

The Engagement Advantage:

Findings from a Mixed-Methods Study of Family-School Partnerships

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Study originates at Learning Heroes “Unlocking the How” Virtual Convening



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Family Engagement Impact Study



STAGE 1: Testing our Hypothesis (Quantitative)

Using publicly available data, assess the association between pre-pandemic family-school engagement and post-pandemic outcomes, controlling for differences in schools, students, and communities.



STAGE 2: Identifying Distinguishing Factors (Qualitative)

Better understand the practices and mindsets that differentiate successful schools using positive deviance methods.



STAGE 3: Improving Measurement

Seeking to develop and test a new tool that can be used by educators, policymakers, and researchers to objectively measure the practices that drive effective family engagement.

5Essentials Details



The 5Essentials survey:

- Is a validated tool based on rigorous research at UChicago Consortium on School Research
- Measures five foundational supports linked to differences in student achievement
- Has been used statewide in Illinois public schools since 2012–13 school year

The **Involved Families** essential measures the extent to which all school staff develop strong relationships with families. It is based on survey responses from teachers that measure:

- Parent influence on decision making in schools
- Parent involvement in school
- Teacher-parent trust

Illinois Reflects the Diversity of the Country



Among all states, Illinois is most like the U.S. based on demographic characteristics*, such as:

- Race
- Age
- Household makeup
- Poverty Rate
- Educational Attainment

The average Illinois school is very similar to the national average across socioeconomic variables, for example:

- The average school in Illinois has 46% students of color, compared to 50% nationally
- The average school in Illinois has 17% students living in poverty, compared to 18% nationally.
- About 23% of schools in Illinois are in cities compared to 27% nationally, and 22% are in rural areas compared to 29% nationally.

*Source: [npr.org/2016/01/29/464250335/the-perfect-state-index-if-iowa-n-h-are-too-white-to-go-first-then-who](https://www.npr.org/2016/01/29/464250335/the-perfect-state-index-if-iowa-n-h-are-too-white-to-go-first-then-who) and [wallethub.com/edu/electorate-representation-index/18190](https://www.wallethub.com/edu/electorate-representation-index/18190)

Note: School averages for race and school locale are based on 2021-22 data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the data for poverty rate is based on 2018-19 Model Estimates of Poverty in Schools (MEPS) from the Urban Institute's Education Data Portal.

STAGE 1:

Testing Our Hypothesis (Quantitative)

How we built the quantitative analysis

Key Input

Strength of Engagement

Using the survey-based “Involved Families” score from the 5Essentials which is publicly available for all schools in Illinois.



Statistical Controls

School and Community Characteristics

Using public data that captures differences across schools that are associated with outcomes, such as student demographic and census data.

Lagged Outcome

We include the 2019 version of the outcome of interest.

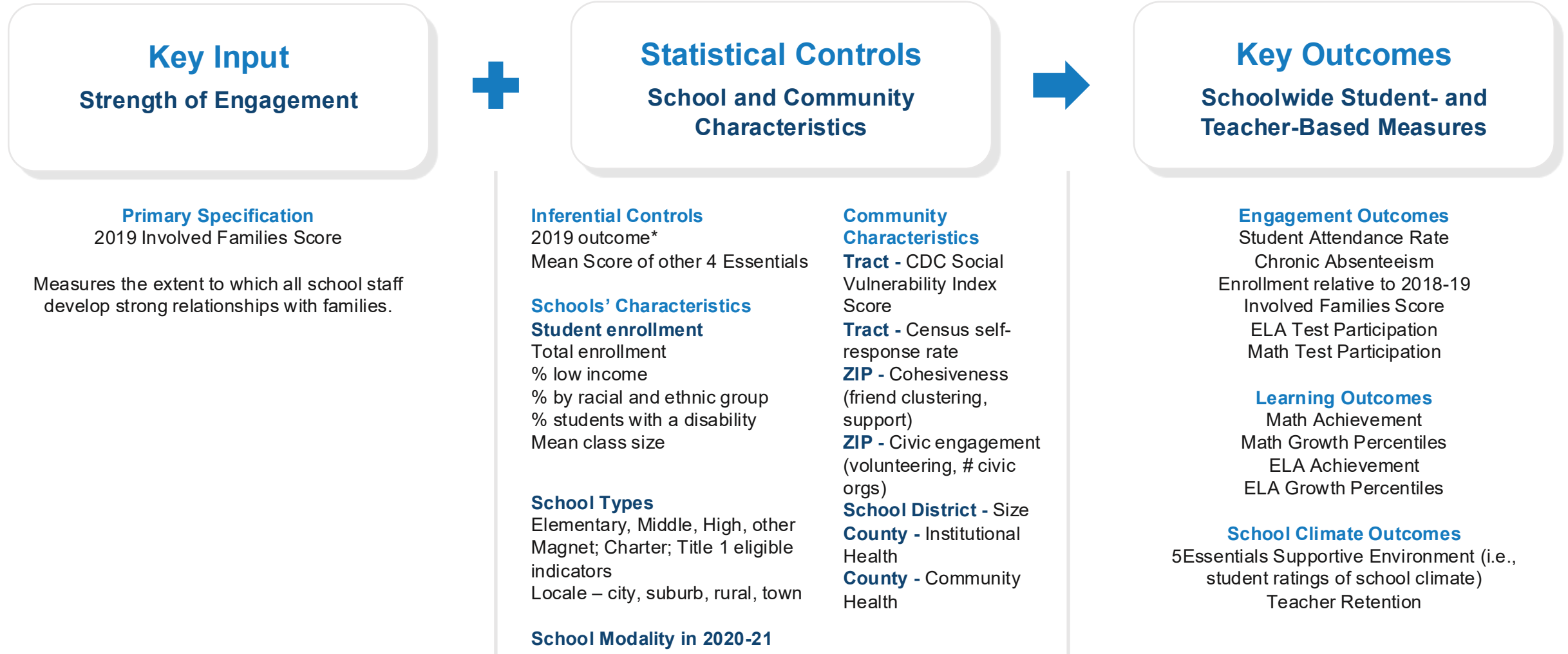


Key Outcomes

Schoolwide Student-Based Measures

Including student attendance, enrollment, achievement, growth, and survey-based perceptions.

