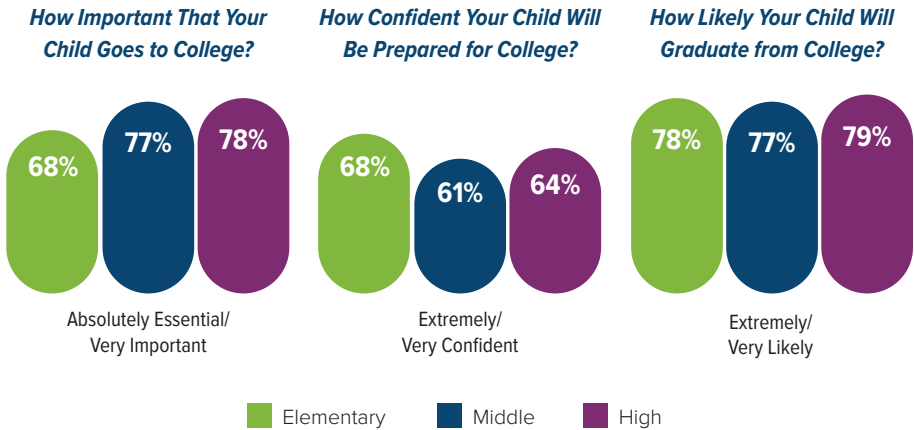
|          | Parents              | Teachers             |
|----------|----------------------|----------------------|
| <b>1</b> | Mental Health        | Reading              |
| <b>2</b> | Reading              | Perseverance         |
| <b>3</b> | Listening Skills     | Growth Mindset       |
| <b>4</b> | Strong Relationships | Strong Relationships |
| <b>5</b> | Math                 | Mental Health        |

\*Top 5 of 27  
Source: Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, Understanding Parent and Teacher Mindsets Towards Education, 2019.

Parents want their children to have a fulfilling career and pursue their passions, and most see college as the pathway to get there.

- Ninety-two percent of parents, based on the Populace data, want schools to help their children better themselves rather than outperform the competition.<sup>11</sup>
- A majority (63%) want their children to pursue their passions, even if that results in an uncertain future.<sup>12</sup>
- Most parents view college as the pathway to a successful life. Populace’s 2019 survey found 92% of parents want their children to attend college.<sup>13</sup> According to Learning Heroes’ research, a majority of parents of public school students are extremely or very confident that their children will be prepared for college, and most say it is likely their children will earn a college degree (Figure 2).<sup>14</sup>

**FIGURE 2—As Students Enter High School, Parent Expectations Remain High for College Graduation**



Source: Learning Heroes, Parents 2019.

Parents' expanded view of what students need for success is shared more broadly. Teachers, college faculty, and employers all recognize that young people will need a broad set of academic, social, and emotional skills to succeed.

- Teachers see more than academics as part of their role: 75% believe they are responsible for imparting more than academic knowledge (Figure 3).<sup>15</sup> And they agree with parents that mental health, strong relationships, and reading are critical to prepare students for a successful future.<sup>16</sup> But teachers often feel ill-equipped to develop non-academic skills in their students and are eager for more support in this area. No more than half of teachers feel adequately prepared to support students in social-emotional development and mental health development — compared to 85% who feel they are adequately prepared to support students in academics (Figure 4).<sup>17</sup>
- Employers and higher education faculty also believe it takes more than academic knowledge for children to be successful in life. Eight in 10 employers say social and emotional skills are the most important for success, yet also the hardest skills to find.<sup>18</sup>

