



One Size Does Not Fit All

Analyzing Different Approaches to Family-School Communication

By Meg Benner and Abby Quirk February 2020

Center for American Progress



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Contents

- 1 Introduction and summary**
- 4 Understanding parent engagement**
- 6 Exploring school-parent communication**
- 8 CAP's school-parent communication survey**
- 20 Review of Title I school district parent engagement plans**
- 23 Policy recommendations**
- 30 Conclusion**
- 31 About the authors and acknowledgments**
- 32 Appendix**
- 37 Endnotes**

Introduction and summary

***Author's note:** CAP uses “Black” and “African American” interchangeably throughout many of our products. We chose to capitalize “Black” in order to reflect that we are discussing a group of people and to be consistent with the capitalization of “African American.”*

Sidney Lanier Senior High School in Montgomery, Alabama, once churned through 10 different principals in 10 years—including four principals in a single year. But today, Dr. Antonio Williams boasts a six-year tenure as Lanier’s principal.

Along with several of his relatives, Williams is a Lanier graduate. He lives just down the street from the school, where he took his first teaching job and where his own children will be students. Williams’ commitment to the community and his job led him to initiate important changes through Lanier’s “Reclaim the Castle” campaign, named after the school building’s prominent turret. As a parent himself, Williams has put parents front and center in his school-home engagement strategy. He created a parent center inside the building, where any parent can use school computers to browse literature about school resources and opportunities and can engage with other members of the community. Williams also hosts monthly “coffee and chat” sessions with interested parents.¹

The authors met Williams and saw his parent center during a visit to Alabama in October 2019. In a follow-up email interview, Williams said he believes that there are no ineffective ways to communicate with parents. Rather, he believes that different methods work for different families, and it is the school’s responsibility to find a way for every family to engage.

The parents at his school agree. “Knowing information up front helps your child and helps the parents as well,” said Lesa Holt, a parent of a Lanier senior. “If more parents were involved with their child’s education, it would help with grades and social life.”² As a result of parents’ involvement and Williams’ commitment to family engagement, Lanier was named a 2018 National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) School of Excellence,³ an honor awarded to schools “in recognition of their commitment to building an inclusive and welcoming school-community where all families contribute to enriching the educational experience and overall well-being for all students.”⁴

When parents and families are engaged with their children’s education, everyone benefits. Engaged parents report better attitudes about their child’s education;⁵ their children experience better academic, behavioral, and social outcomes;⁶ and schools receive better ratings on measures of climate and culture.⁷ Many factors can influence engagement, but clear and consistent communication about different issues—from academic progress to student behavior to daily logistics—is an important tool for building trust between parents and schools and increasing family engagement.

Given the rise of public school choice—which relies on parents seeking out other schools and comparing them with their neighborhood public school—in many urban school districts, there is a burgeoning field of research on schools’ communication with prospective families. Many researchers and advocacy groups have examined what information helps parents select a school that is most likely to maximize academic outcomes, as well as the most effective ways to present that information to parents.⁸ However, recent research has not extensively explored how schools communicate with parents whose children are currently enrolled. The available data, however, suggest that there is room for improvement.

Many families do not receive consistent communication from their child’s school. The nationally representative Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey of more than 14,000 parents found that only 42 percent reported receiving a school-initiated phone call about their child in the 2015-16 school year, and only 62 percent had received an individualized email about their child.⁹

Current research and advocacy efforts to improve school-parent communication mostly focus on one type of communication: student achievement report cards. Surveys of parents have identified a disconnect between parents’ perceptions of student progress and students’ actual progress. In 2018, the education nonprofit EdNavigator distilled the experiences of parents in New Orleans and Boston who attempted to understand and support their child’s academic progress, finding that the information they typically received was often “unclear and muddled.”¹⁰ Learning Heroes—a nonprofit organization committed to helping parents and guardians support their children’s social, emotional, and academic development—conducts annual national surveys and focus groups of parents and guardians to reveal their needs, priorities, and concerns and to examine school-home communication around student achievement.¹¹ Although 90 percent of parents—across race, income, and education level—believe that their child is at or above grade level, Learning Heroes’ 2018 report found that giving parents a combination of information, such as report cards with grades, state standardized test results, and a school performance rating, changed a significant percentage of parents’ views of their child’s performance.¹²

Analysis of schools' communication and engagement with parents

Through new, original analysis, the Center for American Progress sought to understand the current state of school-parent communication and family engagement¹³ through two lenses: (1) parents', teachers', and school leaders' perceptions of communication; and (2) the engagement policies that are already in place across different school districts in the United States.

CAP created and distributed a survey to K-12 public school parents, teachers, and school leaders that asked about the content, frequency, and importance of multiple types of information parents receive, as well as the methods schools use to communicate this information. The authors also reviewed current parent and family engagement plans—required under Title I, Part A of the Every Student Succeeds Act—choosing plans from three districts in Colorado and three districts in Pennsylvania and highlighting observed trends. (see “Title I review methodology” in the Appendix for more information about why these districts were selected)

Key findings from the survey include:

- Overall, parents, teachers, and school leaders reported that schools' communication of various types of information is actionable, and parent engagement is strong.
- Across parents, teachers, and school leaders, individual student achievement was most commonly rated as the most important type of information to communicate to parents, but no one type of information received a majority of votes from any of the stakeholder groups.