We used publicly available school and community level data to examine the connection between pre-pandemic family engagement and a school's ability to better withstand disruption.



*Including a lagged version of the outcome allows us to account for patterns and persistence over time in the outcome as well as unobserved factors that might affect the outcome.

Applying statistical analysis to compare two schools

Consider two schools in the same community...

- Same 2018-2019 outcomes...
- Served same proportion of low-income students...
- Served the same grade levels...
- Were located in the same type of community...

The two schools are essentially the same except...



This school's **pre-pandemic family engagement is weak**, at the 10th percentile.



This school's **pre-pandemic family engagement is strong**, at the 90th percentile.

Typical change in attendance outcomes from 2018-19 to 2021-22 by strength of family engagement

Compared to a typical school of 500 students with weak family engagement, a school with strong family engagement:

Chronic Absenteeism

Had **31 fewer** chronically absent students



Student Attendance Rate

Had about **800 fewer** absences

Amounted to **more than \$45,000** of a typical school budget



*Note on calculation: For example, all else equal and on average, we expect a typical school in the 90th percentile of family engagement in 2019 to see a 9.7% rise in 2022 chronic absenteeism compared to a rise of 15.9% for a typical school in the 10th percentile of family engagement. This means that on average, a school with strong engagement rose 61% as much a school with weak engagement (9.7% / 15.9%) and that its rise was 39% smaller (100% - 61%). A "typical" school has 500 students and had 180 school days in 2022. The typical school budget is approximately \$5,000,000. The 5Essentials Involved Families scores range from 1 to 99. "Weak" engagement is equivalent to the 10th percentile score (a score of 26) and "Strong" engagement is equivalent to the 90th percentile score (a score of 78).

Typical change in proficiency outcomes from 2018-19 to 2021-22 by strength of family engagement

Compared to a typical school of 500 students with weak family engagement, a school with strong family engagement:

ELA Proficiency

Had **11 more students** meeting ELA proficiency standards



Math Proficiency

Had **14 more students** meeting Math proficiency standards

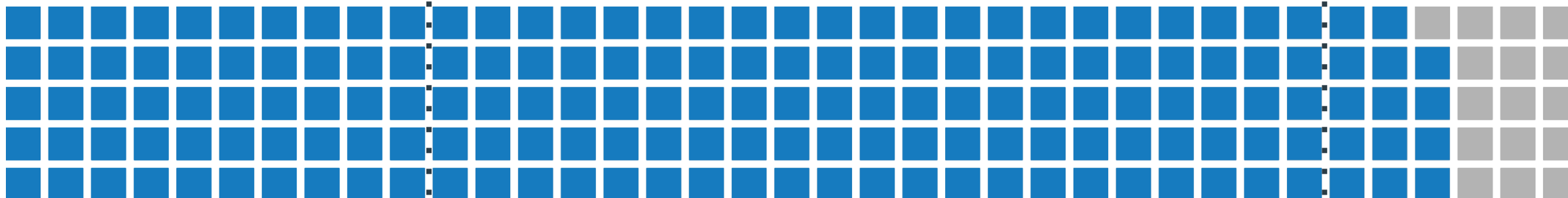



**Note on calculation: For example, all else equal and on average, we expect a typical school in the 90th percentile of family engagement in 2019 to see a 6.2% decline in 2022 ELA proficiency compared to a decline of 8.5% for a typical school in the 10th percentile of family engagement. This means that on average, a school with strong engagement declined 37% as much as a school with weak engagement (6.2% / 8.5%) and that its rise was 27% smaller (100% - 73%). The 5Essentials Involved Families scores range from 1 to 99. "Weak" engagement is equivalent to the 10th percentile score (a score of 26) and "Strong" engagement is equivalent to the 90th percentile score (a score of 78).*

The effect of family engagement was similar to the effect of in-person instruction in 20-21

50 In-person days (average school in IL in 20-21)

For math, the effect size of strong family engagement was roughly equivalent to 96 additional days of in-person learning instead of remote.

