

# B-flation

HOW GOOD GRADES CAN SIDELINE PARENTS



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# A Letter From Learning Heroes

We founded Learning Heroes to harness the power of families as a way to unlock student potential and school success. Every day, we help equip families and schools with tools, research and training to clearly communicate student data and foster meaningful partnerships. And today, we are sounding the alarm.

As you will see in this report, almost nine in 10 parents nationally think their children are on grade level, despite the grim reality of declining student achievement. You may ask how that's possible given the steady stream of data on post-pandemic student performance. Our research at Learning Heroes has shown that parents rely on report card grades as their primary source of information and the vast majority of parents (80%) say their kids are receiving B's or better.

We partnered with Gallup, which would not be possible without the vision and generosity of Citadel founder and CEO Ken Griffin and Griffin Catalyst, to shout from the rooftops that while parents are doers and fixers, they can't be expected to solve a problem they don't know they have. We've also joined forces with our long-time national partners including National Urban League, Univision, UnidosUS, National PTA, GreatSchools.org, US Chamber of Commerce Foundation and UNCF.

We are asking parents to go beyond the grades by partnering up with teachers to better understand student performance. Teachers say that the number one way for parents to know how their child is achieving is through ongoing communication with them. Grades reflect many factors, including effort, homework completion and behavior, as well as mastery of the learning standards. Asking teachers to unpack those factors and focus on grade-level learning is how parents can know where to lean in and help.

As parents, we know we are a formidable force when it comes to our children, and we see it in our work at Learning Heroes. Right now, this incredible national asset — America's parents — are on the sidelines, lulled into complacency by B-flation.

This is a solvable problem. The answer to, "is my child on grade level in reading and math" is knowable. This report speaks loud and clear. When parents know, they act.

**-Bibb Hubbard, founder & president and Cindi Williams, co-founder, Learning Heroes**



# Introduction

In fall 2023, Gallup partnered with Learning Heroes, a nonprofit that supports families and educators in teaming up to advance student learning and wellbeing, to better understand how parents perceive, evaluate and take action in support of their children’s academic progress. Families play a crucial role in their children’s learning, but previous Learning Heroes research has shown that many parents don’t have access to all the information they need to most effectively support their child academically.

The Gallup-Learning Heroes study used the Gallup Panel to report on a representative sample of nearly 2,000 parents of K-12 public school students nationwide, sharing their aspirations, their experiences with and perceptions of their children’s progress, their process for getting information from and engaging with their child’s school and their hopes and worries for the future. The study’s findings — complemented by national data on student performance — highlight the nuances on parents’ understanding of whether their child is performing at grade level and demonstrate that some parents are relying on a small subset of the multiple measures needed to understand the full picture of their children’s progress. Absent a more holistic picture, parents could miss out on taking additional actions that could make a significant difference in ensuring their child receives the support they need to be successful.

Findings highlight key opportunities to better support families — especially when it comes to deciphering report cards and other measures and generating awareness of what a report card really means.



## Key Findings

How is my child doing in school? Despite a variety of measures of academic achievement — quiz grades, report cards and achievement tests — it can be hard for parents to answer this question accurately. Pinpointing a child’s academic progress is complex, and different measuring sticks often provide conflicting answers. Schools and teachers use many pieces of information to determine how a student is doing academically, including their performance on in-class assignments and tests, their own observations and interactions with the child and a range of standardized exams, including short benchmark tests given throughout the year (such as mClass, MAP Growth, DIBELS or iReady) or longer annual state-level tests. Integrating as many data points as possible is key to understanding whether a child is performing at their grade level. Knowing whether a child is ‘at grade level’ is critically important to supporting them, as parents who recognize their child is not performing at grade level can take different actions to best advocate for their child’s learning and support them at home.

Yet, parents might not see the full picture, and therefore miss out on opportunities to support their children. Nearly eight in 10 U.S. parents (79%) say their child is receiving mostly B’s or better, and almost nine in 10 believe their child is at or above grade level in reading (88%) and math (89%). Since the majority of parents (64%) say report cards are an important measure to know whether their child is at grade level, these parents would understandably equate a good grade with grade-level achievement. However, report cards are only one source of information on academic progress and measure much more than achievement — including attendance, participation and effort. Other sources of student achievement include the results of benchmark and standardized tests, which often paint a significantly different picture of student performance. By looking at the Gallup and Learning Heroes parent data side-by-side with other sources of information like standardized test data, it is clear that a B grade at the K-12 level could actually indicate a wide range of reading and math achievement; parents need more information to fully understand their child’s academic progress. **As we explore in the report, relying on report cards in isolation could prevent parents from initiating crucial interventions on behalf of their child’s academic progress.**

**1 Parents' perceptions of student performance are largely based on report cards but are misaligned with other measures.**

- Almost nine in 10 parents say their child is at or above grade level in reading (88%) and math (89%). This deviates sharply from other measures, including standardized test scores, which suggest that less than half of children are performing at grade level (see Table 1).
- Sixty-four percent of parents cite report cards as an important measure to know how their child achieves, suggesting parents rely on report cards as a primary measure of their child's progress. With 79% of parents saying their child receives mostly B's or better, it is understandable that nearly nine in 10 parents believe their child is on grade level in reading and math.

**2 Parents who recognize their child is not on grade level worry more about the child's academic skills and are more likely to discuss concerns with their child's teacher.**

- Ninety-seven percent of parents who know their child is below grade level in math are worried about their child's math skills, compared with 22% of all parents who say their child is at or above grade level.
- Seventy-four percent of parents who know their child is below grade level in math and have had conversations with their child's teacher say they've discussed their concerns about their child's academic progress, compared with 50% of all parents who have talked to their child's teacher.

**3 Parents may need more measures beyond report cards to know when they should step in.**

- With 79% of students receiving mostly B's or better (according to their parents), traditionally good grades are likely to encompass a wide variation of performance levels.