- Parents, teachers, and school leaders reported that the school communicated information frequently but said ideal communication would be more frequent and more consistent.
- All three groups reported high value in the communication systems they used, and individualization—regardless of how technologically advanced—mattered the most in value perceptions. Parents reported using fewer methods than teachers and school leaders, suggesting that parents may not find all available systems at their school effective.
- There are grade-level differences in the frequency and importance of different types of information, but there were few differences among parents by race and ethnicity or income.

The authors' review of six Title I parent and family engagement plans found that each assessed engagement activities and provisions to include parents in plan development, but the most comprehensive plans acknowledged the need for multiple communication entry points.

Based on these findings, CAP believes that policymakers should take a community-informed approach to updating parent engagement plans by soliciting parent input and comparing results across different groups of families—for example, by race and ethnicity or by the primary language spoken at home. Federal and state policymakers should also provide technical assistance and Title I parent engagement funds. School districts can leverage these resources to conduct parent surveys, implement teacher training, and hire technology advisers in order to increase both the quality and quantity of school-parent communications.

Understanding parent engagement

At the turn of the century, the success of early childhood initiatives that prioritized parent involvement, such as Head Start, as well as the expansion of public school choice inspired extensive research that tied parent engagement to a number of positive academic, social, and behavioral outcomes for students.¹⁴

However, research in this area has waned in the past decade, with many recently published studies relying on data from the 1990s.¹⁵ Still, meta-analyses continue to find a robust relationship between parent involvement and academic success across all students,¹⁶ especially for African American and Latino students.¹⁷ Parent-teacher relationships may also influence students' behavior and peer relationships,¹⁸ and teachers in one survey reported that students with more engaged parents performed better in class,¹⁹ although evidence for these outcomes has been less consistent.²⁰

Defining parent engagement

Parent communication is just one element in the broader field of parent engagement. There are six commonly recognized forms of parent engagement, as popularized by scholar Joyce L. Epstein's 1995 framework. These include the ways in which schools help establish supportive home environments; the design of communications between school and home; the recruitment and organization of parent help at school; information about how parents can help with

homework and other curricular activities; the development of parent leaders and the inclusion of parents in school-level decisions; and the leveraging of community resources to strengthen school programs.²¹ This report adopts Epstein's framework in order to examine the role of school-parent communications in supporting multiple forms of parent engagement and in keeping parents informed about their child's academic performance.

There are many barriers to family engagement, including limited time and resources available for teachers and families alike; a lack of professional development focused on how teachers can best engage families; and different levels of family understanding about how or why they should engage with their child's education.²² Certain groups of parents also face unique challenges: For example, immigrant parents may

not speak the same language as school teachers or leaders,²³ while LGBTQ parents may not be fully recognized by schools as a family unit.²⁴ A focus group of predominantly Black parents found that a negative school climate, including hostile interactions with teachers and poorly organized communication channels, was the primary barrier to effective communication.²⁵

At the beginning of the century, overall parent engagement seemed to be increasing. According to a study by Child Trends, in 2016, 89 percent of parents attended a parent-teacher conference and 79 percent attended a school or class event, up from 72 percent and 67 percent, respectively, in 1996.²⁶ However, Learning Heroes trends data have shown declining parent-teacher conference attendance since 2016, along with declining rates of helping with homework and communicating with teachers outside of a conference.²⁷

Parent-teacher conferences are not the only ways to involve families in their children's education. In a 2018 report, Learning Heroes found that although teachers viewed engaged parents as those who show up to conferences, parents cited email communications, calls, and text messages as other metrics of engagement.²⁸ There are also important grade-level differences: In a 2018 Learning Heroes survey, only 61 percent of middle school parents reported attending a parent-teacher conference, compared with 70 percent of elementary school parents.²⁹

In addition to differences by grade level, there are also important demographic differences in how parent engagement is perceived. For instance, research from the early 2000s demonstrates that some of the ways in which parents of certain cultural backgrounds approach educational engagement, such as teaching their children about the value of hard work through real life experiences, are not always recognized as such by teachers from different cultural backgrounds.³⁰ Efforts to increase family engagement also have had varying levels of success across schools and parents of different socioeconomic status or level of educational attainment.³¹ School volunteer rates, for example, are approximately twice as high among parents with a graduate degree as they are for parents who do not have a high school diploma.³²

As mentioned earlier in this report, schools can support family engagement in many ways. Epstein's framework includes five methods of engagement that include helping establish supportive home environments and teaching parents how to help with homework. Epstein considers communication to be the sixth method, but this report explores how communication can be used as a critical, all-encompassing tool to strengthen the other five.

Exploring school-parent communication

“Engagement means that a parent has pretty open communication with their child’s teachers.”