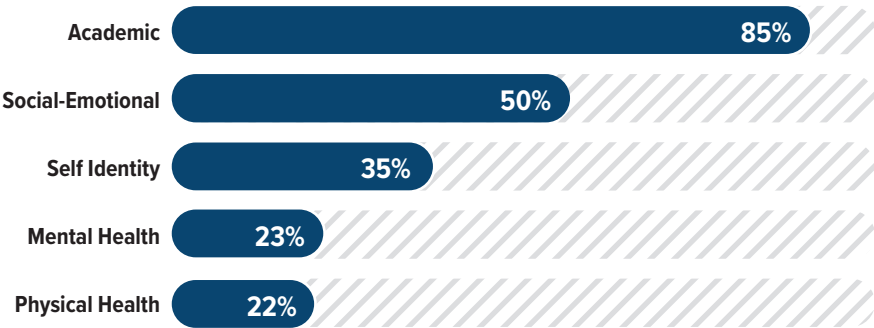
**FIGURE 3—Role of Teachers: Whole Child**

*Teachers are responsible for more than just imparting knowledge, like how to build healthy relationships*



Source: Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, Understanding Parent and Teacher Mindsets Towards Education, 2019.

**FIGURE 4—Teacher-Reported Preparedness to Develop Student Skills**



Source: Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, Understanding Parent and Teacher Mindsets Towards Education, 2019.



# UNLOCKING PARENTS' AGENCY

Over the past 20 years, schools have made progress in achievement and in high school graduation rates, yet large and persistent gaps remain, particularly for students furthest from opportunity. Moreover, the gains in academic preparation do not reflect the broader range of things that parents want for their children or that children need to succeed in a constantly changing world.

***By leaving parents on the sidelines of school improvement, we are ignoring a significant opportunity to move further faster in improving educational outcomes for all students. Populace found that 87% of parents don't define success for their children through the lens of a zero-sum game, suggesting they would engage in efforts that help every child succeed. But we know that parents begin with their own children. As long as they believe their child is on track and succeeding, they won't look beyond their child to support broader efforts.***

Parents deserve to have the information they need to ensure their children have the knowledge, skills, habits, and dispositions to meet future demands and achieve their hopes and dreams. Yet the current educational system does not adequately allow for, let alone incentivize, informed parent engagement. As a result, parents have been underinformed, undervalued, and underleveraged in playing a role to ensure their expansive view of education for their children is being met. This is true despite research showing that parent engagement can increase student achievement and outcomes.<sup>19, 20, 21</sup>

To change the system so that it effectively serves all children, we need to provide parents with a holistic picture of their children's progress and success and find ways to meaningfully connect schools, out-of-school programs, and families in a sustaining way. There are a range of examples that can help deliver an accurate picture to parents, including home visits; providing parents with clearer, more understandable information about assessment results; protocols for having productive parent-teacher meetings; and professional development for educators about how to effectively engage parents and have difficult conversations. With an accurate and complete picture of their children's success, parents can effectively advocate on behalf of their children and take a range of new and different actions that support their broad definition of success, which we believe will generate demand and pressure for school improvement. Parent awareness and action is a key part of the foundation upon which change happens.

# REALIZING PARENTS' DEFINITION OF SUCCESS: SILENT BARRIERS

Based on our research, three main barriers prevent many parents from acting on their more expansive vision of school success:

- **Limited awareness that others share their views;**
- **The lack of a complete and accurate picture of how prepared their children are for the next grade level and for future success; and**
- **The absence of a concrete understanding of what it looks like to educate the whole child.**

These obstacles limit parents' ability to most effectively support their children's aspirations. By understanding and addressing these challenges, all stakeholders — educators, families, business leaders, policymakers, academics, philanthropists, and advocates — can share in a collective action agenda to design effective solutions across the education spectrum.

Specifically, without an understanding that others share their view of success, parents may be hesitant to act on their beliefs. Without a complete and accurate picture, parents cannot know to address a potential problem and may not take actions aligned with their definition of success. Without clear, actionable information and a concrete understanding of what is possible to support their children, parents will not know how to get involved.

