

CENTERING FAMILIES IN THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION



INSIGHTS & PERSPECTIVES
FROM 10 YEARS OF RESEARCH

OCTOBER 2025


**LEARNING
HEROES**

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Introduction

K-12 education is being reimagined in real time. The rapid expansion of school choice, high school transformation, AI, and educational technology is unfolding even as learning gaps widen and chronic absenteeism reaches unprecedented levels. This mix of innovation and opportunity gives rise to a greater sense of complexity, uncertainty, and urgency – as well as a shared sense of optimism about what comes next. Through it all, one constant remains: families are the experts on their kids.

Yet, traditional school systems have mostly sidelined parents, too often lacking full transparency and authentic opportunities to engage with families as true partners in their children's education.

*Through it all, one constant remains:
families are the experts on their kids.*

This remains true today despite a robust and longstanding body of research showing that meaningful family engagement is closely linked to student and school improvement. The Family and Community Engagement (FACE) Impact Study, conducted by Learning Heroes and TNTP, showed that schools with strong family engagement practices experienced significantly smaller increases in chronic absenteeism and smaller declines in reading and math proficiency during the pandemic. For example, schools that were in the top 10 percent

for family engagement saw a 39 percent smaller rise in absenteeism than those in the bottom 10 percent, amounting to more students in school each day and hundreds of additional instructional hours each year. This evidence base makes clear that family engagement is not a nice-to-have; it is a driver of school success and student achievement.

Learning Heroes, alongside our partners, have spent the past decade working to change the status-quo by building the capacity of educators and families to team up to advance student learning and well-being.

This report draws on 10 years of research and practice with families, educators, and community partners. Through surveys, focus groups, in-depth interviews, ethnographies, local campaigns, educator trainings, and co-designed initiatives, we have surfaced 10 insights that point to a simple but powerful truth: **when families are engaged as true partners in education, they help build stronger, more learner-centered systems where achievement rises, schools improve, and trust becomes a catalyst for lasting change.**

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Insight 1

Mind the Gap – Perception vs. Reality

Parents* are their child's most important teachers and advocates, but they can't solve a problem they don't know they have.

In 2016, Learning Heroes first unearthed the “perception gap” – the difference between parent perception of their child's achievement and the reality. Nearly a decade later, this gap persists: A **2023 survey** from Gallup and Learning Heroes found that 88 percent of parents say their child is at or above grade level in reading and math. Yet only about 30 percent of eighth graders demonstrate proficiency and above in those subjects on the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).**

When we ask parents what matters when it comes to their school's engagement efforts, time and again they **prioritize an accurate description of**

their child's performance and hearing the truth about their child's progress, even if it isn't positive. Importantly, teachers and principals **also prioritize this goal**. Yet our data has consistently shown that most parents have an inflated view of their child's performance.

Part of the challenge is that typically, teachers are not expected or trained to share more than report cards and grade portal updates with families, which can mask a student's grade-level ability. That's why it's critical for families and teachers to team up around a shared, accurate understanding of a child's strengths and areas for growth. Because when parents know their child needs support, they seek essential academic supports like tutoring, summer math or reading programs, and are more likely to consistently send their child to school.

“The perception gap suggests that parents aren't getting the full picture of how prepared their kids are for the next grade, for college, or for the workforce. We owe it to families to provide them with clear, honest information about their children's progress. Without that transparency, we risk denying students the opportunities they deserve.”

JOHN B. KING, CHANCELLOR OF THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK (SUNY) AND FORMER U.S. SECRETARY OF EDUCATION

*Throughout this report, “parents” refers broadly to any caring adult responsible for a child's well-being, including families, caregivers, and guardians.

**Given that grade-level standards are inconsistent across states, NAEP “proficient” offers a national standard representing solid academic performance for the given grade level.

What this looks like in action

Several states, including [Texas](#), [Arkansas](#), and [Virginia](#), are developing videos, tools, and guides to help families gain a holistic understanding of student grades and test scores, both compared to other students in the state and as it relates more broadly to their college or career readiness.

Virginia, for example, has developed a [new accountability model](#) for K-12 schools designed to provide families with clear, timely, and actionable information about student learning and school quality. Families also now receive fall and winter growth assessment reports in grades 3-8 that show whether their child is progressing, along with literacy

screeners results in grades K-3 that flag early reading challenges. The goal is to provide parents with a variety of data points and resources about their child's performance that are easily understood.

In Arkansas, leaders are supporting the [LEARNs Act](#) with a variety of family-facing resources and educator training on meaningful home-school partnerships. These guides and tools are intended to help parents understand their child's scores and progress towards grade-level mastery, and to equip educators with the support they need to engage effectively with families.