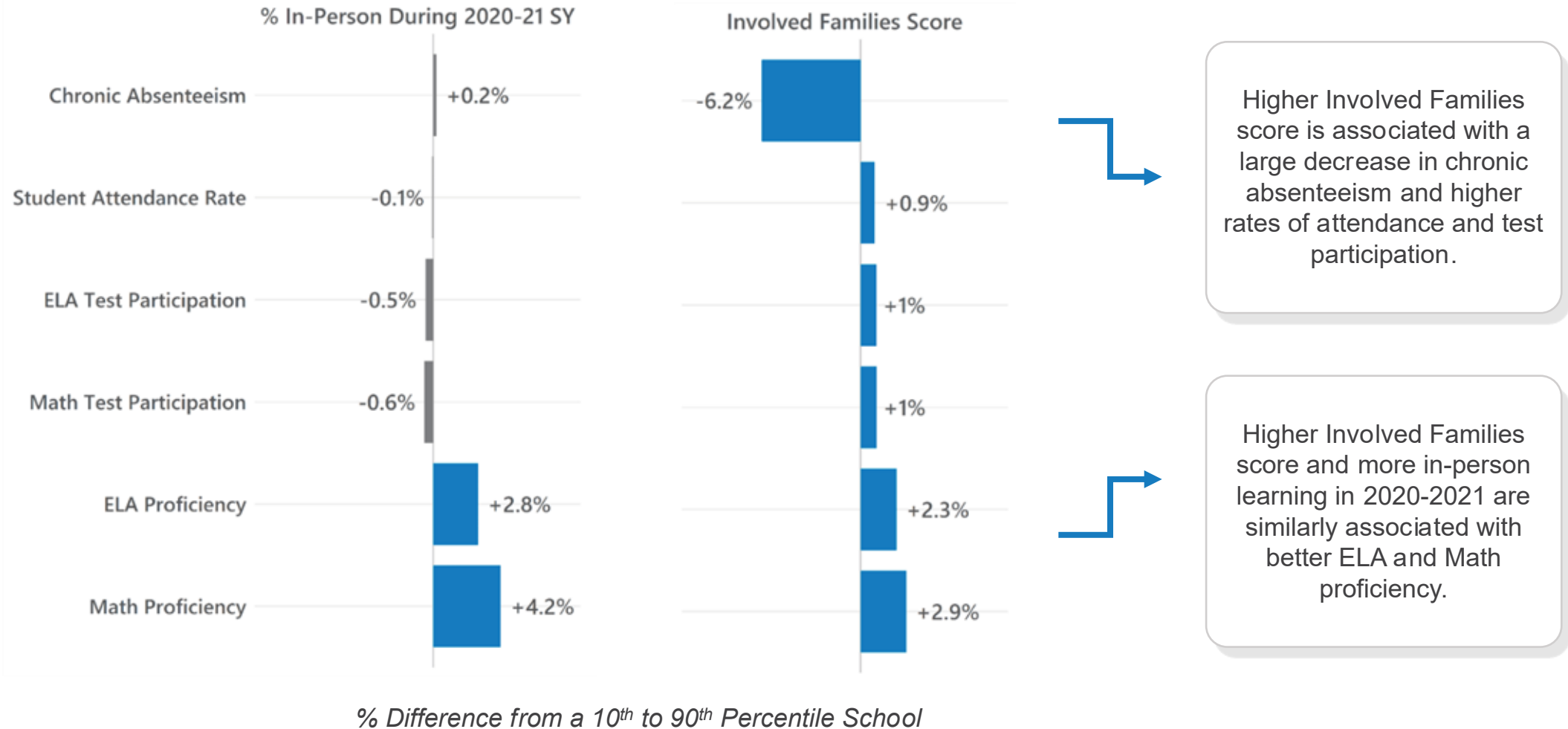


 = 1 School Day in a 180-day year

For ELA, the effect size of strong family engagement was roughly equivalent to 114 additional days of in-person learning instead of remote.

Note: These findings are associational and have been controlled for lagged proficiency rates as well as school and community characteristics. The benefits associated with in-person learning refer to the effect of learning in-person compared to hybrid and remote school modalities. The Involved Families scores range from 1 to 99. The 10th percentile is equivalent to an Involved Families score of 26 and the 90th percentile is equivalent to a score of 78. The percent of in person learning during the 2020-21 school year ranges from 0-100% with an average of 27%. We compare to the % of in-person learning during the 2020-21 school year due to its documented influence on learning (for example, see: cepr.harvard.edu/sites/hwpi.harvard.edu/files/cepr/files/explaining_covid_losses_5.23.pdf)

Comparing the effect of family engagement to in-instruction in 2020-2021 on multiple outcomes

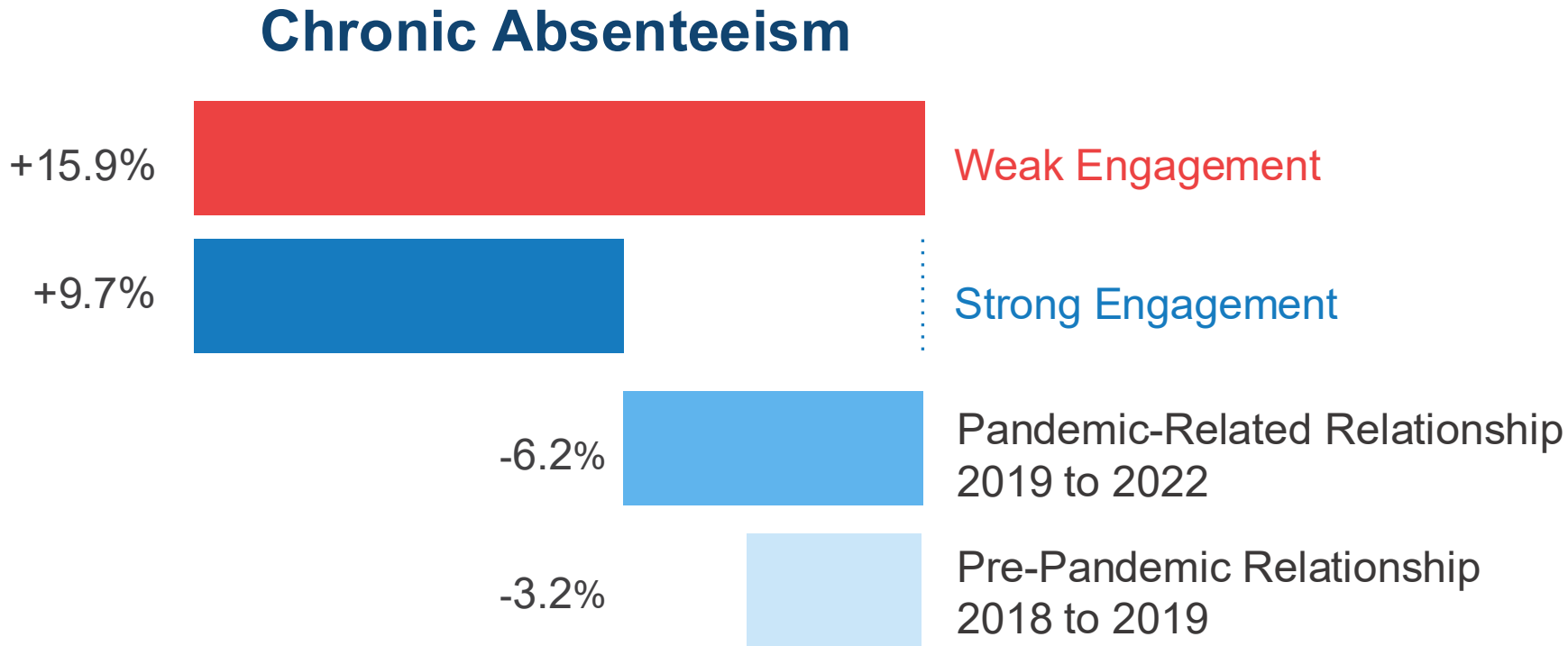


Higher Involved Families score is associated with a large decrease in chronic absenteeism and higher rates of attendance and test participation.