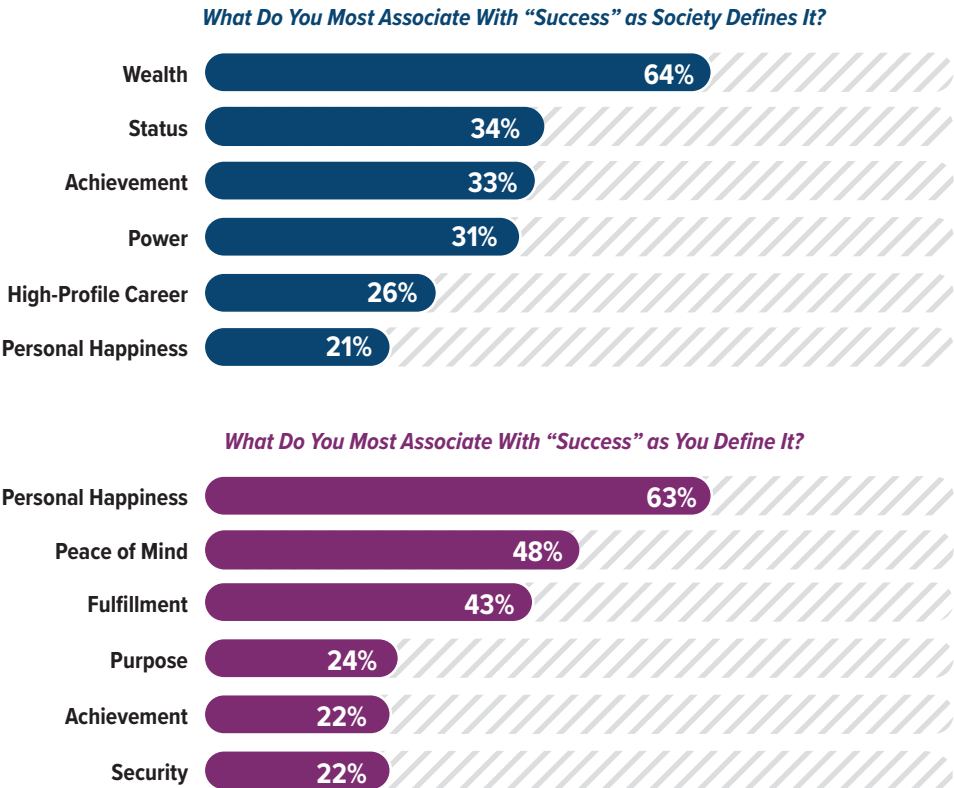
## 1 | OPPORTUNITY: SHIFT MINDSETS

### *Show That a Majority Share Views on Success.*

Populace's recent survey found 88% of U.S. adults and 85% of parents of children under age 19 prioritize a "good, satisfying life" over a "successful life by society's definition."<sup>22</sup> While 6 in 10 U.S. adults believe society values wealth above all else, followed by status (34%), achievement (33%), and power (31%) (Figure 5), more Americans disapprove than approve of what society deems successful.<sup>23</sup> If parents knew they were part of a large, silent majority, behavioral research suggests they'd be more likely to act on their views, for example, by demanding that schools focus on the whole child and work with them to explore alternative pathways to success from an earlier age. Only 36% of parents think that American schools are effective at preparing students for success, Populace found.<sup>24</sup>

As long as parents are generally unaware that a majority share their personal definition of success, we believe parents will continue to accept the status quo and not engage proactively to most effectively support and advocate for their children. Without explicitly aligning with parents around a broader set of goals for schooling, it's going to be hard to create new feedback loops and communications strategies that go beyond grades and other traditional measures of academic performance to give parents a broader view of their children's progress.