National parent perception of student grade-level achievement vs. reality

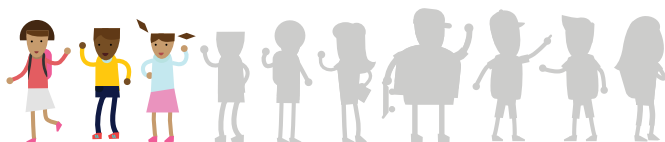
PERCEPTION



88%

of parents regardless of race, income, and education level, believe their child is at or above grade level in reading and math.*

PERFORMANCE



30%

of eighth graders demonstrate proficiency or above in reading and math.**

*Gallup & Learning Heroes. (2023, November 14). *B-flation: How good grades can sideline parents*. bealearninghero.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/B-flation_Gallup_Learning-Heroes_Report-FINAL.pdf

**National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). *The nation's report card: 2024 reading and mathematics assessments*. nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard

Insight 2

Reckoning with Report Cards

One reason for the disconnect between perception and reality is clear – nearly 80 percent of parents say their child earns mostly Bs or better, and most say they rely on report cards to gauge achievement. But teachers say grades measure more than mastery of academic content, factoring in elements like classroom participation, effort, and completion of assignments, not necessarily whether a student is performing at grade level.

The good news is that the vast majority of parents shift their understanding when presented with additional, albeit conflicting, information about their child's progress. We **asked** parents to imagine their child earning a B in math on their report card, but below grade level performance on an annual state test and below grade level on a formative standardized test. *The result?* Just 44 percent of parents believed their child would be at or above grade level, down from 92 percent who based their perception on report cards alone.

This dramatic shift underscores how multiple measures of learning – report card grades, annual state test results, other standardized or formative assessments, and more – can help families gain a complete picture of their child's readiness so they can more accurately recognize when and how their child needs support.

Years of **polling** by the **Data Quality Campaign** reinforces that parents want better access to their children's data, and there are many ways that states and districts can ensure more data are accessible to parents. In addition to take-home notices, report cards, and parent/teacher conferences, there has been increasing availability of parent portals that allow families to directly access data. Plus, there are opportunities for states to provide more robust **school-based report cards**.

Awareness isn't the end goal – it's the spark that lights the path to action, advocacy, and achievement.

"An important lesson from the pandemic is that grades didn't often reflect how much students were learning. Parents were told their children were doing fine when statewide test results told a very different story. It is imperative that we give parents an accurate picture so that they can take schools and districts up on the tutoring and extra help that is available."

**DR. THOMAS KANE, FACULTY DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER
FOR EDUCATION POLICY AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY AND
CO-AUTHOR OF THE EDUCATION RECOVERY SCORECARD**

Why this matters

The disconnect between perception and reality garnered attention in the wake of the pandemic, when significant learning loss and a rise in chronic absenteeism by and large had minimal impact on grades. A [report](#) from TNTP, EdNavigator, and Learning Heroes that examined two separate school districts found that student achievement had fallen an average of five months in math and reading, and chronic absenteeism spiked, with students missing one to two or more weeks of school. Yet most students still earned the same grade – or better – in 2022 as they did in 2019. While the number of students not yet on grade level and chronically absent quadrupled, more than 40 percent of these students still earned Bs or better in core subjects.

In other words, grades were – and in most cases still are – sending signals that students were doing well at a time when there was serious reason for concern. But how would parents know?

As it stands, too many report cards are still sending false signals, and many families, trusting the information they've been given, simply aren't aware that their students may be behind. Pinpointing a child's academic progress is complex. But absent a more holistic picture, parents may miss out on taking additional actions that could make a significant difference in ensuring their child receives the support they need to catch up.

Parents reporting their child receives all bs or above*



*Gallup & Learning Heroes. (2023, November 14). *B-flation: How good grades can sideline parents*. bealearninghero.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/B-flation_Gallup_Learning-Heroes_Report-FINAL.pdf

Insight 3

Spark Parent Action Through Awareness

When parents know their child is not at grade level, they take action.

Let's use math as an example: A whopping 97 percent of parents who know their child is behind in math say they are concerned about their child's math skills, ranking it above everything else, including paying the bills or the impact of social media on their child. But among the nearly 9 in 10 parents who believe their child is on track, math barely registers as a concern, with just 22 percent citing it.

When parents have a clear understanding, they are far more likely to raise concerns about their child's academics directly with their child's teachers. 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 specifically discussed their concerns about their child's academic progress, compared with 50 percent of all parents who have talked to their child's teacher.

The question is, through the channels where parents are typically engaging, such as checking their child's assignments, helping with homework, attending conferences, and communicating with the teacher – why aren't more parents getting the message that their child is not at grade level?

"When parents know there's a problem, they'll fix it. They care about their child's success more than anything else, so you had better believe they'll take action – teaming up with teachers and getting their kids the support they need. But how are they expected to fix a problem they don't know they have?"