– Sharice Stevens, a parent at Sidney Lanier High School³³

Clear and consistent communication channels are an important way for schools to empower families to engage and support student achievement.³⁴ Educators in one qualitative study unanimously agreed that communication with families was critical to student success.³⁵ Communication channels must go above and beyond the occasional parent-teacher conference. In one experimental study, a high school math teacher sent regular notifications home to the parents of students in two of his four classes. After three months, students whose parents received the notifications earned higher math grades and test scores than the students whose parents did not receive the notifications, despite not having demonstrated significantly higher math ability before the study began.³⁶

Yet the existence of communication channels alone is not enough. Some recent reporting suggests that the information families receive—especially regarding student achievement—can be unclear or feel unactionable.³⁷ Confusing proficiency descriptions such as “nearly meets standard” can mislead many parents into believing their children are on track when they are not, a problem exacerbated by report card grades that often paint a more positive picture than standardized test scores.³⁸ Still, parents continue to rate report cards as the most important tool for understanding student achievement, while teachers rate them third-most important behind regular communication between parents and teachers and graded work.³⁹ This discrepancy may be one of the reasons why in Learning Heroes’ national surveys of K-8 parents since 2016, 9 in 10 parents believed their children were at or above grade level—a stark difference from the 33 percent of eighth graders who are actually considered proficient in math and reading.⁴⁰ Even well-performing students may benefit from more communication about their progress. One recent study found that Black students who scored in the top category of the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program and received a congratulatory letter about their achievement outperformed Black students who scored the same but did not receive a letter.⁴¹

Parent perceptions about how much communication they receive may predict the extent of their engagement. One 1997 study found that parents' perceptions of the amount of information they received from teachers, more so than the actual amount, predicted their self-reported involvement in their child's learning.⁴² Unfortunately, there is some evidence of a disconnect between schools' and parents' perceptions of communication. The same study found no correlation between parent- and teacher-reported amounts of information, even within the same school.

These differences in perceived amounts of information persist today. Qualitative interviews of public school parents and teachers reveal discrepancies in ideal frequency and form of communication.⁴³ Parents prioritized instant communication methods, such as calls, texts, and comments on graded assignments, while teachers considered scheduled meetings, such as parent-teacher conferences, to be the best indicators of engagement. Perceived barriers differ as well. One focus group of parents and school staff found that parents were more likely to cite timeliness, quality, and clarity as the biggest barriers to effective communication, while school staff cited more structural barriers such as lack of contact information and language fluency.⁴⁴

Technology has created new opportunities for schools to stay in touch with families.⁴⁵ Parents and teachers agree that technology can be useful to foster proactive engagement,⁴⁶ and some recent school interventions have found success in leveraging technology, such as by texting parents reminders about reading and attendance.⁴⁷ In 2011, National School Public Relations Association President Ron Koehler observed: "The backpack folder is no longer the primary source of information for parents. They want and prefer instant electronic information."⁴⁸ Heejae Lim, who created an app that translates teachers' texts to a parent's preferred language, believes that texting can be especially useful for engagement because of its ability to create a two-way conversation.⁴⁹

However, there seem to be gaps between preference and actual practice in using technology effectively. Of the 19 features that teachers and parents reported wanting from their school websites in a 2016 survey, only eight were in common use.⁵⁰ Additionally, a lack of information about how best to leverage new technology may make it more difficult to adopt. A recent study found that teachers who received a free mobile communication app were more likely to use it if they received intensive training and continued support such as communication tips and reminders.⁵¹

Family engagement is crucial to student success, and school-parent communication can bolster engagement. However, there is still much to learn about the types of communication that parents seek and what kinds are most effective.

CAP's school-parent communication survey

In 2019, the Center for American Progress surveyed more than 900 parents who were mostly representative of the public school student population, more than 400 teachers, and more than 400 school leaders, including principals and other administrators. The survey aimed to better understand what type of information the respondents believe is important for schools and teachers to communicate to parents; how often they currently receive or share that information; how often they believe that information should ideally be shared; and what types of platforms or communication tools are most helpful for sharing information. (see Appendix for more detailed information on the full survey sample and methodology)

According to Principal Williams of Sidney Lanier High School, “Parents must understand your mission, vision, and goals in order to be active participants in the educational process.”⁵² Williams’ words suggest that robust communication should occur with families even before there is academic progress to share. Schools should use communication to build a community with shared values that will frame students’ eventual academic achievement.

Findings

The survey findings painted a more positive picture of the perceived value and effectiveness of parent-school communication than other recent research that focuses on parent-school communication about student achievement. Overall, parents, teachers, and school leaders all reported that the different types of information schools communicate are important, although parents and teachers would ideally like this information to be communicated more frequently and consistently.

All three groups also reported that the specific communication systems they use are valuable, but there were different perceptions across participants about which systems were in use by the school. There were minimal differences by school characteristics or parents’ race and ethnicity, but there were statistically significant grade-level differences.

Key trends from the analysis include:

Parents, teachers, and school leaders perceive communication to be actionable and reported that parent engagement is strong.