Higher Involved Families score and more in-person learning in 2020-2021 are similarly associated with better ELA and Math proficiency.

Note: The Involved Families scores range from 1 to 99. The 10th percentile is equivalent to an Involved Families score of 26 and the 90th percentile is equivalent to a score of 78. The percent of in person learning during the 2020-21 school year ranges from 0-100%. The 10th percentile is equivalent to 0% of in person learning and the 90th percentile is equivalent to 79% of in person learning during 2020-21.

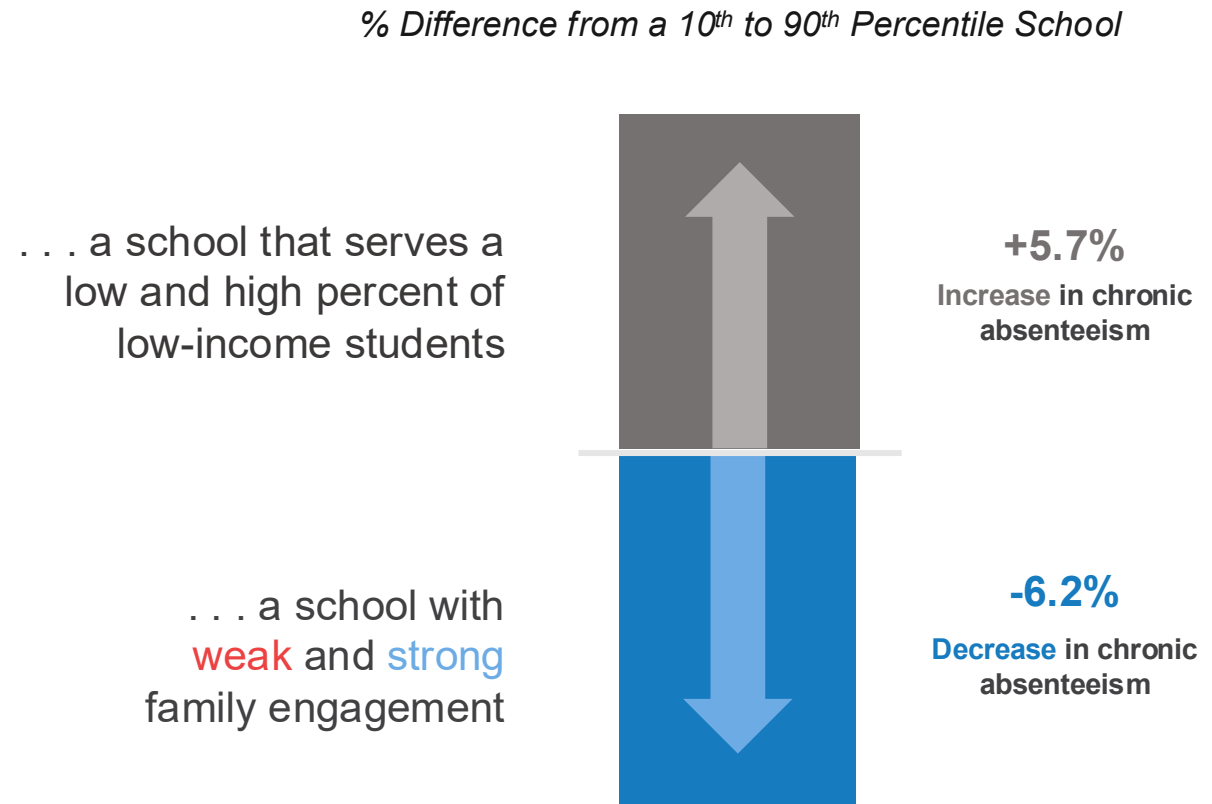
The importance of strong family engagement was magnified by the pandemic



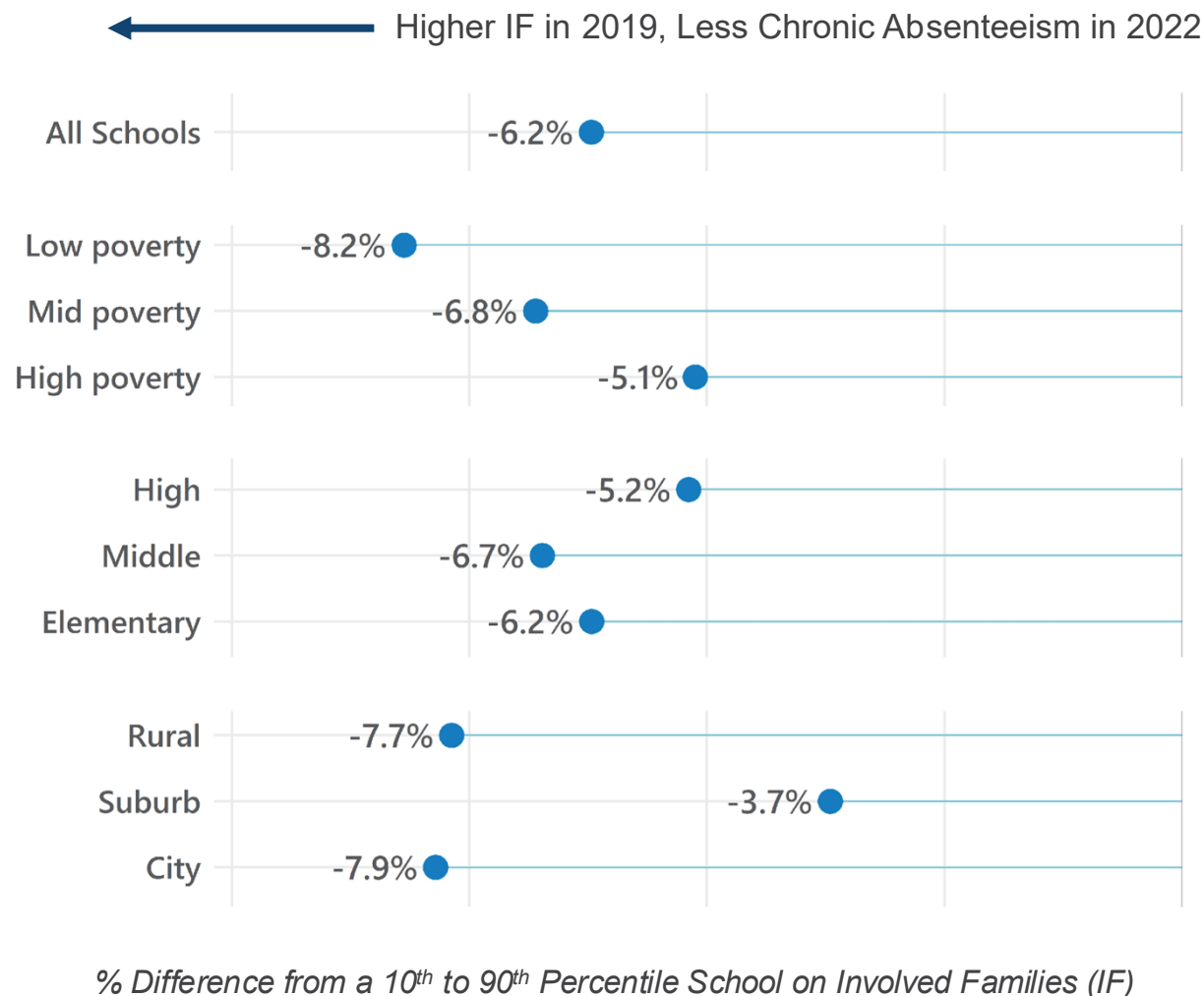
The Involved Families scores range from 1 to 99. In 2022, the 10th percentile Involved Families score is 26 and the 90th percentile score is 78. In 2018, the 10th percentile score is 28 and the 90th percentile score is 80. Given data availability, the number of schools in the 2018-19 analysis is smaller than the 2019-2022 timeframe and the control variable sets differ slightly.