**SARAH CARPENTER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF MEMPHIS LIFT,
A PARENT ADVOCACY ORGANIZATION**

What this looks like in action

Our data show that parents are hungry for more information and a better understanding of where their child stands academically. But they need access to information, including multiple measures of achievement and development.

Parents who recalled the [Go Beyond Grades](#) awareness campaign conducted across nine communities were nearly twice as likely to report taking action, such as asking their child's teacher whether their child was at grade level, having conversations with the teacher about summer learning, or seeking out information on progress beyond report card grades, than parents who didn't recall the campaign.

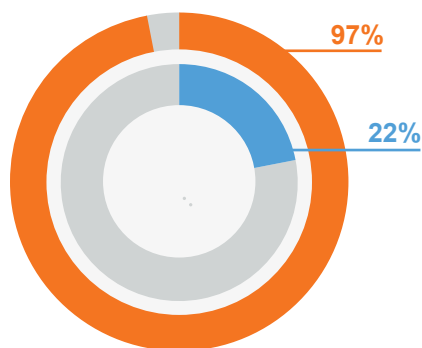
The largest Go Beyond Grades campaign to date is in [Tarrant County, Texas](#), where 80 community partners are coming together to address the perception gap by providing actionable information and resources to families and educators through digital ads, social media, a designated landing page, earned media, and billboards throughout the county. A campaign evaluation found a 12 percent drop in

parents who reported that their child is at or above grade level in reading – an astounding result that paves the way for improved student outcomes.

The campaign message resonates with LaShanta Mire, a Tarrant County mom who believed her daughter was doing well in school until she joined the parent advocacy group [Parent Shield](#). There, she discovered that report cards [had not been telling the full story](#). “[My daughter] was getting all A’s and she wasn’t even on grade level, and that was a big disappointment,” said Mire. After finding out her daughter wasn’t on grade level, she worked with the school for additional reading support and now says her daughter is getting A’s – and deserves them.

And national organizations like UNCF are creating tools for families to turn awareness into advocacy at the state and district level. In 2025, UNCF launched its [Parent Toolkit](#) to help families advocate for increasing the pipeline of Black teachers, illustrating how family engagement is also about equipping families to help shape the systems that support their children’s success.

Parents who know their child is behind in math say math is top worry*



97% 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**.

*Gallup & Learning Heroes. (2023, November 14). *B-flation: How good grades can sideline parents*. bealearninghero.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/B-flation_Gallup_Learning-Heroes_Report-FINAL.pdf

Insight 4

Prioritize the Parent-Teacher Team

Families and educators want the same thing: for children to thrive academically and emotionally. Yet, too often, they operate on parallel tracks – committed, but disconnected. While many factors contribute, one challenge lies in a breakdown in communication and the systems that enable connection.

“Unlocking the ‘How’: Designing Family Engagement Strategies That Lead to School Success” suggests three pillars for effective family engagement:

1. **Placing trust at the center of the home-school relationship**
2. **Anchoring family engagement strategies in student learning and well-being**
3. **Investing in building the infrastructure to enable this work**

Without proper systems – namely structured time and meaningful preparation – even the most willing teachers are left guessing about how to engage families. If we want real collaboration focused on student outcomes, we must give educators the skills and support they want and need.

As “Unlocking the How” highlights, teachers consistently say that having dedicated time for family engagement is one of the most valuable supports a school can provide – yet it’s also one of the least common. Simply asking teachers to “do more with less” can fuel frustration and burnout.

Additionally, the report points to examples where schools have built family engagement into existing routines – for instance, using back-to-school as an opportunity for teachers and parents to have one-on-one conversations, which can set the stage for trust and partnership before the school year begins.

“What we’ve seen first hand in Washington, D.C. schools is that when parents and teachers come together to form partnerships grounded in trust and focused on student learning and well-being, we unlock the real potential of our children. We’re seeing positive outcomes happening at scale because school leaders are listening to families and prioritizing the systems and structures that make collaboration possible – it strengthens families, schools, and the entire community.”