The survey asked parents, teachers, and school leaders to gauge their perceptions of communication. Most parents, teachers, and school leaders reported that communication was clear and actionable and that schools provided the right amount of information. (see Figure 1) Specifically, more than three-fourths of parents, teachers, and school leaders agreed or strongly agreed that communication was actionable, and more than one-half responded that the amount of information shared with parents was “just right,” as opposed to too much or too little. In line with previous research, school leaders were the most positive in their reported levels of engagement, frequency of communication, and the value of the systems that are used.

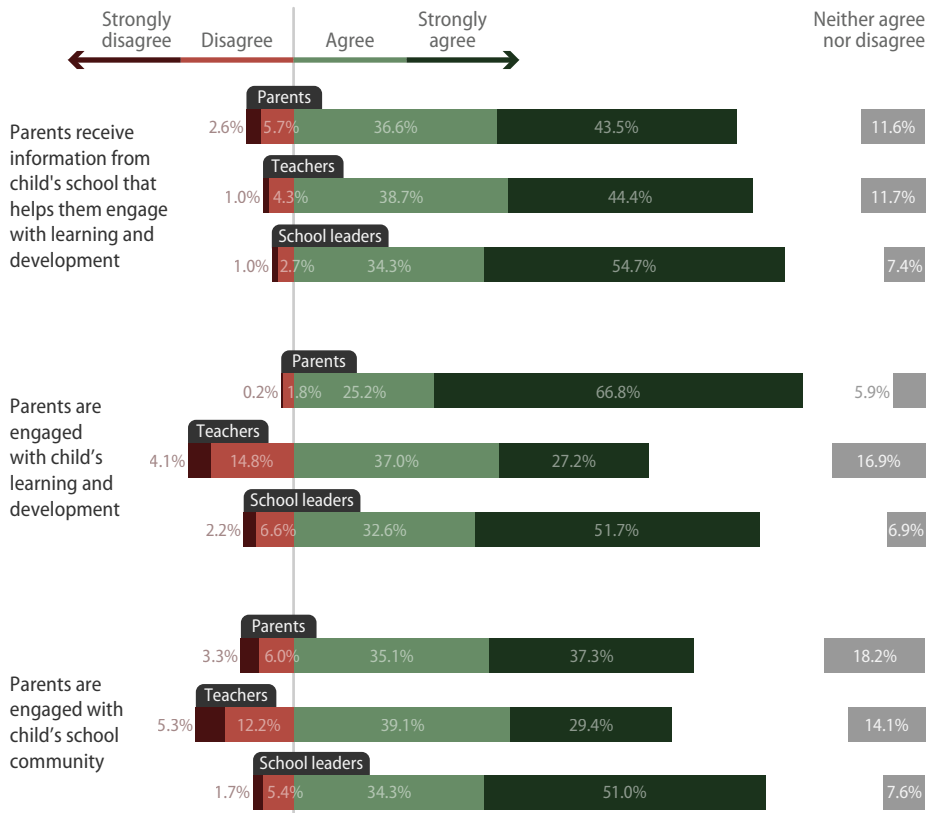
Relatedly, the majority of each group reported that communication allowed parents to engage with their child’s learning and that parents are engaged in learning and the school environment. Notably, however, there were differences in reports of how engaged parents really are. Parents overwhelmingly agreed that they were involved with their children’s learning: 92 percent of parents agreed or strongly agreed, compared with only 64 percent of teachers and 84 percent of school leaders. School leaders were more likely to agree that parents were involved with the school community: 85 percent agreed or strongly agreed, compared with only 72 percent of parents and 69 percent of teachers.

There were also differences in reported engagement by grade level. Elementary school parents, teachers, and school leaders were more likely than survey respondents from middle or high schools to agree that the information their schools shared helped promote parent engagement. This is similar to Learning Heroes survey data that found a severe drop in parent engagement in middle school: Middle school parents are more likely than elementary school parents to use less personal methods of engagement, such as accessing a web portal, and are less likely to use more personal methods, such as attending a parent-teacher conference.⁵³

Parents surveyed reported more positive perceptions of parent-school communication than in other recent reports, including surveys and stories from Learning Heroes and EdNavigator. The difference may be a result of the fact that the CAP survey asked about many more types of communication than school report cards and communication around academic progress. In addition, in an effort to keep the survey brief and prevent survey fatigue, the authors did not define “actionable” or “engagement.” Given research that shows that different populations define engagement and communication differently, the results of the survey cannot be directly compared with other findings that provided parents or teachers with more specific examples or definitions of these terms.

FIGURE 1
Parents, teachers, and leaders agree that parents are engaged and school communications help them engage

Agreement with survey questions about parent engagement, by group



Source: Original CAP analysis. See Appendix for full methodology in Meg Benner and Abby Quirk, "One Size Does Not Fit All: Analyzing Different Approaches to Family-School Communication" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2020), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/?p=479902>.