The effect size of family engagement was larger than the effect size of poverty

Keeping all measured characteristics the same, the estimated difference in chronic absenteeism between . . .



Across a diverse range of schools, strong family engagement is linked to lower chronic absenteeism



Note: The Involved Families scores range from 1 to 99. The 10th percentile is equivalent to an Involved Families score of 26 and the 90th percentile is equivalent to a score of 78. Low poverty refers to the 25th percentile (28% low income), mid poverty is the 50th percentile (46%), and high poverty is the 75th percentile (69%). See the model results in the appendix for interactions on other outcomes.

STAGE 2:

Identifying Distinguishing Factors (Qualitative)

Learning from Bright Spot schools



What can we learn from Bright Spot schools about developing and sustaining strong family engagement?

What distinguishes schools with better-than-expected family-school engagement?

A positive deviance framework allows us to examine *how* some schools achieve strong family-school engagement

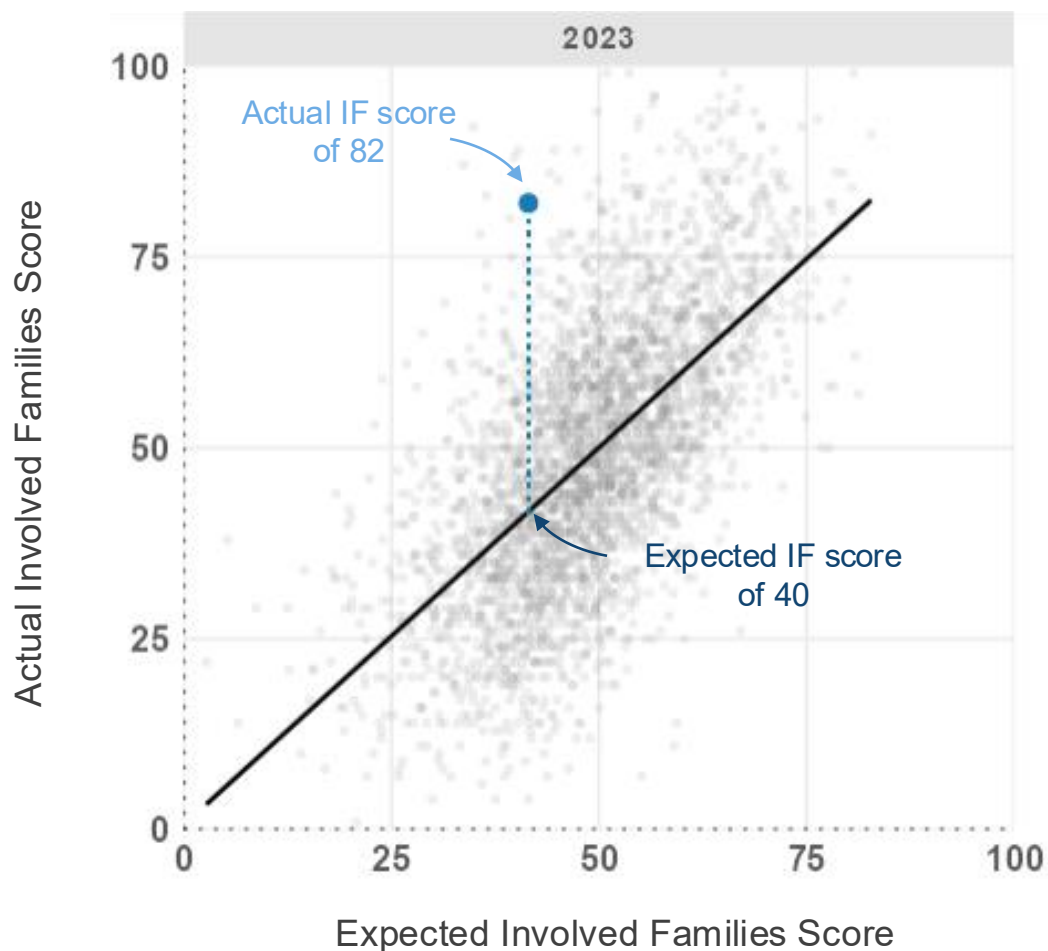
Bright Spot schools are schools that operate in similar settings (such as urban or rural areas) and serve similar students yet perform better on family-school engagement than their peers.