MAYA MARTIN CADOGAN, FOUNDER & CEO OF PAVE (PARENTS AMPLIFYING VOICES IN EDUCATION), A PARENT ADVOCACY ORGANIZATION

What this looks like in action

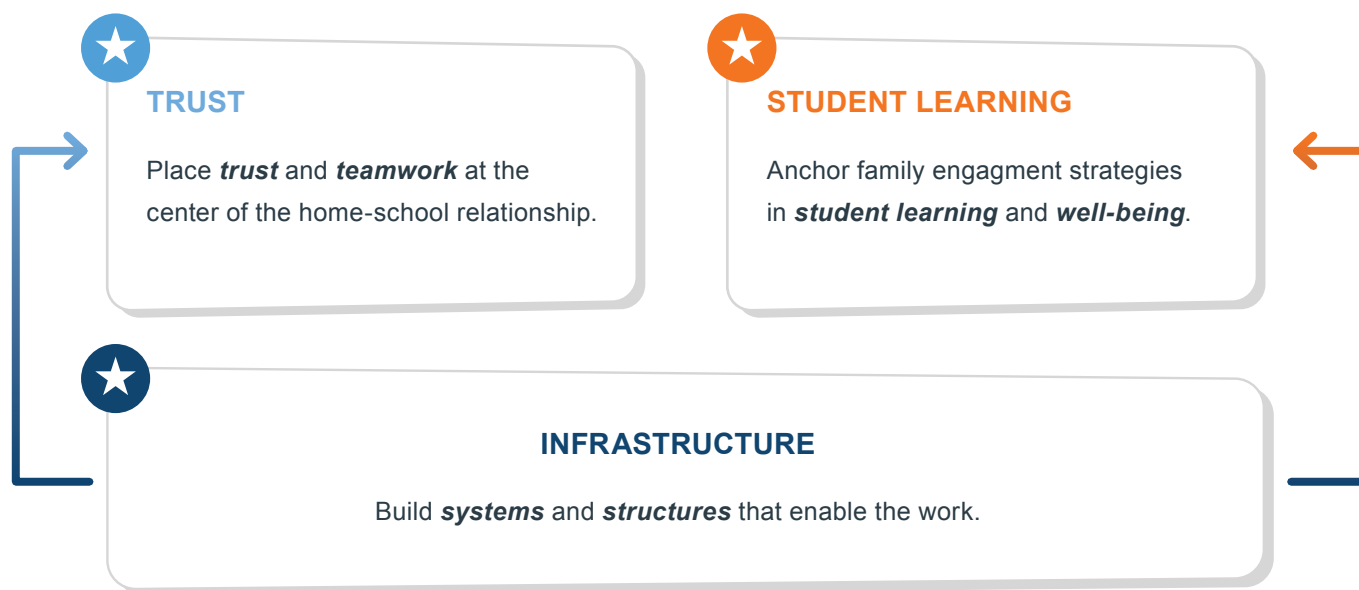
During the 2023-24 school year, **Prodeo Academy**, a charter network in Minneapolis serving about 1,000 students – the vast majority low-income students of color – went all in on family engagement as a strategy to boost student achievement. They centered their approach on building trust with families, focusing on student learning, and equipping teachers with professional development that shifted mindsets to see families as true partners.

This included prioritizing candid conversations, improving data-sharing practices so families could clearly see their child's progress in reading and math, and redesigning family conferences so that teachers and parents could co-create "action plans" to get students on track.

As a result, families became more aware of their child's progress, with a 15-point increase among parents who recognized their child wasn't on grade level. Two-thirds of parents reported having a plan to support their child, and three-quarters committed to supporting their child's writing and math outside of school. In just one school year, Prodeo showed that when teachers get the support they need to engage families and share multiple measures of achievement, student outcomes improve.

"I exceeded several of my strategic goals this year, such as the number of students meeting MAP growth targets and surpassing student retention goals," said Steven Ward, principal at Prodeo Academy. "I believe this was in part because of our increased focus on family engagement."

Three pillars of effective family engagement*



*Bergman, E. (2022). *Unlocking the "how": Designing family engagement strategies that lead to school success*. Learning Heroes. bealearninghero.org/unlockingthehow

Insight 5

Make Family Engagement a Strategy, Not a Goal

Family engagement is most effective when it's directed toward the goals and priorities that schools are already focused on. Educators are busy people, and asking them to participate in family events or initiatives that are disconnected from their central goals helps explain why efforts fail and why it's hard to secure broad support amongst school and district staff.

Yet, the research affirms what educators and parents agree on – effective home-school engagement makes a difference for kids. The FACE Impact Study by Learning Heroes and TNTP shows that schools with strong family engagement pre-pandemic had much lower than expected chronic absenteeism post-pandemic as well as higher rates of student achievement.

Framing family engagement as a strategy – not a stand-alone goal – helps educators connect it directly to outcomes, from attendance to proficiency. It also helps achieve the elusive goal of coherence – how all of the components of school fit together around a shared set of goals – which is a constant struggle in underperforming schools. For example, the proven practice of home visits can strengthen a family engagement strategy focused on building trust with families and advancing school goals like attendance and achievement.

“Too often, schools treat family engagement as a set of activities or events, separate from their core instructional priorities. When family engagement is instead embedded as a strategy to reach goals such as improved attendance, literacy, or math proficiency, it becomes transformative. This is when educators begin to see families as true partners in advancing student learning, rather than an ‘add-on’ to their work.”

**DR. KAREN L. MAPP, PROFESSOR OF PRACTICE,
HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**

What this looks like in action

“Unlocking the ‘How’” includes several examples of schools and districts that anchor family engagement strategies in student learning and well-being. One way that districts can approach their goal of increasing student achievement is through Individual Student Success Planning. In rural southern Illinois at Unity Point Consolidated School District 140, nearly all students participate in tailored planning meetings at the start of the school year, where the student, a family member, and educator begins to build trust, establish academic and personal growth goals, and assess academic, social, and emotional needs. Touch points throughout the year connect to this plan, with staff responsible for responding to needs as they emerge.