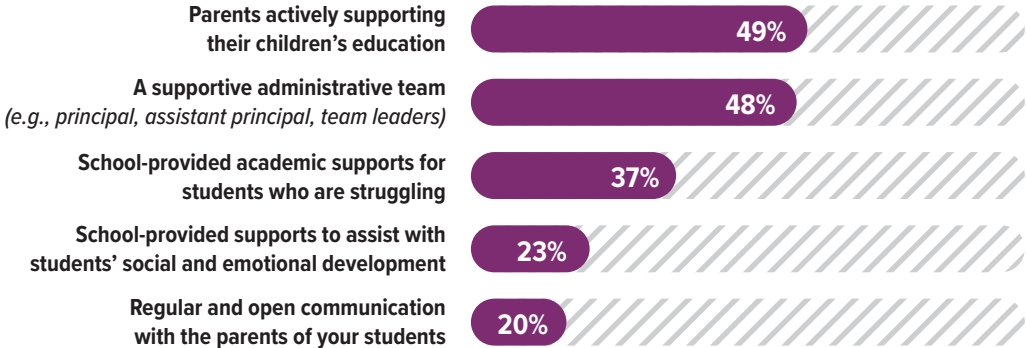
**FIGURE 5—Perceptions of Success: Society's vs. Personal**



Source: Populace, The Pathway to Embracing Personal Success, Society-Wide, 2018.

Educators and others can raise awareness among parents that others share their view of success. For example, state and district leaders could help parents and educators align on a shared, broader definition of success for students to thrive in school, work, and life. Teachers and school leaders could engage parents' perspectives on how they can work together to meet students' and families' needs, and how parents can support what is happening in schools. Forty-nine percent of public high school teachers say that parents actively supporting their children's education is among the top two most important ways for them to be successful in their job as a teacher, followed by 48% who say that it is a supportive administrative team (Figure 6).<sup>25</sup>

**FIGURE 6—What's Most Important for Your Success as a Teacher?**



Source: Learning Heroes, Parents 2019.

## 2 | OPPORTUNITY: BUILD AN ACCURATE PICTURE

***Give Parents a Strong Understanding of How Prepared Their Children are for the Next Grade Level and for Future Success.***

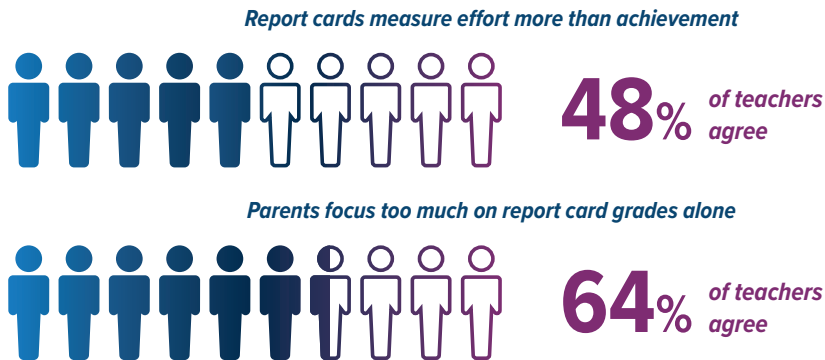
Although we have more education data than ever, it traditionally hasn't been the job of schools or teachers to share this data with parents. Parents deserve a more complete, accurate picture of their children's academic achievement and developmental progress. This includes helping them distinguish between norm-referenced tests, which place students on a bell curve, and standards-referenced tests, which let parents know whether their children are mastering the knowledge and skills for their grade.

Absent an accurate picture, parents rely on report card grades: the measure they have access to and with which they are most familiar. Most parents of third through eighth graders in public school believe good grades equal grade-level achievement. Seventy-four percent indicate their children typically get all A's or mostly A's and B's on their report cards.

Eighty-four percent agree that "If my child gets A's or B's on their report card, that indicates they are doing the work that is expected of them at their current grade."<sup>26</sup> They believe their schools are delivering for their children: 83% rate the education that their children are getting in school as excellent or pretty good.<sup>27</sup> Yet teachers acknowledge that report cards, while important, take in a variety of factors and do not provide the complete and accurate picture parents need to understand their children's school success.