Similar factors such as:

- School size
- Enrollment
- Resources
- Student demographics



How we identified Bright Spots



These are schools who Exceeded Expectations



We estimate an expected Involved Families (IF) score for each school based on how IF scores across thousands of other schools tend to go up or down with characteristics like size, locale, spending, and student demographics.*

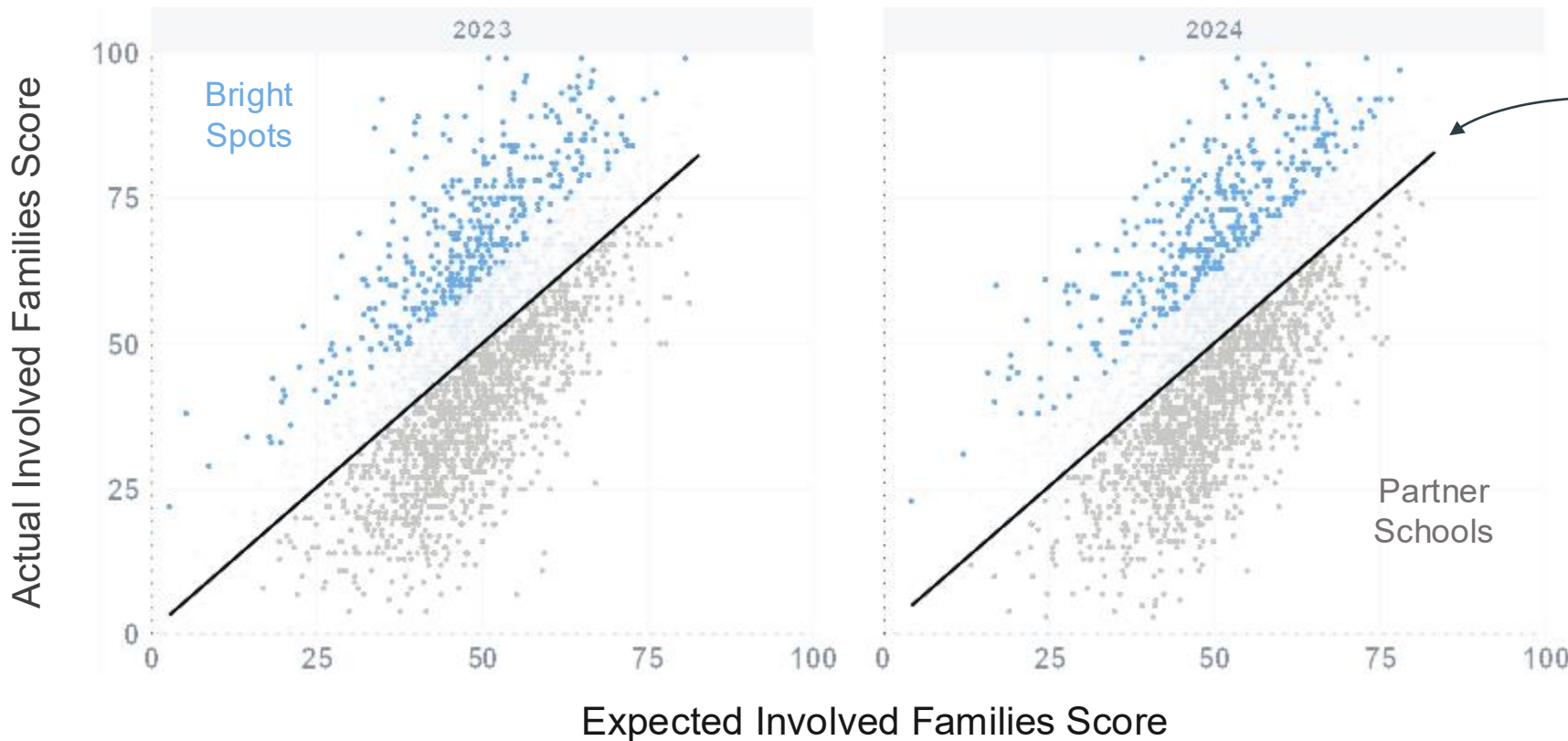
- **Each dot** = a school
- **Dot on the black line** = actual IF is typical and as expected
- **Dot above the black line** = actual IF is higher than expected

The highlighted school scored **82** on IF versus an expected **40** - exceeding expectations by **+42** points, indicating much stronger engagement **than similar schools**.

**Expected IF is estimated using a linear model with district size, grade band, locale, charter flag, average class size, student enrollment, teacher retention rate, principal turnover, total per-pupil expenditure, % students with disabilities, % low-income students, % limited English proficient students, and % students by race/ethnic groups.*

Identifying Bright Spot and Partner Schools

Bright Spots are schools that place in the top 20% for better-than-expected IF scores in both 2023 and 2024. **Partner schools** placed in the bottom 50%, meaning they performed below expectations in both 2023 and 2024.



The performance gap between **bright spots** and **partner schools** strengthens the contrast between groups while maintaining a sufficient pool of partner schools to enable within-district matching.

Note: If a school lacks Involved Families scores for both 2023 and 2024, we use 2022 and 2023, and if it lacks scores for 2022 and 2023, we use 2022 and 2024

Bright Spot and Partner schools were similar on student characteristics but differed on family engagement

Demographics	All Potential Schools	Bright Spots	Partner Schools
% Low-income students	49%	45%	54%
% Students w/disabilities	19%	22%	17%
% Students w/LEP (Limited English Proficiency)	15%	20%	28%
% Black students	16%	9%	14%
% Latinx students	28%	38%	43%
% White students	47%	42%	33%

➔ We wanted these school characteristics to be similar.

Involved Families Score	50	75	45
IF Overperformance	0	+17	-8
Chronic Absenteeism Rate	27.9%	24%	33%
Math Achievement Rate	26.4%	42%	29%
ELA Achievement Rate	32.9%	47%	30%

➔ But we wanted family engagement to be different.