This kind of effort reflects a broader movement to make family engagement an instructional strategy. Through the Family Engagement Leadership Institute, school and district leaders are re-designing their engagement approaches so that they’re directed toward their school goals. In Pajaro Valley Unified School District in California, for example, leaders and families have built engagement strategies grounded in trust and focused on student learning and well-being – a process that has strengthened both relationships and results.

Family engagement traditional goals:

- ✓ Increase the number of families at Family Night
- ✓ Host Donuts for Dads
- ✓ Send monthly classroom newsletters

Family engagement as a strategy for achieving school goals:

- ✓ Train and give teachers the time to share student data with families
- ✓ Create an “action plan” with each family to support reading at home
- ✓ Conduct home visits as a way to build relationships and improve attendance

“This year we’re realizing as an academic community that parent engagement is not a goal in and of itself. Rather it is a strategy to meet all of our other goals. And if we can put all of these pieces together, we can help students maximize their full potential.”

JACKIE MEDINA, PRINCIPAL AT STARLIGHT ELEMENTARY IN WATSONVILLE CALIFORNIA (PAJARO VALLEY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT)

Defining Success After High School

College still matters. But high school students and their families are increasingly thinking differently about what might serve them best after graduation.

In our survey of parents, just 57 percent said it was “absolutely essential” or “very important” to get a two- or four-year college degree, representing a steady decline from years prior. The importance of a degree has also dropped among Black and Hispanic families, though they continue to place more importance on going to college than White parents.

Regardless of the pathways students and their families choose after graduation, one barrier to post-secondary success remains constant: overwhelming majorities of parents say they want – but their child lacks access to – pathway opportunities such as advanced placement, dual enrollment, and CTE

courses, according to data from 50CAN. In fact, they also found that, in a majority of states, only about one third of parents or less are extremely confident their child will be well prepared for entrance into and success in college or equipped to succeed in the workforce upon graduation from high school.

We know that the road to a fulfilling career doesn’t always follow a single path. That’s why it’s crucial for students to make the most of high school to help them discover their passions – and continue to learn and grow, whether through a four-year college or a specialized training program that launches them to a career. With the current momentum around post-secondary pathways and investment in economic mobility for all learners, it’s key to engage and support families around post-secondary pathways for their children.

“Providing every parent in America with clear information about how their children are performing in school is a national imperative. Whether it’s our youngest students learning to read and do basic math, our middle schoolers moving through more advanced coursework, or our high schoolers gaining skills to succeed on their future pathway of choice – families deserve timely and transparent data so they know how to help their child.”

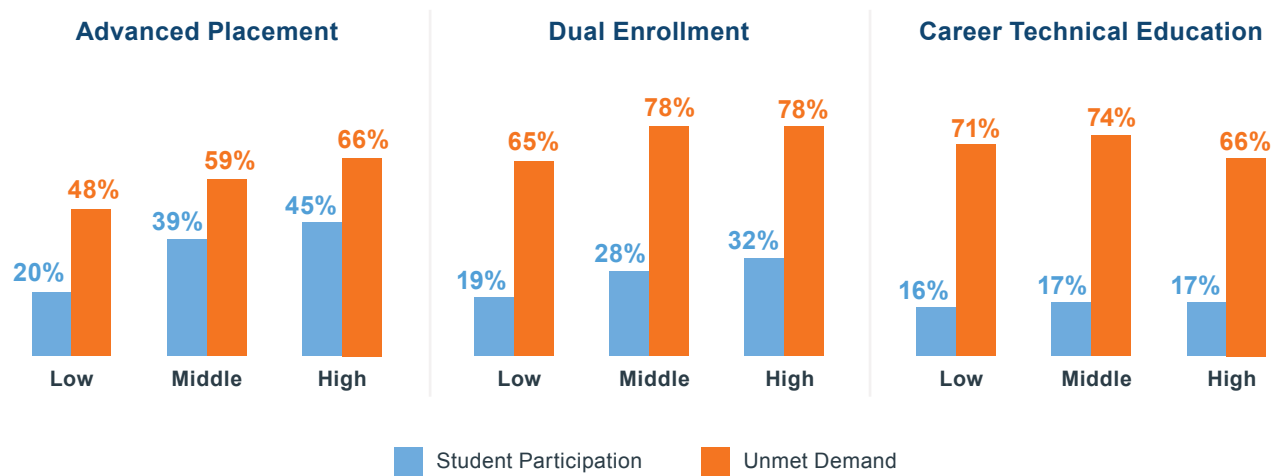
**MARGARET SPELLINGS, FORMER U.S. SECRETARY OF EDUCATION
AND PRESIDENT & CEO OF THE BIPARTISAN POLICY CENTER**

What this looks like in action

The [National Summer Learning Association \(NSLA\)](#) is building career-connected pathways by empowering school districts and community organizations to deliver high-impact summer experiences for all students. These summer programs provide early exposure to potential career fields and strengthen students’ academic and social-emotional skills.