# Detailed Findings

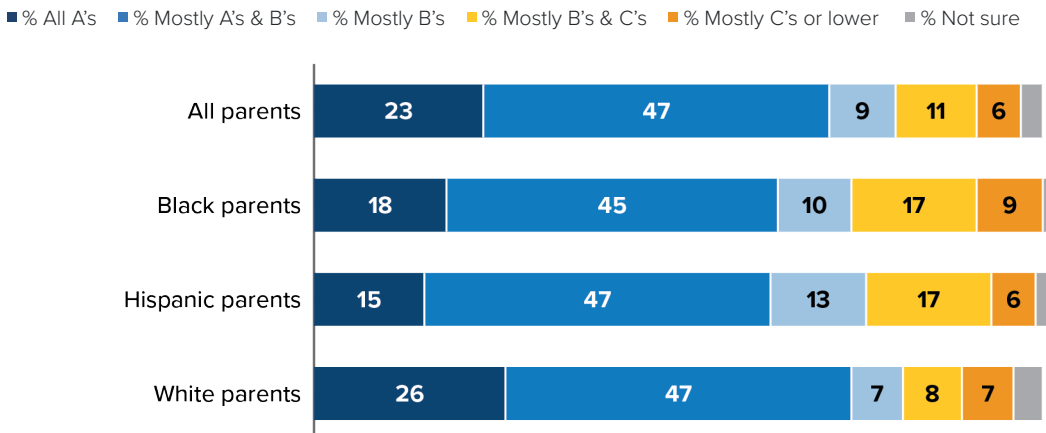
## B's on a report card aren't the full story, but parents may not realize it.

**Seventy-nine percent of parents report their child receives traditionally good grades — mostly B's or better.** The proportion receiving B grades or better (as reported by parents) is greater for White children (80%), compared with Black (73%) and Hispanic (75%) children, and it is also greater for children in the highest versus lowest income households<sup>1</sup> (88% vs. 69%, respectively).

### Chart 1

#### Almost eight in 10 parents overall report their child is receiving mostly B's or better.

When you think about your child's report cards, what grades does he/she typically get?



Note: Values not shown when <5%. Full item text: "When you think about your child's report cards, what grades does he/she typically get? If your school uses a different grading system, use your best approximation of how your child fits into this traditional grade scale."



About nine in 10 parents say their child is performing at or above grade level, but a range of measures suggest the number is much lower.<sup>2</sup>

Eighty-eight percent of parents say their child is at or above grade level in reading, and 89% say the same for math. A 10-percentage-point gap is seen between parents in the lowest versus highest income households (84-85% vs. 94-95% say their child is at or above grade level).

<sup>1</sup> The lowest household income category includes households earning \$49,999 or less annually. The highest category earns \$150,000 or more.

<sup>2</sup> See Table 1 for external data.



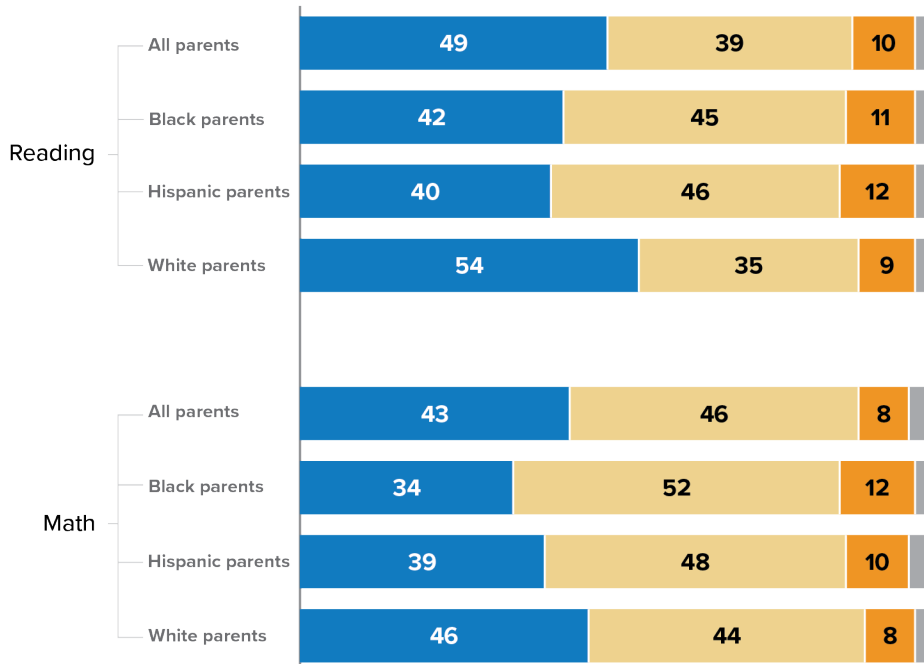
The portion of parents who say their child is **above** grade level also differs by racial and ethnic background, with Black (42%) and Hispanic (40%) parents being less likely than White parents (54%) to say their child is performing above grade level in reading, with a similar finding in math. However, the combined proportion of those who report at or above grade level in reading or math is similar across racial and ethnic backgrounds.

**Chart 2**

**Almost nine in 10 parents overall say their child is performing at or above grade level in either reading or math.**

When it comes to reading/math, is your child achieving...?

■ % Above grade level ■ % At grade level ■ % Below grade level ■ % Do not know enough to say



Note: Values not shown when <5%.

Parents with a child who receives special education through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 plan are less likely than parents overall to say their child is performing at or above grade level in reading (74%) or math (79%). While parents with a child who has an IEP or 504 plan represent 22% of the parents in this study overall, they make up a disproportionate number of those who say their child is below grade level in either reading (53 %) or math (49%).

**Other academic measures suggest grade-level performance is much lower.** Children’s academic progress is nuanced. Evaluating their knowledge and skills requires decision-making about what is important for a child to know and do and how those things should be measured. For this reason, report cards are just one method that schools and teachers use to understand how a child is doing and whether they might require more academic support.

Results from a range of standardized tests generally report a much lower proportion of students at or above grade level, although the information provided varies by test. As almost nine in 10 parents believe their child is at or above grade level in reading or math, the information provided by standardized tests deviates sharply from the understanding that most parents have of their child’s academic achievement.