➔ Bright spots also had better student outcomes

Data Collection Details

- ☆ We partnered with five bright spot schools and five partner schools **from the same districts** that served a similar student body.
- ☆ We collected more than **100 interviews**, with principals, teachers, and family members from schools representing nearly **8,000 students**.
- ☆ We examined which practices and conditions were more frequently emphasized at bright spot schools.

How we conducted the qualitative analysis



Phase 1:
Codebook
Development



Phase 2:
Human-AI Label
Calibration



Phase 3:
AI-Assisted Labeling
with Human
Oversight

Why did we use AI?

We used generative AI through a secure and private platform to increase the quality and efficiency of our qualitative labeling process.

Stronger codebook:

AI acted as an extra coder and enabled researchers to spend *substantially* more time engaging with interview text and refining labels instead of applying labels.

Human-level accuracy, at scale:

Apply labels in hours instead of weeks with consistent application and no labeler fatigue.

Reproducible and auditable:

The same model and prompt will reliably reproduce results allowing us to replicate and refine labels.

Distinguishing Factors at Bright Spot Schools

1

Mindsets: Families as Equal Partners

Staff emphasized a shared belief that educators and families are on the same team and are equal partners in student success.

2

Leadership: Clear Vision, Inspiration, Expectations & Infrastructure

Leaders provide a cohesive vision for family engagement, inspire their staff by modeling the importance of family engagement, communicate clear expectations, and create accountability structures.

3

Communication: One-on-One, Academically Focused, Unwavering

Schools emphasized proactive, consistent, and persistent communication with families in one-on-one interactions that were focused on academics.

4

Relationships: Personal & Enduring

Schools showed evidence of deep, personal connections with students and families, extending beyond the school building and school year.

Cross-Cutting finding: Partner Schools Emphasize Barriers

Educators at Bright Spot schools mentioned barriers to family partnership relatively less frequently than those at their matched Partner schools.

Barriers mentioned more frequently at Partner Schools:

- Language Access and Translation
- Cultural Differences
- Time and Work Conflicts
- Educator Interest
- Educator Capacity

“Are there barriers or just excuses? Language is the number one barrier, but I try [to speak the language], and parents seem to appreciate it.”

**– BRIGHT SPOT ELEMENTARY
PRINCIPAL**

Mindsets: Families as Equal Partners

At Bright Spot schools:

- Staff – and many families – consistently expressed a belief that educators and families are on the same team.
- Staff emphasized valuing families' assets and contributions.

Mindsets: Families as Equal Partners

**Bright Spots emphasize a
“Same Team” Mindset**

*“The ‘why’ is pretty simple:
We don't achieve our mission
without our families. It's as
simple as that.”*

– BRIGHT SPOT PRINCIPAL

**Partner Schools describe challenges
with existing mindsets**

*“I think sometimes there's a mindset
piece. I have heard a lot of people talk
about it directly and indirectly, like ‘well,
what's it going to do if I call their parent?
Why bother, it's not going to help.’*

– PARTNER SCHOOL TEACHER

Mindsets: Families as Equal Partners

Bright Spots emphasize a “Same Team” Mindset

“I tell parents this on day one every year: you know your kids the best. We never know better than you. We're obviously experts in this (subject), but this is a hundred percent a partnership.”

**– BRIGHT SPOT HIGH SCHOOL
TEACHER**

Partner Schools describe challenges with existing mindsets

“We're all so busy. Most parents work. They don't think they can contribute anything – which we know is incorrect. So, [we're] trying to train families [but it] takes time and effort.”

– PARTNER SCHOOL TEACHER

Mindsets: Families as Equal Partners

**Bright Spots emphasize a
“Same Team” Mindset**

“This school is like an extended part of my family. I honestly feel like we are collectively raising my son.”

– BRIGHT SPOT HIGH SCHOOL PARENT

**Partner Schools describe challenges
with existing mindsets**

“School staff only reach out when my children are bad or off task. [If] it's a behavior issue, we work together to solve it. That's it.”

– PARTNER SCHOOL PARENT

Leadership: Clear Vision, Inspiration, Expectations & Infrastructure

Leaders at Bright Spot schools:

- Provide a vision for family engagement
- Inspire their staff by modeling the importance of engagement
- Communicate clear expectations
- Create and use accountability structures

Leadership: Clear Vision, Inspiration, Expectations & Infrastructure

Bright Spots emphasize effective leadership

“My expectation is that we treat everyone with dignity, we are warm, and we problem solve as partners. If you're not thoughtful, you can make assumptions about kids or about their families. So I am clear that I believe this, and I reinforce that through my own storytelling of what it is like to be a parent.”

– BRIGHT SPOT PRINCIPAL

Leadership: Clear Vision, Inspiration, Expectations & Infrastructure

Bright Spots emphasize effective leadership

“If I get an email from a parent, I'm expected to return that email within 24 hours of the school day. At the beginning of the year they lay out some pretty — I don't want to say strict guidelines, but you know, you better be communicating with the kid and the parent.”

– BRIGHT SPOT TEACHER

Partner schools describe challenges with effective leadership

“I think they want to do [family engagement], but... our leadership team is so busy with other stuff.”

– PARTNER SCHOOL TEACHER

Leadership: Clear Vision, Inspiration, Expectations & Infrastructure

Bright Spots emphasize effective leadership


“I expect them to do 2 communications a week. One precursor — here's what we're doing this week — and then a roundup towards the end of the week, so that parents have a good idea of what's going on. Lots of teachers do more than that and I'm tagged on all those.”

– BRIGHT SPOT PRINCIPAL

Partner schools describe challenges with effective leadership

“My manager [said] you need to email families if students are failing but there [aren't] a lot of expectations. The vibe is – if a kid is in trouble with moving on, it is communicated.”

– PARTNER SCHOOL TEACHER



**Communication:
One-on-One, Academically
Focused, Unwavering**

Communication: One-on-One, Academically Focused, Unwavering

Bright Spot schools discussed communication in two important ways:

1. *How* they communicated (one-on-one, proactive, consistent, persistent)
2. *What* they communicated (anchored in academics).