CAP's survey design also did not allow the authors to test the strength of the respondents' convictions. In other words, parents, teachers and school leaders may not know what they do not know. So, while all groups may perceive engagement to be strong, there still may be room for improvement. The significant differences seen between parents' and teachers' reported frequency of communication versus their ideal frequency of communication support this idea. It is possible that the surveyed groups may report differently if they are provided with an objectively ideal picture of engagement.

This discrepancy has been shown in previous reports about parent knowledge and information. For example, in a 2017 Learning Heroes survey that asked parents if their child was performing at, above, or below grade level, only 8 percent of parents initially reported that their child was performing below grade level. The survey then presented national proficiency data showing that many students fail to meet proficiency standards in reading and math, which caused the number of parents reporting that their child may not be meeting proficiency standards to rise to 25 percent.⁵⁴ These findings could extend to the authors' engagement research, and more research is needed to understand whether the generally positive findings in CAP's survey are because actual engagement is high or because perceptions of engagement are limited.

The CAP survey results provide information about current subjective perceptions of school-parent communications and how these perceptions differ among parents, teachers, and school leaders. However, as with any belief, perspectives might change if individuals have more information.

Individual student achievement was considered the most important, but not the only important, type of information.

All three groups rated most of the types of information listed in Table 1 as “mostly” or “extremely” important. The types of information with the highest importance ratings across all three groups included individual student achievement, patterns of behavior, disciplinary action, curriculum, and logistics such as early dismissal. Teacher qualifications, opportunities to volunteer, and information on how the school uses its budget received lower average importance ratings across each of the groups, although 8 percent of parents selected teacher qualifications as their most important type of information.

The most important type of information across all groups was individual student achievement, which was more than three times as likely to be selected than the next most frequently selected type of information for parents, teachers, and leaders alike. Still, no one type of information received majority support. Teachers also differed from parents and school leaders in the information they considered most important. For teachers, disciplinary action and patterns of behavior were the next most commonly selected, while curriculum and resources about college and career readiness gained more support from parents and school leaders.

Although most research in school-family engagement focuses on communication exclusively about student achievement, these survey results show that parents are interested in more than just academic information from their child's school, as are teachers and school leaders.

TABLE 1
Individual student achievement is the most important type of information for parents, teachers, and school leaders

Percentage choosing “most important” and average importance rating for all types of information, by group

Type of information	Parents		Teachers		School leaders		Statistically significant group differences
	Rating	Percentage choosing “most important”	Rating	Percentage choosing “most important”	Rating	Percentage choosing “most important”	
Individual student achievement (progress or challenges)	4.58	37%	4.62	42%	4.57	33%	N/A
Curriculum	4.44	11%	4.18	6%	4.52	8%	▲
Resources and information about preparation for college and/or career opportunities	4.28	10%	4.13	2%	4.4	8%	▲
Teacher qualifications and experience	4.27	8%	3.85	1%	4.31	6%	▲
Patterns of behavior	4.51	7%	4.53	11%	4.56	5%	N/A
Disciplinary action	4.43	7%	4.58	10%	4.58	7%	■
Homework	4.39	5%	4.08	6%	4.45	7%	▲
Opportunities to be involved in decision-making	4.32	4%	4.09	7%	4.44	6%	▲
Logistics (e.g., early dismissal, enrollment)	4.32	4%	4.4	6%	4.51	6%	●
Schoolwide achievement (progress or challenges)	4.15	3%	4.17	5%	4.46	9%	◆
Classroom or school event	4.25	1%	4.37	2%	4.53	2%	◆
Information on how the school uses its budget	3.65	1%	3.66	1%	4.23	2%	◆
Opportunities to volunteer to support the school	3.73	1%	4.19	1%	4.41	3%	★
Average importance rating	4.26		4.22		4.46		◆

Notes: Survey respondents rated the communication systems on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 meaning “Not at all valuable”; 2 meaning “Slightly valuable”; 3 meaning “Somewhat valuable”; 4 meaning “Mostly valuable”; and 5 meaning “Extremely valuable.” Most responses for the “Other” communication systems category cited Class Dojo or other phone apps.

Source: Original CAP analysis. See Appendix for the full methodology in Meg Benner and Abby Quirk, “One Size Does Not Fit All: Analyzing Different Approaches to Family-School Communication” (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2020), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/?p=479902>.