Standardized tests provide another piece of information to supplement in-class activities, grades and observations. Such tests are administered and scored in a consistent way and ask students to answer questions from a common question bank so that it’s possible to compare performance across students, classrooms, schools or districts and to estimate students’ knowledge and skills at a single point in time. The tests usually go through rigorous investigation to ensure they are fully measuring what they are supposed to, making them a reliable way to measure grade-level academic achievement across many school settings.

These results also differ by racial and ethnic background, showing a wider gap for parents of Black and Hispanic children between parents’ perceptions and results from standardized tests. NAEP data report that while 42% of White students are showing grade-level proficiency in reading, only 17% of Black students and 21% of Hispanic students are proficient. Among 12<sup>th</sup> graders taking the ACT, 50% of White students are meeting college readiness benchmarks in reading compared with 17% of Black students and 27% of Hispanic students.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to these results, findings from the Gallup-Learning Heroes study show that more than 85% of Black and Hispanic parents say their child is at or above grade level in either reading or math.

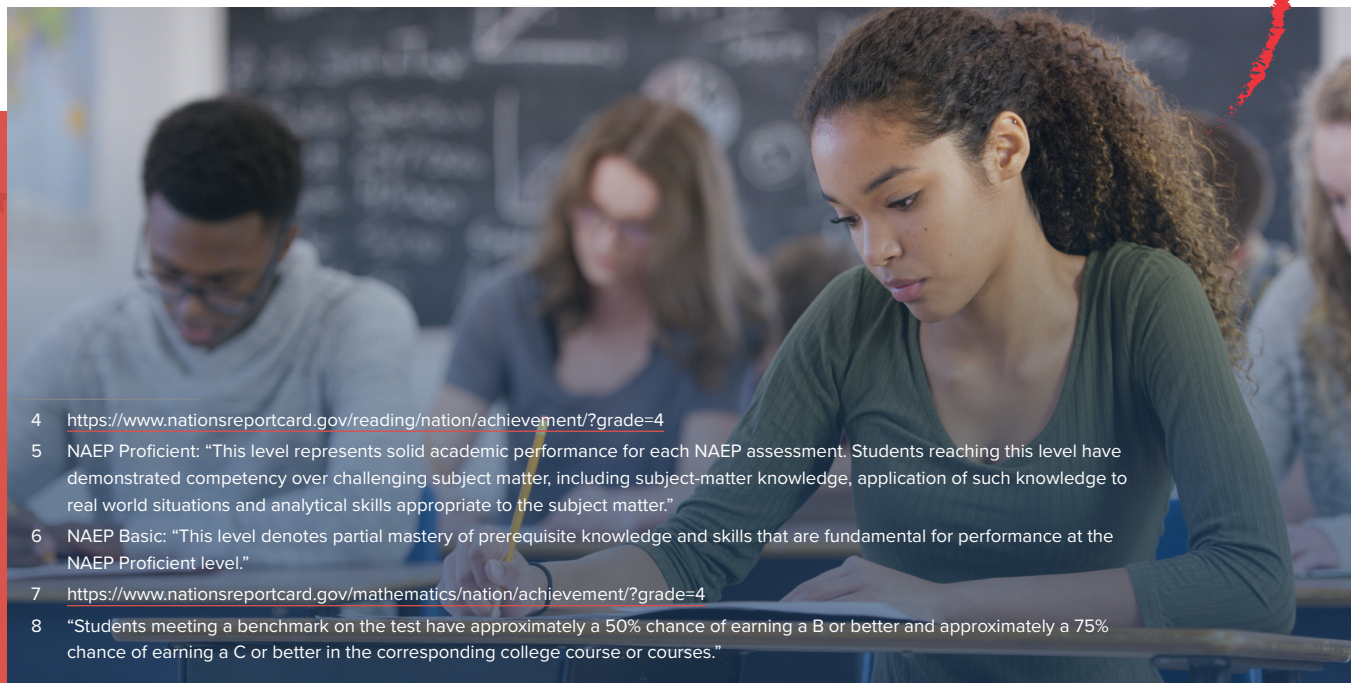
3 <https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/2023-National-ACT-Profile-Report.pdf>; <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/nation/groups/?grade=4ps> (nationsreportcard.gov)

**Table 1**

**Selected standardized test results show widely varying proficiency and/or grade-level knowledge, although less than half are usually deemed to be meeting grade-level expectations of fully proficient.**

Exam	Year	Measure	Percentage
NAEP <sup>4</sup>	2022	“Proficient” <sup>5</sup> or above in reading	33% of 4 <sup>th</sup> graders; 31% of 8 <sup>th</sup> graders
NAEP	2022	“Basic” <sup>6</sup> or above in reading (indicates partial mastery)	63% of 4 <sup>th</sup> graders; 70% of 8 <sup>th</sup> graders
NAEP <sup>7</sup>	2022	“Proficient” or above in math	36% of 4 <sup>th</sup> graders; 26% of 8 <sup>th</sup> graders
NAEP	2022	“Basic” or above in math (indicates partial mastery)	75% of 4 <sup>th</sup> graders; 62% of 8 <sup>th</sup> graders
SBAS	2019	At or above grade level in English Language Arts (ELA)	50% of 4 <sup>th</sup> graders
SBAS	2019	At or above grade level in math	46% of 4 <sup>th</sup> graders
ACT	2023	Meeting “college readiness benchmarks” <sup>8</sup> in reading	40% of 12 <sup>th</sup> graders
ACT	2023	Meeting “college readiness benchmarks” in math	30% of 12 <sup>th</sup> graders
ACT	2023	Meeting “college readiness benchmarks” in English	51% of 12 <sup>th</sup> graders

Note. Test results reflect the states in which the exams were administered as well as the student who participated, and, with the exception of NAEP, are not intended to reflect all students nationwide. NAEP = National Assessment of Educational Progress, SBAS = Smarter Balanced Assessment System, ACT = A college preparation exam that is also used as a year-end test in some states.



4 <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/nation/achievement/?grade=4>

5 NAEP Proficient: “This level represents solid academic performance for each NAEP assessment. Students reaching this level have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real world situations and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter.”