Sixty-four percent of teachers believe parents rely too much on report card grades, and fewer than half agree that report cards are the best way to know how a student is achieving academically (Figure 7).<sup>28</sup> With a better understanding of their children's progress and achievement, parents could take additional actions tailored to support children's achievement.

**FIGURE 7—Public School Teachers’ Views on Report Cards**



Source: Learning Heroes, Parents 2018 and Parents 2019.

Currently, there are minimal incentives, requirements, training, or resources for schools and teachers to provide parents with multiple measures about their children’s progress, development, and performance. Yet research on large-scale systems change suggests that creating feedback loops is one of the most powerful levers to intentionally shift a system.<sup>29</sup> We have an opportunity to ensure that parents have the right mix of information to support their children at home, at school, and in out-of-school settings. Right now, report cards are the primary source of information for parents; and in isolation, they are telling parents that everything is essentially fine, which is not sending families the signal they need to do anything differently. We can create new feedback loops and communications strategies that give parents an accurate and complete picture so they know how their children are doing in relation to the knowledge and skills they need to succeed from one grade level to the next and, ultimately, beyond high school. Instead of maintaining the “no news is good news” mindset, we can equip parents with tools and training to proactively ask probing questions and seek out informed interactions with their children’s teachers and school leaders.

Policymakers and advocates also can explore public policies that would incent schools and out-of-school settings to deliver a complete and accurate picture to parents, involve parents in their children’s educational journey, and train teachers and school leaders to build trusting, productive relationships with parents. For example, many states require Individual Learning Plans for students, but don’t ensure parents are informed or integral in the design and execution of those plans. Some states have policies to ensure every third grader is reading at grade level, yet miss the opportunity to engage parents as a strategy. Policymakers also could provide incentives, resources, and training requirements for teachers and school leaders to engage with parents, to give parents additional information about their children’s progress, and to have ongoing communication with parents about their children’s performance and how families can plan to meet the goals they have for their children. There are also school systems that provide parents with a rich array of high-quality public school options. We can learn more about what parents want from schools by examining their choices.

### 3 | OPPORTUNITY: FOSTER UNDERSTANDING

#### *Provide Parents with a Complete Understanding of What It Looks Like to Educate the Whole Child.*





















The past two decades of school reform have focused narrowly on academic achievement, particularly in reading and math. While that's important, it's incomplete based on what we now know about how children learn and what parents want for their children's education. Eighty percent of parents of K-8 students agree that "Children equipped with social, emotional, and academic skills and traits are ready to learn and do better in school."<sup>30</sup> Seventy-nine percent of parents of K-8 students agree that "We live in a very different world today, with more social media, bullying, violence, and suicide — making it even more important for teachers and schools to reinforce skills and traits that help students and their parents deal with these issues effectively."<sup>31</sup>

Yet while parents of public school elementary and middle school students want a more well-rounded education for their children, focus groups with parents, conducted by Learning Heroes, suggest they don't know what it looks like in practice. So parents look to inputs, such as the variety of courses available or class sizes. Parents want to know how best to assess the outcomes they are looking for and concrete examples of places that are delivering on those outcomes, so they can point to them and know what to ask for.

Part of the challenge is that the field is not yet aligned on how to define a holistic education that encompasses social, emotional, cognitive, and academic development. The majority of parents support whole child education: 86% of parents of public or private school students feel extremely or somewhat favorable about schools that have a whole child development approach — which supports not only academic achievement, but also cognitive, mental health, social, emotional, physical, and identity development.<sup>32</sup> But 32% are concerned that teachers don't have the resources to implement this approach.<sup>33</sup>