Communication: One-on-One, Academically Focused, Unwavering

The 1-on-1 nature of the parent-teacher communication was a key differentiator:

Bright Spots described *individual* planned and unplanned communications between families and teachers.



Partner Schools mentioned communications in large groups (e.g. events, email blasts)

1. More focused on individualized academic performance
2. Unwavering -- engaging in multiple communications methods and not being deterred when initial outreach was unsuccessful

Communication: One-on-One, Academically Focused, Unwavering

**Bright Spots emphasize
effective communication**

“For conferences, we’ve gone to parents’ houses and parents’ work, knocked on doors, rode the bus home with students to meet their parents at a bus stop.”

– BRIGHT SPOT TEACHER

**Partners describe challenges with
effective communication**

“I do call parents frequently, but I don’t see that across the board. Besides the parent coffee, and having our family nights, I don’t see anything else.”

– PARTNER SCHOOL TEACHER

Communication: One-on-One, Academically Focused, Unwavering

**Bright Spots emphasize
effective communication**

“My daughter was behind in math. And then the teacher started telling me it’s a team effort. She sent books and [materials] we could work on together, and my daughter made better progress.”

**– PARENT AT BRIGHT
SPOT SCHOOL**

**Partners describe challenges with
effective communication**

“There is no explicit direction that I have to contact parents. Ever. When we discuss students that are struggling of course it comes up: ‘Let’s call home... but there is nothing structured that says I have to call them.’”

– PARTNER SCHOOL TEACHER

Deeper Dive on One-on-One Communication

At Bright Spot schools, family-school interactions were more likely to focus on 1:1 interactions with individual families, rather than school- or classroom-wide efforts.

Mentioned more frequently at Bright Spot Schools

- ☆ Student-Mediated Interactions
- ☆ Unscheduled 1:1 In Person
- ☆ Scheduled 1:1 Meeting

Mentioned more frequently at Partner Schools

- ☆ Mass Push Communication
- ☆ School Event
- ☆ Family Group and Committees

Deeper Dive on Unwavering Communication

Bright Spot schools shared an unwavering commitment to reaching families—getting information to them early, predictably, and through multiple channels.

Mentioned more frequently at Bright Spot Schools

- ☆ Proactive-Timely
- ☆ Persistent Follow Through
- ☆ Consistent

Mentioned more frequently at Partner Schools

- ☆ Multilingual

Information provided in families' preferred languages via translation or bilingual staff.

Deeper Dive on Academically-Focused Communication

Families at Bright Spot schools underscored the central role of academic-focused communication.

Examples of learning resources shared with families at Bright Spot schools:

1. Uploading bilingual videos to Google classroom that walk families through math techniques
2. Sharing classroom lessons with explicit instructions for how parents can work with students to strengthen skills at home
3. Messaging families about a key lesson, including questions they can ask their student to check for understanding
4. Sending home grade-appropriate books to read with students at home
5. Sharing learning apps that students can use for additional practice

Relationships: Personal & Enduring

Educators at Bright Spots:

- Emphasized building connections that go deeper than day-to-day interactions
- Described staying in touch with alumni to follow and support their life journeys.

Relationships: Personal & Enduring

Bright Spots emphasize deep relationships

“I know it sounds silly, but [we have] conversations with families about their other children or about their job, taking time to connect on a deeper level — [not] just ‘hi, how are you, but ‘how are you really?’”

– BRIGHT SPOT TEACHER

Partner Schools describe challenges to establishing deep relationships

“There is one parent who I talk to about twice a year, but every time I talk to her it is a very intense conversation where I feel as though I’m her social worker rather than her kids’ [teacher].”

– PARTNER SCHOOL TEACHER

Relationships: Personal & Enduring

Bright Spots emphasize deep relationships

“We’re able to have conversations with our families like they’re old friends... I would say, at least 90% of the families that I have had over my career, if I saw them at the grocery store, it’s like catching up with an old friend.”

– BRIGHT SPOT TEACHER

Partner Schools describe challenges to establishing deep relationships

“I have noticed some of my newer coworkers, they don’t really have guidance. They’ll say things like, “[your child] is trashing my room, or “he’s disrupting the class,” instead of, “hey, I’m concerned. I’m coming from a place of care.”

– PARTNER SCHOOL TEACHER

Partnering Across Language & Cultural Divides

Bright Spot schools

Educators at Bright Spot Schools with at least 50% Multilingual Learners (MLL) emphasized practices like student-mediated interactions and support services to families.

Partner schools

Educators at high-MLL schools emphasized traditional supports like having translators on site and sending communications in multiple languages

In other words, Partner Schools emphasized doing what's required, while Bright Spots this and more.

Partnering Across Language & Cultural Divides

Educators at **Bright Spot Schools** consistently described practices that **go above and beyond** in their approach to family engagement

Bright Spot practices Including:

- Hiring dedicated staff to support families
- Ensuring families feel welcomed in the school community
- Integrating families into the school community in staff roles
- Providing families with resources and services
- Creating opportunities for students to engage their own families as learning partners

Partnering Across Language & Cultural Divides

Student-mediated interactions were described more often in Bright Spot schools and may offer a cultural onramp for immigrant families into the schooling experiences of their children.

Examples of student-mediated interactions:

- Student-led parent conferences
- Students presenting projects to families at parent night
- Students performing for families at a poetry showcase
- Family members expected to sign off on 20 minutes of reading time
- Parent acknowledgement that they reviewed students' work

Using these results, we will build a tool to help schools evaluate their family engagement

In Stage 3 of this study, we will:

Develop a New Tool to Measure Family Engagement

Using our learnings from Stages 1 & 2, we aim to develop a tool that can be used by educators, policymakers, and researchers to measure the strength of a school's family engagement efforts.

Test the Efficacy and Viability of this Tool

We will test our tool in a sample of schools across the country to study its feasibility as a measurement tool. We'll also look at its viability as a policy instrument at the school, district and state levels.

Thank you to our funders!

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