6 NAEP Basic: “This level denotes partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for performance at the NAEP Proficient level.”

7 <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/mathematics/nation/achievement/?grade=4>

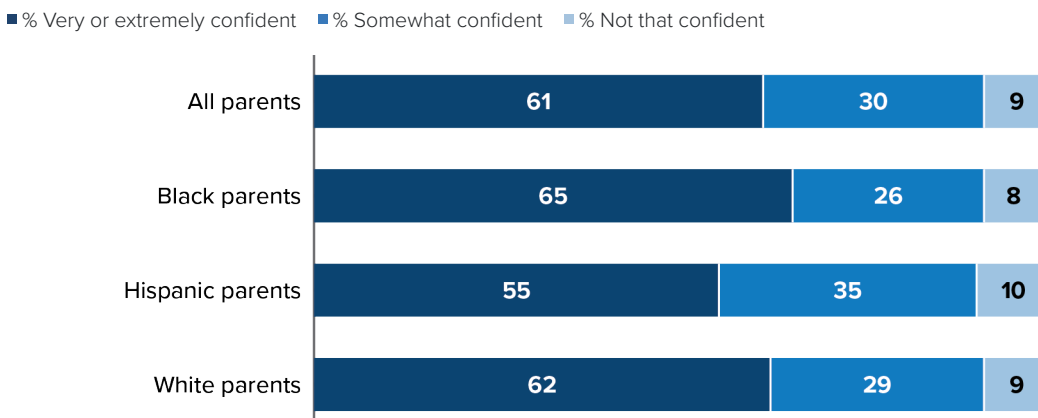
8 “Students meeting a benchmark on the test have approximately a 50% chance of earning a B or better and approximately a 75% chance of earning a C or better in the corresponding college course or courses.”

The picture is similar for older students, even among those who might be planning for college. The number of 12<sup>th</sup> graders meeting college readiness benchmarks in reading (40%) and math (30%) is a big departure from K-12 parents' beliefs about their child's preparation for college, as 61% of parents are very or extremely confident that their child will be well prepared for college. This level of confidence holds true for parents across multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds. Using ACT data as a guide, as many as half of them may not have the full picture.

### Chart 3

#### About six in 10 parents are confident their child will be well-prepared for college.

How confident are you that your child will be well-prepared for entrance into and success in college upon graduation from high school?



Note. Differences between parents by racial and ethnic background do not reach statistical significance.





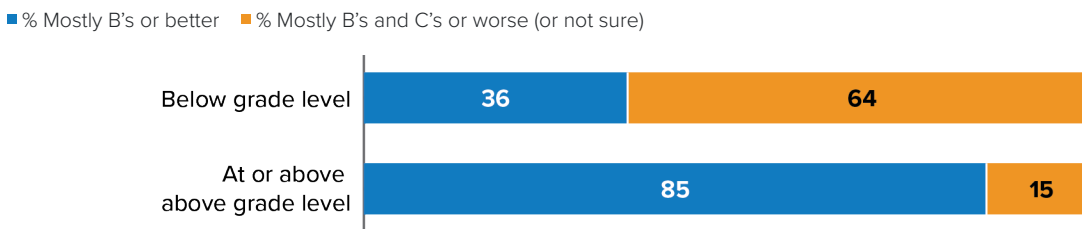
**Report card grades can help, but they don't tell the whole story of academic performance.**

Among the minority (10%) of parents who say their child is below grade level in reading, more than one-third (36%) still see mostly B's or better on their child's report card. The same pattern is true among parents who say their child is below grade level in math. This finding demonstrates how traditionally good grades (such as a B or better) don't always indicate that a child is performing at grade level.

**Chart 4**

**Among parents who say their child is below grade level in reading, about one-third see mostly B's or better on their child's report card.**

When you think about your child's report cards, what grades does he/she typically get?



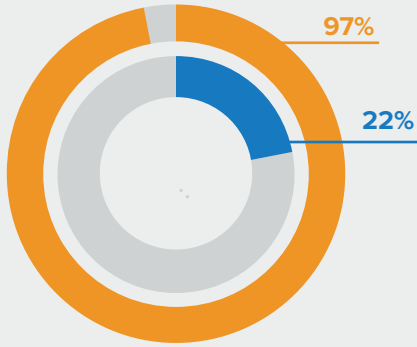
Full item text: When you think about your child's report cards, what grades does he/she typically get? If your school uses a different grading system, use your best approximation of how your child fits into this traditional grade scale."

**If a parent were to use traditionally good grades as an isolated measure of grade-level performance, some might not realize their child is not at grade level.** Access to different measures of achievement can provide additional nuance for parents who want to know how their child is doing and when to step in. This is especially true for parents who see mostly B's or better on report cards (79%), as they may not realize that a 'good grade' doesn't always correspond to grade-level achievement as measured by other sources.

This complexity, where grades are not always a good match to other academic measures, is also documented in prior research. Some studies have estimated that grades and standardized test scores are only moderately correlated. Roughly one-quarter of what is measured by a child's grade is similar to what is measured by a standardized test.<sup>9</sup> Since each of these measures can provide differing or even conflicting information, many types of measures are needed to fully understand whether a child is learning the knowledge and skills required for their age and grade level.

9 Brookhart, S. M., Guskey, T. R., Bowers, A. J., McMillan, J. H., Smith, J. K., Smith, L. F., & Welsh, M. E. (2016). A century of grading research: Meaning and value in the most common educational measure. *Review of educational research, 86*(4), 803-848.

## When parents recognize their child is not performing at their grade level, they have different concerns and are more likely to act.



**Ninety-seven** percent of parents who know their child is **below grade level** in math are worried about their child's math skills, compared with **22%** of those who believe their child is **at or above grade level**.

Parents who know their child is not performing at their grade level in math prioritize their child's math skills at the very top of a list of 12 possible worries or concerns. A similar pattern is true for parents who know their child is below grade level in reading.

However, the priorities are much different for parents who say their child is at or above grade level in math: Concern about their child's math (22%) and reading (20%) skills fall to the very bottom of the list. Instead, parents are more concerned about their child's social issues, such as the impact of social media (71%), their child's stress or anxiety (55%) or their emotional wellbeing (48%).