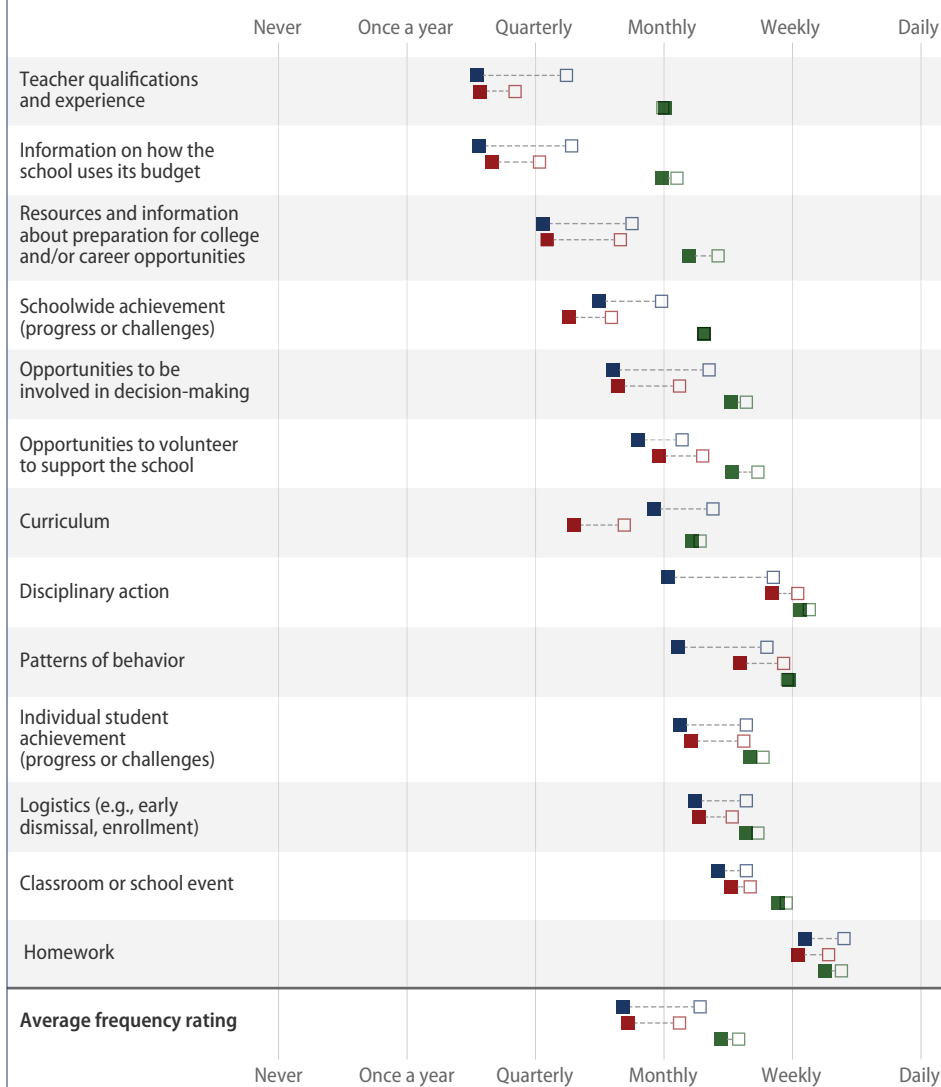
- Parents different from others
- ▲ Teachers different from others
- ◆ School leaders different from others
- School leaders and parents different
- ★ All groups different

Parents and teachers think that ideal communication would be more frequent and more consistent, with differences by grade level.

The survey asked parents, teachers, and school leaders to report both the current and their ideal frequency of parent-school communication about various types of information. All groups reported that most types of information from the school were communicated between weekly and monthly but said ideal communication would be more frequent and closer to every week. (see Figure 2) Parents and teachers especially wanted communication about almost all types of information to be delivered more regularly, regardless of how often, rather than on an irregular schedule or “only when relevant.”

FIGURE 2
Parents and teachers report that ideal communication would be more frequent

Average current and ideal communication frequency ratings for all types of information, by group