To provide parents with a concrete sense of what educating the whole child looks like, we need to first support teachers and school leaders in acting on this knowledge. The science of learning and development has made remarkable strides in the past few decades, but this new knowledge has not been broadly disseminated and incorporated into how we design schools and instruction, as well as ways to help develop children in out-of-school settings.<sup>34</sup> Learning Heroes' research also suggests that educators and academics need to translate what we know about social, emotional, and academic development into language that parents use.<sup>35</sup> Concrete examples of what this looks like in practice, through videos and other means, may prove particularly useful. In collaboration with the National Commission on Social, Emotional and Academic Development, Learning Heroes developed a facilitator's guide for educators, out-of-school-time providers, and community leaders to conduct family workshops that communicate with parents and guardians on the front end about efforts to integrate social and emotional development into academic and out-of-school settings. We've seen in focus groups how real-life examples that show what is indeed possible help significantly.

## METHODOLOGY: PARENTS AND GENERAL POPULATION

|   |  |  |   |   |  |
|---|--|--|---|---|--|
| The Case for An Accurate Picture (2019)   | Developing Life Skills in Children: A Road Map for Communicating with Parents (2017)   | School Accountability (2019)   | The Pathway to Embracing Personal Success, Society-Wide (2018)  | The Changing Story of American Success (2018)   | Understanding Parent and Teacher Mindsets Towards Education (February 2019)  |
| Commissioned By   |  |  |   |   |  |
|    |   | Populace   | Populace  | Populace  | Chan Zuckerberg Initiative    |
| Sample  |  |  |   |   |  |
| <b>2,952</b><br>parents of public school students enrolled in grades preK-12.<br>Data were weighted by key demographics to ensure results are representative. | <b>2,026</b><br>parents of public school students in grades K-8.<br>Data were weighted by key demographics to ensure results are representative. | <b>2,608</b><br>parents of school-age children who are decision-makers regarding their child's education. Results were not weighted. | <b>1,259</b><br>U.S. adults, including 793 parents of children under 19 years. Results were not weighted. | <b>2,958</b><br>U.S. adults, including 1,804 parents of children under 19 years. Results were not weighted. | <b>1,019</b><br>parents, not employed in education, advertising, PR, or market research, with a child enrolled in a public or private school. Results were not weighted. |
| Method  |  |  |   |   |  |
| <br>Online Survey  | <br>Online Survey   | <br>Online Survey                                 | <br>Online Survey      | <br>Online Survey        | <br>Online Survey   |
| Dates   |  |  |   |   |  |
| <br>April 15 – May 5, 2019   | <br>August 25 – September 12, 2017                            | <br>March 12–23, 2019                             | <br>April 20–24, 2018  | <br>June 14–29, 2018     | <br>November 2018   |
| Conducted By  |  |  |   |   |  |
|    |   |   |                        |                          | GRADIENT   |



# METHODOLOGY: TEACHERS

| The Case for An Accurate Picture (2019)   | Parents 2018: Going Beyond Good Grades (2018)   | Understanding Parent and Teacher Mindsets Towards Education (February 2019)  |
|---|---|--|
| <b>Commissioned By</b>  |   |  |
|                    |    | Chan Zuckerberg Initiative                    |
| <b>Sample</b>   |   |  |
| <p><b>505</b><br/>public school teachers of students in grades 9-12. Results were not weighted.</p> | <p><b>1,035</b><br/>public school teachers of students in grades 3-8. Quotas were set to ensure results are representative of key demographics.</p> | <p><b>500</b><br/>teachers in a public or private elementary, junior high/middle, or high school. Results were not weighted.</p> |
| <b>Method</b>   |   |  |
| <br>Online Survey  | <br>Online Survey  | <br>Online Survey                             |
| <b>Dates</b>  |   |  |
| <br>May 2–9, 2019 | <br>August 16–25, 2018  | <br>November 2018                            |
| <b>Conducted By</b>   |   |  |
|                  |    | GRADIENT   |

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## ***Acknowledgements***

***Learning Heroes is grateful to the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative for their collaboration and financial support in the development of this report. We would also like to thank our writer Lynn Olson and the design team at Six Half Dozen.***

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