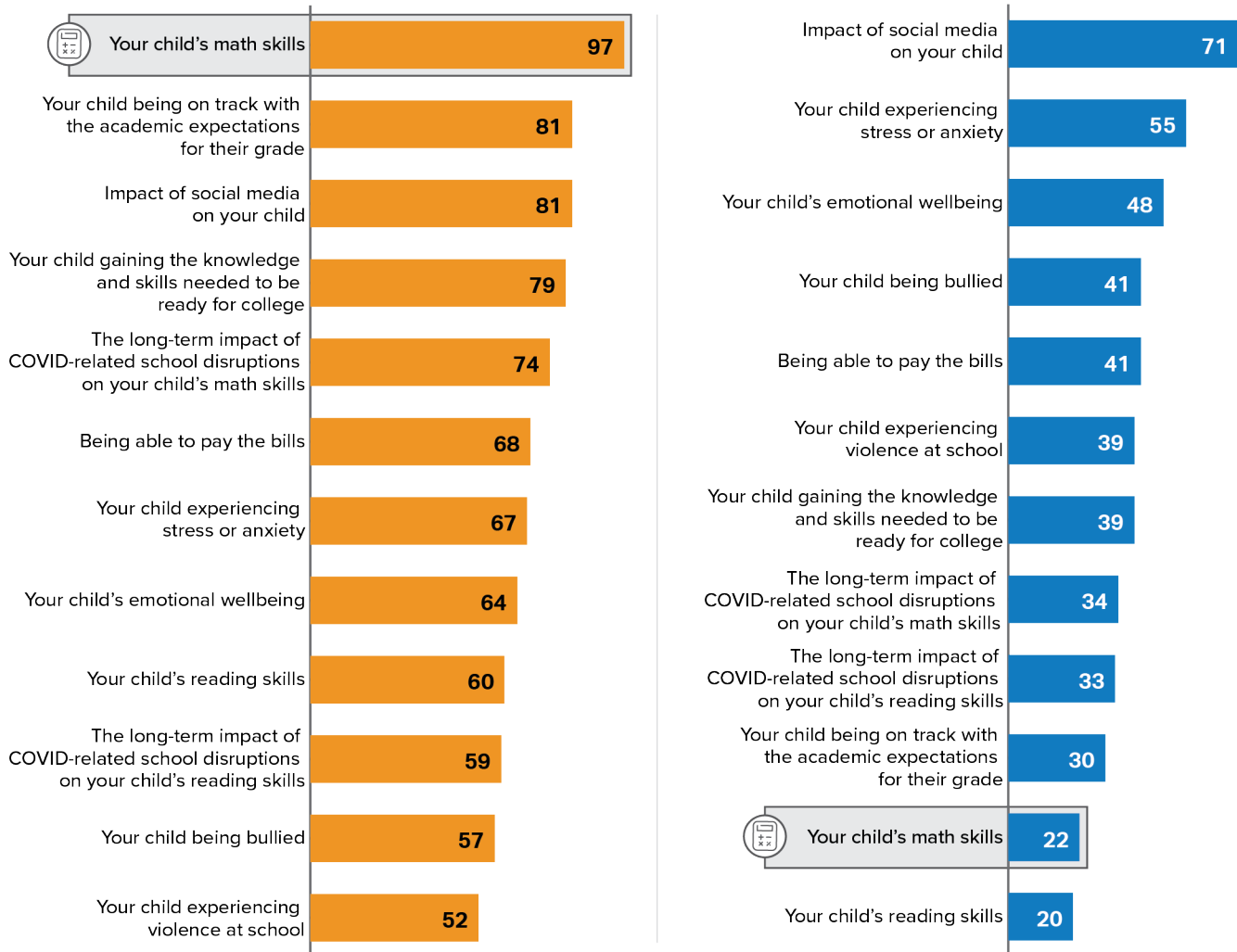
### Chart 5

## Parents who say their child is below grade level in math are more likely to prioritize those academic skills in their list of worries.

As a parent, to what extent are you worried about each of the following?

% Somewhat or extremely worried

- Among parents who say their child is below grade level in math
- Among parents who say their child is at or above grade level in math