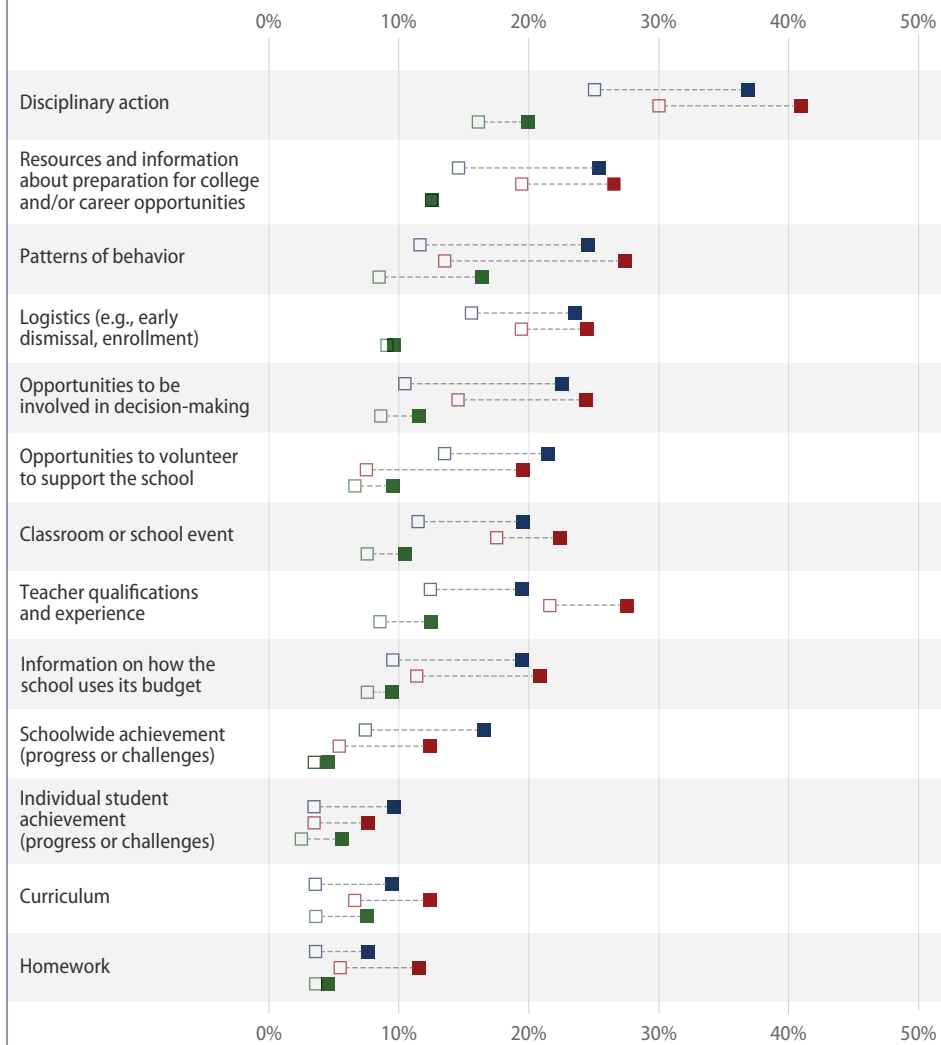


Notes: Survey respondents rated both the current frequency of parent-school communication for each type of information and the ideal frequency of communication on a scale of 1 to 6, with 1 meaning "Never"; 2 meaning "Once a year"; 3 meaning "Quarterly"; 4 meaning "Monthly"; 5 meaning "Weekly"; and 6 meaning "Daily." Participants also saw the option for "irregularly, only when relevant," but these selections were analyzed separately. (see Figure 3) All current versus ideal comparisons were statistically significantly different at $p < .001$ for parents and teachers, but for school leaders, the only significant differences between current and ideal frequencies were for information about college and career preparation and volunteer opportunities.

Source: Original CAP analysis. See Appendix for the full methodology in Meg Benner and Abby Quirk, "One Size Does Not Fit All: Analyzing Different Approaches to Family-School Communication" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2020), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/?p=479902>.

FIGURE 3
Parents, teachers, and school leaders report that ideal communication would happen on a more regular basis

Percentage stating that communication currently is and ideally should be irregular for all types of information, by group



Note: All current versus ideal comparisons were statistically significantly different at $p < .001$, except for "Homework" for school leaders ($p = .006$). Survey respondents had the option to select "Irregularly, only when relevant" instead of a specific frequency (e.g., "Daily") when rating both the current frequency of parent-school communication for each type of information and the ideal frequency. (see Figure 2)

Source: Original CAP analysis. See Appendix for the full methodology in Meg Benner and Abby Quirk, "One Size Does Not Fit All: Analyzing Different Approaches to Family-School Communication" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2020), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/?p=479902>.

Overall, homework was communicated between weekly and daily, while most other types of information were communicated between monthly and weekly. Opportunities to be involved in decision-making and information about schoolwide achievement were communicated approximately monthly, and information about how the school uses its budget was communicated slightly more than once a year; however, parents reported wanting all three types of information on a more frequent, monthly basis.

Disciplinary action was the most likely type of information to be communicated irregularly, with more than one-third of parents, teachers, and leaders saying it was currently only communicated when deemed necessary. However, only one-quarter of parents and less than one-fifth of school leaders believed this information should ideally be communicated irregularly. There was also a large gap regarding opportunities to be involved in decision-making; twice as many parents and three times as many school leaders reported that communication was currently irregular as those who wanted it to be irregular.