NSLA also supports youth by offering paid public policy internships in Washington, D.C., and a National Youth Leadership Summit, where students from across the country gather for a week of networking and leadership training. The organization invests in the adults who lead these programs by offering professional development and fostering year-round learning communities. They highlight best practices and successful programs that offer students access to advanced courses, career exploration, and credit recovery opportunities.

Student participation and unmet parent demand in college and career programs (by household income)*



*50CAN. (2024, October). *The state of educational opportunity in America: A 50-state survey of 20,000 parents.* [50can.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/50CAN.EducationOpportunitySurvey.pdf](https://www.50can.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/50CAN.EducationOpportunitySurvey.pdf)

Insight 7

Connecting the Dots Between Social, Emotional & Academic Growth

Parents see their children's social, emotional, and academic growth as deeply connected – and they want their schools to address all three to ensure students are prepared for life after graduation. In fact, **80 percent** say it is “absolutely essential” or “very important” that their child's school has high expectations for learning and academic progress, and almost as many, 78 percent, say the same for social and emotional development.

Moreover, parents expect to see certain behaviors if their child is developing these skills. Parents' top ranked skill, *respect*, includes both treating others with respect and understanding and respecting other people and cultures.

And there's strong support for integrating life skills with academics. Parents respond favorably when social, emotional, cognitive, and academic development are integrated into the teaching of academic subjects like reading, writing, and math. This allays parents' concerns that these skills will

be taught at the expense of academic progress. For example, **84 percent of parents** are “very” or “somewhat interested” in having their school use strategies and activities to reinforce these skills and traits throughout the school day. The following are **key reasons** parents give for supporting this integration:

- Children need social and emotional skills and traits to work with others, solve social problems, and make communities better in the future.
- When children have learning mindsets and skills, they are motivated, know how to learn, and are more likely to thrive in school.
- 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 tough issues effectively.

“Each student is a human being in progress, full of possibility. The ability to change, grow, and learn new skills lives in each of us, in our biology. Parents and schools have enormous influence over how much of each child's potential we ever get to see. That's because what shapes the human brain and body, what drives genetic expression, are the relationships, experiences, and opportunities in each young person's life. Trusting relationships – whether between adults and kids or between peers – produce the biological spark that fuels curiosity, engagement, and learning inside and outside of school.”

**PAMELA CANTOR, MD, CHILD AND ADOLESCENT PSYCHIATRIST
AND CEO OF THE HUMAN POTENTIAL L.A.B.**

When getting information on this topic, parents tend to trust those who are in their inner circle or who have specific expertise – teachers, family members, and pediatricians. When asked whom they trust for information about social, emotional, cognitive, and academic development, **76 percent said their child’s teachers.**

Parents also value opportunities for their children to build social and emotional skills beyond the school day and overwhelmingly say out-of-school programs help their children succeed academically and feel more prepared for the next school year and beyond. These findings underscore the critical role of homes, schools, and communities working together to create opportunities that foster a sense of purpose, belonging, and readiness.

What this looks like in action

CASEL helps make evidence-based social and emotional learning accessible to schools through their **Guide to Schoolwide SEL** which includes a focus on **Strategies for Establishing School-Family Partnerships in Support of SEL**. This

process helps ensure the benefits of social-emotional learning go both ways – teachers are better able to support their students by engaging with families and parents have a partner in supporting their child’s growth and development.

Top skills and traits parents prioritize for their children*



*Learning Heroes. (2018). *Developing life skills in children: A roadmap for communicating with parents*. Learning Heroes. bealearninghero.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/DLS-Report-2018-for-distribution-single-pages.pdf

Insight 8

Learning Differences Are Common – Support Should Be, Too

There's perhaps nowhere that trust is more important in a K-12 setting than when educators and parents work hand-in-hand to identify and support a child's learning difference.

Nearly **1 in 5 students** has a learning difference, whether that's a specific learning disability such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia, or a related neurological processing challenge, including attention deficits, sensory processing disorders, and executive function challenges.

Learning Heroes' **research** with the **NERC** finds that teachers are often the first to spot an issue, with nearly 8 in 10 saying they're on the front lines of identification. Yet, fewer than half have received training on specific learning differences like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or dyscalculia, and only half feel they have the resources needed to help these students thrive.

Families face equally steep hurdles. Just **20 percent of parents** of a child with a learning difference say it's very easy to navigate the evaluation process, meaning many families believe the process is too complex. Nearly half delay seeking a diagnosis because of stigma, long wait times, or unclear next steps – challenges that disproportionately affect low-income families.