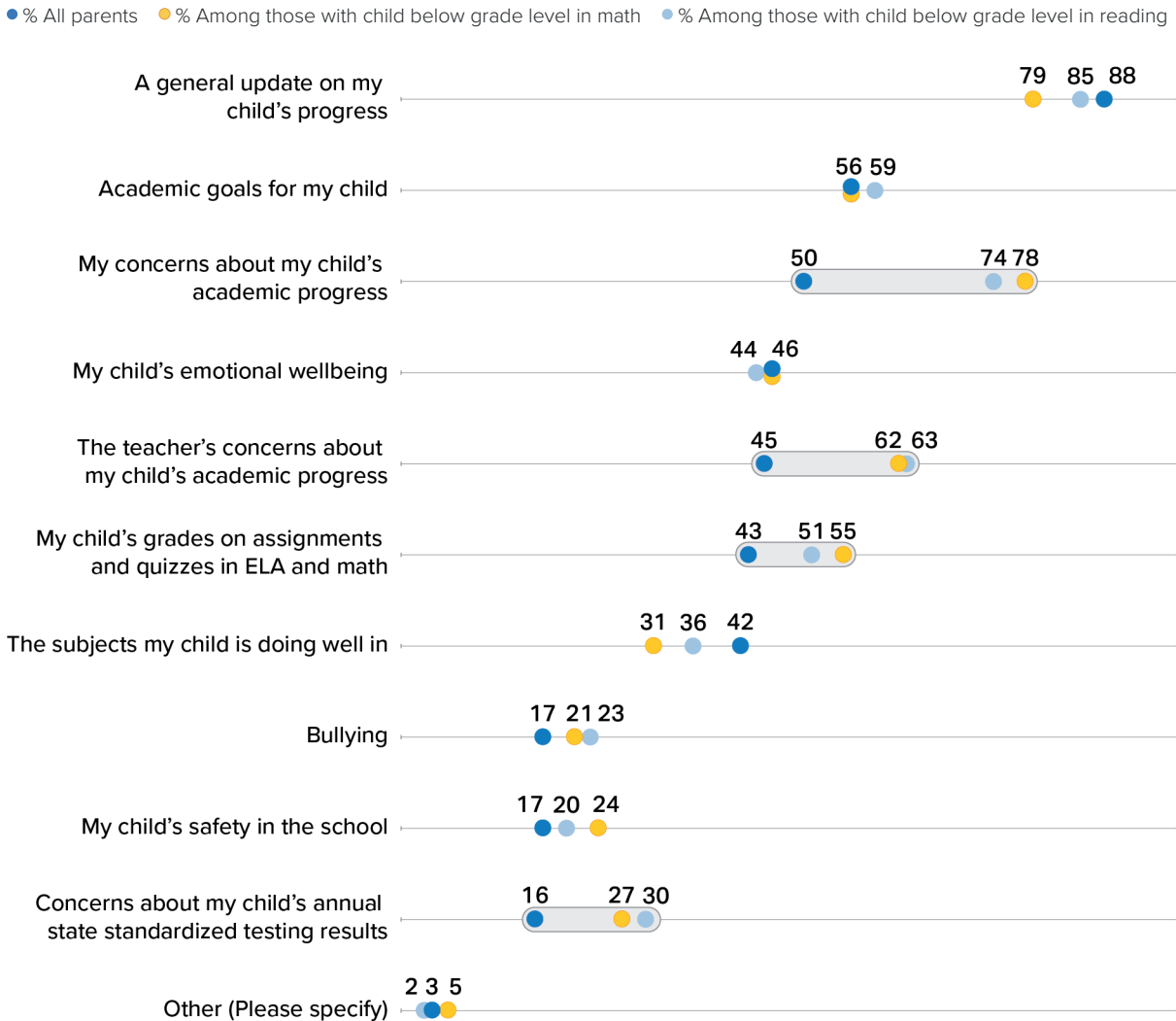


When parents think their child is below grade level in reading or math, they are more likely to discuss their concerns and those of their teachers. However, the number of parents who hold these concerns is still significantly less than the number of children below grade (roughly one-quarter of those who have conversations with their child's teacher are still not discussing their own concerns with their child's teacher). **These data show that when parents are informed about their child's academic challenges, they are more likely to engage with teachers and schools to support their child's development.**

### Chart 6

## Parents who say their child is below grade level in reading or math are more likely to discuss those topics while talking to their child’s teacher.

Which of the following have you discussed?



Note: Results reported among parents who have participated in a discussion with their child’s teacher, through parent-teacher conferences, regular check-ins with their child’s teacher, a visit from their child’s teacher or communication with their teacher via a mobile app, which represents 93% of parents.





**If they knew their child was receiving low test scores, over half (56%) of all parents say they would be very or extremely concerned.**

In a hypothetical scenario where their child receives a B in math but has two below-grade-level math test scores (on both a year-end test and a district-wide benchmarking test), over half of parents say they would be very or extremely (56%) concerned. Black parents are more likely to say they would be concerned (72%) compared with Hispanic (56%) and White parents (52%). This suggests that recognizing low test scores might alert parents to academic challenges, even when their child continues to receive a B or better on their report cards.

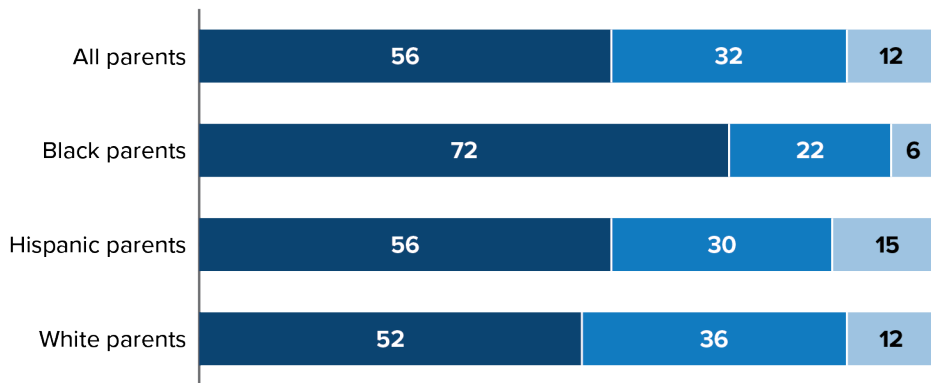
Parents who say they would be somewhat concerned (32%) may be uncertain about how to interpret the conflicting sources of information. Trusting partnerships with teachers could be key to translating standardized and benchmarked test scores for parents, and to helping them understand their child’s performance.

**Chart 7**

**Parents’ level of concern if their child were to receive a B grade and two low test scores.**

How concerned would you be?

■ % Very or extremely concerned ■ % Somewhat concerned ■ % Not too concerned, not concerned at all, or not sure



Full item text: “Imagine that you received the following information regarding your child’s achievement: Your child received a B on their report card in math, your child’s year-end state test results indicate that they are below grade level in math, and your child’s results on other standardized tests (district-wide tests, including MAP, iReady, DIBELS, MClass, etc.) indicate your child is below grade level in math. How concerned would you be?”

## Provide support to parents to incorporate more measures.

Findings reveal three big areas that could help parents and educators work together to see the big picture of their child’s academic progress.

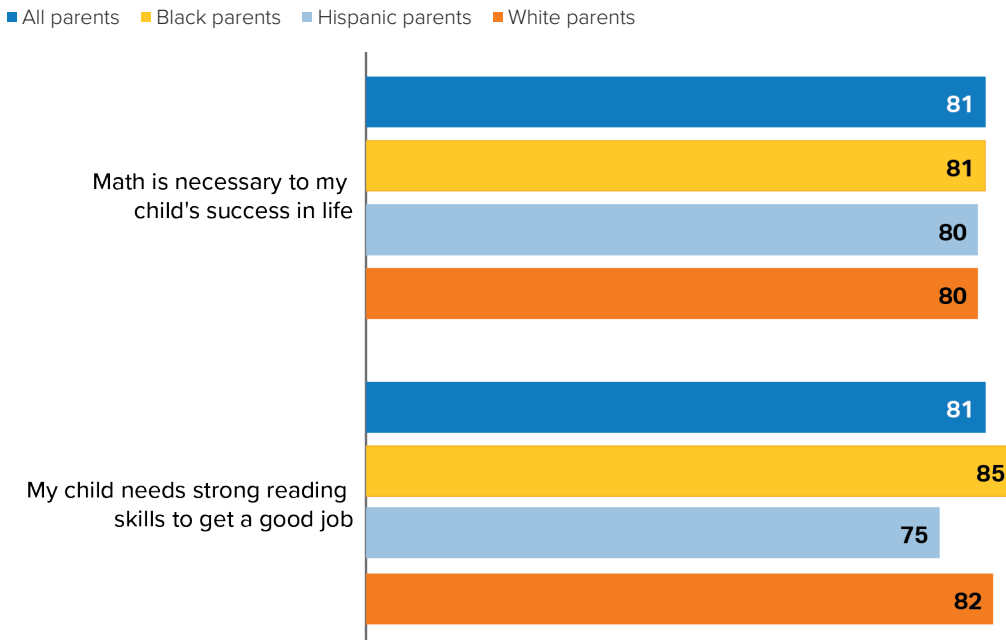
### 1 Start with reading and math: Parents see them as key to a child’s future success.

More than eight in 10 parents say their child needs strong reading skills to get a good job (81%) and that math is necessary to their child’s success in life (81%), and this is largely true across parents regardless of racial/ethnic background. Some differences exist among parents of varying household incomes, with parents in the highest income category being more likely to agree their child needs strong reading skills for a good job, compared with the lowest income category<sup>10</sup> (84% vs. 73%, respectively). Further, majorities of parents are confident in their children’s ability to gain math (65%) and reading (74%) skills. Parents likely want to know how their child is performing in these critical content areas, and care deeply about the answer. Parents who want to ensure their child is set up for success would likely welcome more sources of information on their child’s reading and math achievement.

#### Chart 8

#### About eight in 10 parents see strong reading skills as necessary for a good job and/or math as necessary to success in life.

% Mostly or completely true



Note. Differences between parents by racial and ethnic background do not reach statistical significance.

10 The lowest household income category includes households earning \$49,999 or less annually. The highest category earns \$150,000 or more.

**2 Lean into strong parent-teacher relationships.**

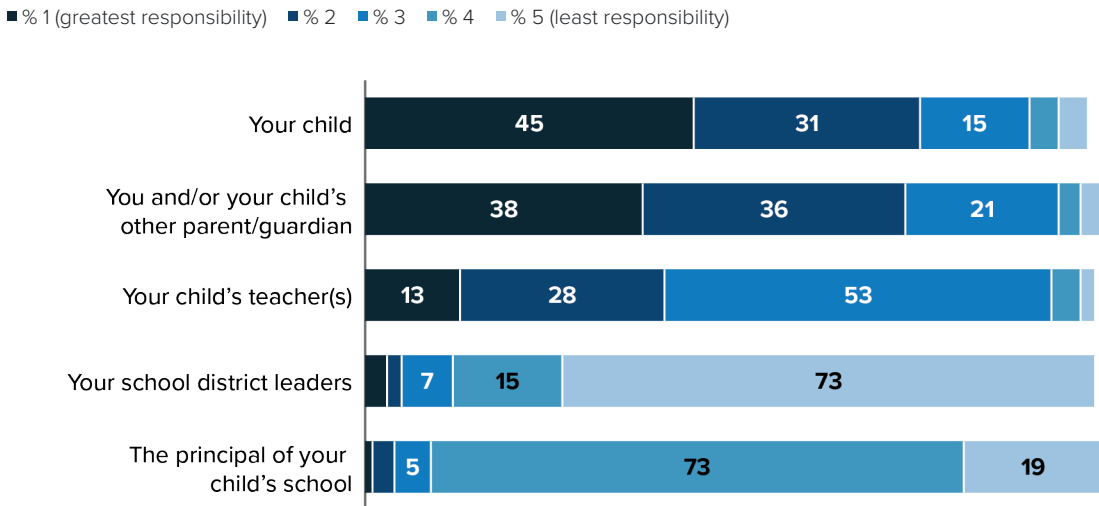
Parents see themselves as one of the most important caretakers of their child’s success in school, and other Gallup research shows that parents rate their child’s teacher positively, especially compared with other aspects of K-12 education at large.<sup>11</sup> Prior research shows that parental involvement, in partnership with their child’s teacher, has a powerful impact in supporting a child academically throughout the year.<sup>12</sup>

Seventy-six percent of parents say their child has the greatest or second greatest responsibility for their child’s academic success, but this is closely followed by 74% of parents who feel the same about their own responsibility for their child’s success in school. The high rates of parental responsibility are also true among parents of high school students (71%).

**Chart 9**

**Most parents hold themselves responsible — or second most responsible — for their child’s success in school.**

Please rank the individuals listed below from the one with the greatest responsibility for your child’s success in school to the one with the least responsibility for your child’s success in school.



Note: Values not shown when <5%.