"My journey as an immigrant and parent of a child with special needs has been challenging and overwhelming. As I manage the school system and obtain the school's support, I needed to learn to navigate the complex process quickly to advocate for my child's needs."

**LIZETH LOCICERO, TEXAS
PARENT AND FORMER
LEARNING HEROES FAMILY
ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER**

Families often rely on teachers for insights into their child's challenges and look to them not just as a guide during the diagnosis process, but as someone who can provide important context and data. Yet teachers often feel just as unprepared as families for this journey – even if they've received professional development on how to help.

Parents and teachers alike agree on the different ways schools and families can work together to increase communication and support. Concretely, this can look like providing more information to families about how they can support their child outside of school, establishing training programs to help families better advocate for their child, or creating a parent guide on age-appropriate academic, social, and emotional milestones.

Constant and comprehensive communication is crucial for helping parents confront barriers like fear and anxiety that can prevent them from identifying and accepting their child's learning difference and getting the services they need, especially since we

know that parents of students who are identified and receiving services **are more satisfied** with their schools than those who suspect their child has a learning difference.

What this looks like in action

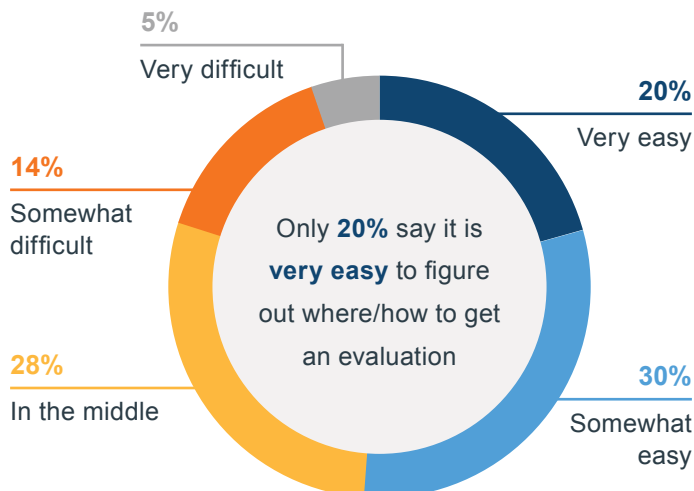
Despite many educators and parents feeling unprepared and lacking the support they need to help their students with learning differences, there are a growing number of resources dedicated to providing them with the tools and information to navigate challenges, improve skills, discover strengths, and find connections in their community.

[Understood.org](#) and [EdNavigator](#), for example, have resources for [families](#) and [educators](#) on supporting students with learning differences. They guide parents on how to request educational services, evaluations, school records, and more.

They provide tips for writing effective and powerful Individual Education Plans and break down confusing-but-common special education terms. They even walk parents through how to file a special education legal complaint.

Learning Heroes' [Playbook](#) for educators, service providers, and advocates, developed in partnership with the Oak Foundation and Understood.org, provides bite-sized resources and inspiring stories of parents who have persisted in navigating these complex systems to get their child the services they need.

Evaluations for learning and thinking differences — few parents find them very easy to obtain*



*Learning Heroes. (2023). *The parent journey: Cracking the code for families of children with learning differences*. bealearninghero.org/learning-differences-playbook

Insight 9

Lose the Edu-Jargon

Another barrier we hear about time and again is that the communications parents receive from their schools, districts, or states are not written with the parent perspective in mind. Research shows that while parents want to be involved in their child's learning, too often the language used creates barriers instead of bridges.

Terms like “resilience,” “growth,” and “school climate and culture” may be commonly used in education circles, but they can be misunderstood or unfamiliar to families. In focus groups, some parents associated “resilience” with trauma or interpreted

“growth” as enrollment increases. Cultural differences are at play, too, with some Hispanic families voicing concerns that “school culture” may have something to do with immigration status.

School leaders and educators often communicate in complicated language that leaves parents scratching their heads or prone to adopting their own definitions. Schools build trust and partnership when they speak in clear, accessible language that resonates with families' lived experiences and goals for their children. These disconnects aren't just semantic – they're structural and consequential.

“Parents shouldn't have to need a glossary to understand what schools and districts are saying. Plain language isn't about dumbing things down – it's about making sure families have the information they need to support their kids and hold schools accountable.”

**ANDY ROTHERHAM, CO-FOUNDER AND SENIOR PARTNER
AT BELLWETHER EDUCATION PARTNERS**

What this looks like in action

When our communications roadmap, a centerpiece of the “[Developing Life Skills in Children](#)” report, was message tested with diverse parent groups, we learned a lot about the need to replace jargon with language that resonates with families. We also found that certain words and phrases generate negative and even visceral responses. Those to watch out for include: “judging or grading students on their feelings,” “teaching children how to think,” or

anything that suggests overriding the role of parents. And rather than saying “resilience,” educators are encouraged to talk about how schools help children “overcome challenges” or “keep trying when things are hard.”