11 Brenan, M. (2023, August 31). *K-12 Education Satisfaction in U.S. Ties Record Low*. [www.gallup.com](https://news.gallup.com/poll/510401/education-satisfaction-ties-record-low.aspx). Retrieved September 15, 2023, from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/510401/education-satisfaction-ties-record-low.aspx>

12 Wilder, S. (2014). *Effects of parental involvement on academic achievement: a meta-synthesis*. *Educational Review*, 66:3, 377-397, DOI: [10.1080/00131911.2013.780009](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2013.780009)

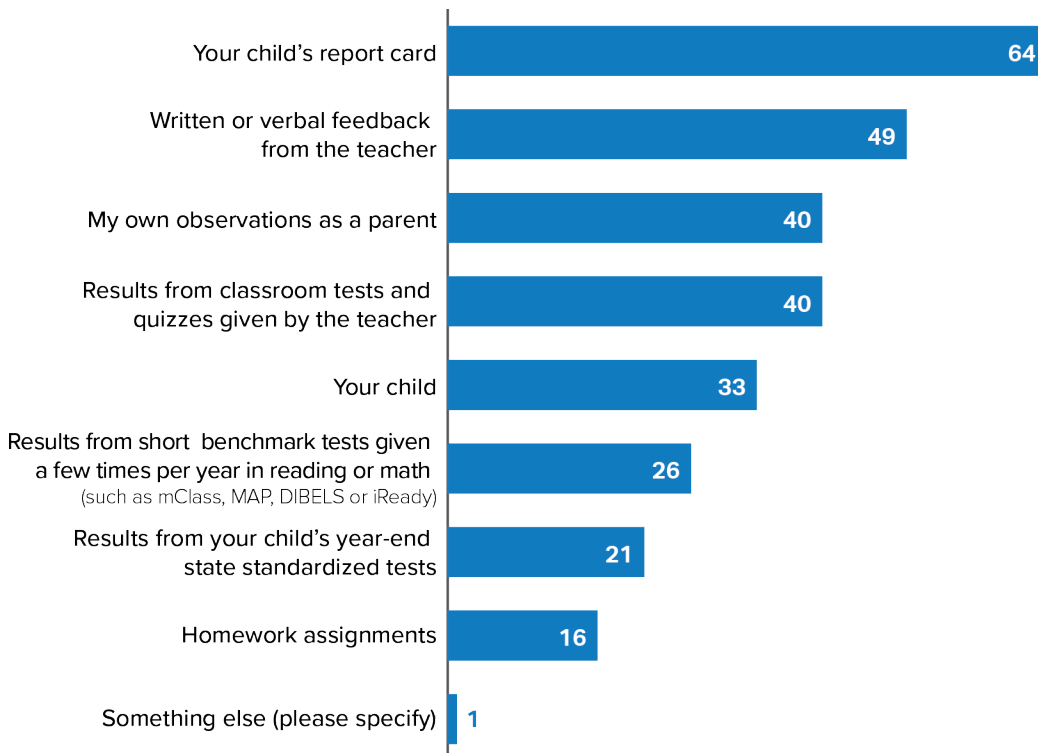
**3 Connect parents with multiple measures of achievement.**

Currently, parents are most often using in-classroom measures like report cards, feedback from the teacher and in-class tests to get information about their child’s academic performance. Sixty-four percent of parents rank the child’s report card among the top three most helpful sources of information. Yet only 21% say the same about year-end state standardized test results or benchmark tests (26%). While 86% of parents report attending their parent-teacher conference, about half are following up with the teacher for one-to-one conversations (40%) and for regular check-ins with their child’s teacher that are not organized by the school (46%). Connecting parents with multiple measures such as observations from the teacher and information about their child’s standardized test scores could be a critical piece to the puzzle that helps parents determine whether they should be concerned — and take action — to support their child.

**Chart 10**

**Parents most often rely on report cards to know whether their child is performing at grade level.**

Please select the three most helpful sources of information that let you know whether your child is performing at grade level. (Shown by %)





## Conclusion: B's Could Be a Call to Action to Look Further

**Today's parents often need more than just a report card to get a full picture of their child's academic performance.** Seventy-nine percent of parents say their child is receiving mostly B's or better, and almost nine in 10 say their child is at or above grade level in reading (88%) or math (89%). However, standardized tests such as NAEP, the Smarter Balanced Assessment System and the ACT suggest that somewhere between 20-50% of students are demonstrating the knowledge and skills that are appropriate for their grade level. With so many students receiving grades that are traditionally seen as good, a B or better inevitably encompasses more than grade-level mastery, and instead includes widely varying performance levels.

Rather, parents may need to recognize B's as a call to look further. When a student brings home a B, parents can seek out other sources — such as ongoing feedback from their child's teacher, their own observations about what is happening at home, statewide tests and in-classroom benchmark exams — to determine how their child is performing. By seeking multiple measures, families are able to identify more ways to support their child's learning.

Report cards are the most commonly reported way that parents use to assess their child's achievement, with 64% saying it is one of their three most useful methods. Opening up the focus to include more varied measures could help more parents see the full picture. Partnerships with teachers and schools are critical to helping parents connect and leverage the multiple pieces of information that are available to track and support a child's growth. By working together, parents and teachers can ensure that every child is connected with academic support tailored to their needs.



## Methodology

Data for this study were collected via the web from October 2-9, 2023. A total of 1,971 surveys were collected from U.S. adults who self-identified as a parent of a child in a public K-12 school, including charter and magnet public schools. This included mothers and fathers, legal guardians, foster parents and stepparents who said they were also guardians. Parents who said their child had a diagnosed and significant cognitive disability were excluded from the study.

Responses were collected using the Gallup Panel, a probability-based panel that selects respondents using Random Digit Dial (RDD) phone interviews that cover both mobile and landline phones, as well as some address-based sampling recruitment. Weighting was conducted to ensure the sample was representative and matched national parent demographics of gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity and education, with cross-classified targets within race. Demographic weighting targets were based on the most recent Current Population Survey estimates for parents of children ages 5-17 who are currently enrolled in school.

The margin of error (MOE) of the full sample, adjusted for design effect, is  $\pm 3.1$  percentage points. The adjusted MOEs for selected sub-groups are smaller and listed below.<sup>13</sup>

For all charts showing row proportions, data may add to 100 +/- 1% due to rounding.

	Sample Size	Design Effect	Adjusted MOE
<b>Overall</b>	1,971	2.0	$\pm 3.1\%$
<b>White</b>	922	1.6	$\pm 4.0\%$
<b>Black</b>	420	1.8	$\pm 6.3\%$
<b>Hispanic</b>	528	3.3	$\pm 7.8\%$
<b>Child is below grade level in math</b>	151	2.0	11.4%
<b>Child is below grade level in reading</b>	160	2.2	11.5%

<sup>13</sup> Adjusted margins of error were calculated using an unrounded design effect. The design effect and adjusted margin of error were then rounded to the first decimal for reporting purposes.





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