These adjustments may seem small, but they play a big role in building understanding, connection, and trust.

Concepts resonate but edu-jargon doesn’t translate*

WE SAY...	PARENTS THINK...	PARENTS SAY...
Resilience, Perseverance, Persistence	“Just say what you’re trying to say. Taking responsibility for yourself?”	Bouncing back, overcoming obstacles, learning from mistakes, sticking with it
Grit	“Strikes me as negative, like a struggle.”	Taking on challenges, pushing yourself, not giving up
Executive Function	“Is that going to the bathroom?”	Organizational skills, setting goals, ability to focus, managing time well
Self-Regulation	“That sounds like my child is going through some sort of therapy.”	Self-control
Growth Mindset	“Not sure what that means?”	Hard work pays off, it’s all in the effort, learn and grow from mistakes

*Learning Heroes. (2018). *Developing life skills in children: A roadmap for communicating with parents*. Learning Heroes. bealearninghero.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/DLS-Report-2018-for-distribution-single-pages.pdf

Engagement Works – At Every Grade Level

Family engagement moves the needle on attendance, achievement, and long-term student success, especially when it's grounded in trust and focused on student learning. The ["Family and Community Engagement Impact Study"](#) affirms this in its finding that schools with strong family engagement experienced significantly smaller increases in chronic absenteeism during the pandemic and smaller declines in reading and math proficiency. Importantly, the finding was true across grade levels, with middle schools seeing the greatest differences in student outcomes between schools with high and low engagement scores.

As ["The Disengaged Teen"](#) by Rebecca Winthrop and Jenny Anderson notes, adolescents are craving purpose and connection. That makes family engagement in middle and high school not just important but essential to helping teens feel seen, supported, and motivated. At the high school level, our research shows that a little information goes a

"When families and educators form authentic, trusting partnerships, the results go far beyond better communication. We see stronger schools, higher student achievement, and a deeper sense of shared purpose."

**YVONNE JOHNSON,
PRESIDENT, NATIONAL PTA**

long way. When parents of high school students are presented with achievement data, many [shift their perceptions](#) about their child's achievement – an indicator that they are leaning in instead of pulling back. Home-school partnerships matter at every level.

"There is one constant in education – the families and students we serve. We cannot sideline them. It is long overdue to center the shifting K-12 education landscape around families and their kids."

**ARNE DUNCAN,
FORMER U.S. SECRETARY OF EDUCATION AND
MANAGING DIRECTOR OF CHICAGO CRED**

What this looks like in action

Chronic absence nearly doubled by the end of the 2021-22 school year, rising from roughly 16 percent to 30 percent – largely as a result of the pandemic. While it has declined somewhat, it remains extraordinarily high.

Such data is tracked by [Attendance Works](#), which launched the [Attendance Awareness Campaign](#) with the core message that engaging students and families is essential for addressing absenteeism, enrollment declines, and educational inequities that have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Some school districts, including [Richmond, Virginia](#) and [Baltimore, Maryland](#) have leaned on home visits as a way to reconnect with families and figure out how to reverse the trend. What they found out was that families do, in fact, care about their kids making it to school. But there are major barriers to getting them through the door: health care, housing, job security, and food insecurity, to name a few. Once district leaders better understood the drivers of the problem, they eliminated punitive repercussions, and instead added wrap-around services meant to ensure children make it to school.



FROM INSIGHT TO IMPACT

This is a pivotal moment in education – but we are not flying blind. We carry a deep, nuanced understanding of what it takes – in homes, schools, districts, and states – for families and educators to partner in ways that truly accelerate progress.

As such, to make meaningful progress on student achievement and school improvement for all students, regardless of educational setting, we must center the voices and needs of those too often overlooked or underserved. When family perspectives shape the systems and structures that support learning, we can directly confront the root causes of chronic absenteeism, student underperformance, educator retention, and more.

With this body of evidence, we can inform and fuel the next chapter – not one of incremental change, but of bold, sustained transformation in how schools and families work together to support the growth and academic success of every child.



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ABOUT LEARNING HEROES

Founded in 2014, Learning Heroes' mission is to accelerate home-school partnerships grounded in trust and centered on student success – advancing student achievement, school success, and thriving communities. As a national non-profit, we work with states, districts, and national and local organizations to bring families and educators together as partners in K-12 education. Our interconnected strategy is rooted in research on the home-school relationship, actionable communications for families and educators, and tools and professional learning experiences that directly impact student learning and well-being.

The background is a solid blue color with a repeating pattern of white line-art icons. These icons include various educational and technological items: globes, books, tablets, bicycles, backpacks, alarm clocks, musical notes, speech bubbles, magnifying glasses, pencils, rulers, and basketballs. The icons are scattered across the entire background.

LEARNING HEROES 10 YEARS

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