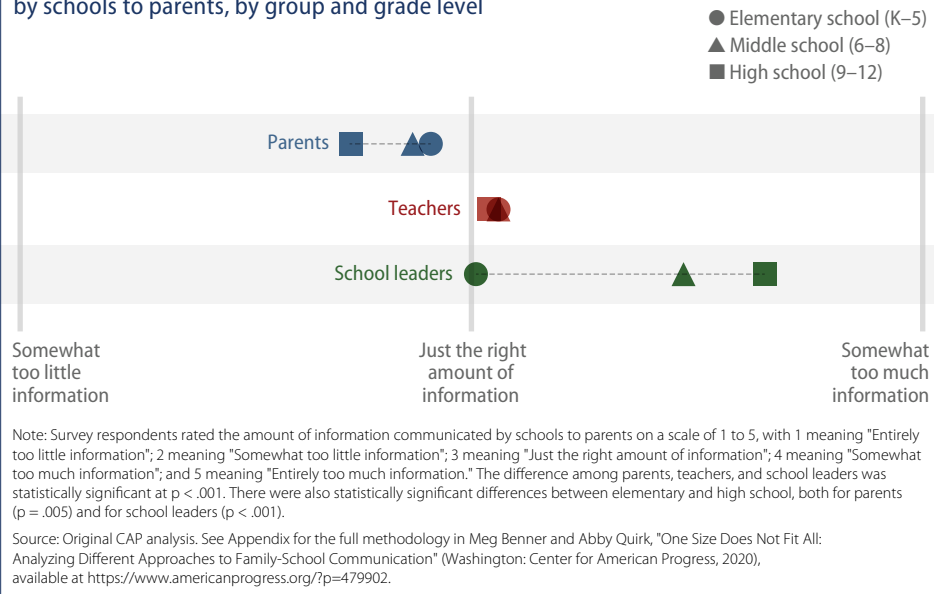
Teachers have reported that, as students get older, the role of school communication shifts from the teacher to the student. Interestingly, research shows that a significant majority of parents agree.⁵⁵ Another parent at Lanier noted that parents of teenagers “feel like they can become more lackadaisical with their involvement, even though these are some of the most important years they should be involved.”⁵⁶ These perceptions may explain why the frequency of information decreases in upper grades and becomes more irregular. Learning Heroes research from 2019 found that between elementary school and high school, the percentage of teachers who believe that communicating academic progress with parents is part of their job description drops from 63 percent to 45 percent.⁵⁷ This suggests that increasing the frequency of information-sharing, especially in upper grades, will require system-level changes to ensure that teachers see parent communication as part of their job. Providing teachers with more time and support to regularly share information with parents will help integrate communication into teachers’ already busy schedules.

Notably, elementary, middle, and high school teachers in CAP’s survey did not differ in their perceptions of how much information their school shared with parents; teachers reported that it was consistently “just the right amount” across all three grade levels. On the other hand, while school leaders thought the overall amount of information shared was increasingly too much as they moved from younger to older grades, parents reported the amount as increasingly too little. (see Figure 3) This suggests a disconnect between leadership practices and parent interests, which may influence the amount of time or resources teachers feel they have available for parent communication.

FIGURE 4

School leaders and parents have increasingly different perceptions on the overall amount of information shared from younger to older grades

Average perception of the amount of information communicated by schools to parents, by group and grade level



All groups agree that the communication systems they use are valuable, but there is a wide variety of types of systems used.

The survey asked respondents to indicate which systems they use from the list indicated in Table 2. The majority of respondents reported that the communication systems that they used were valuable, although there was a relatively wide distribution of the types of communication systems used by the respondents within each group. Interestingly, almost all of the systems received relatively high value ratings.

The most commonly used methods were parent-teacher conferences and personalized emails or calls—all methods that rely on individualized attention and teacher time. Eighty-nine percent of parents, 85 percent of teachers, and 97 percent of school leaders reported that parent-teacher conferences are mostly or extremely valuable, with similar results for personalized emails and calls. The next most commonly used methods were websites and paper notifications. Despite their common use, these were rated less valuable than more personalized approaches: Only 69 percent of parents, 65 percent of teachers, and 77 percent of school leaders reported that their school's website was mostly or extremely valuable, while 71 percent of parents, 60 percent of teachers, and 68 percent of school leaders said the same for paper notifications.

TABLE 2

Individualization, not technological capacity, matters most for whether parents, teachers, and school leaders use and value a communication system

Percentage of each group indicating that they used the system and the average value rating of each system

Communication system	Parents		Teachers			School leaders		Statistically significant group differences	
	Value	Percentage who use each system	Value	Percentage who use each system	Percentage whose school uses each system	Value	Percentage whose school uses each system		
Parent-teacher conferences	4.49	68.2%	4.35	77.8%	76.8%	4.55	65.0%	■	
Paper notifications	4.00	54.6%	3.69	57.8%	66.3%	4.05	46.6%	■	
Websites	3.97	54.0%	3.84	39.1%	76.4%	4.17	61.8%	◆	
Personalized calls or emails	4.43	53.9%	4.51	74.9%	62.3%	4.53	49.3%	N/A	
Emails or listservs	4.09	53.3%	3.96	55.4%	60.6%	4.23	59.1%	❖	
Automatic text messages	4.09	35.1%	3.80	20.5%	43.7%	4.26	49.3%	■	
Web-based platform with personalized student/class information	4.22	32.5%	3.99	33.2%	46.5%	4.32	40.9%	■	
Robocalls	3.45	32.4%	3.43	6.0%	52.3%	3.66	33.8%	N/A	
Social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook)	3.66	23.5%	3.46	16.5%	46.1%	3.94	37.7%	◆	
Other	4.27	2.4%	5.00	3.6%	1.0%	4.14	1.7%	N/A	
Average number of systems used	4.1		3.8			5.3		4.5	★

Notes: Survey respondents rated the communication systems on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 meaning "Not at all valuable"; 2 meaning "Slightly valuable"; 3 meaning "Somewhat valuable"; 4 meaning "Mostly valuable"; and 5 meaning "Extremely valuable." Most responses for the "Other" communication systems category cited Class Dojo or other phone apps. Statistically significant group differences are displayed for value ratings and average number of systems used only.

Source: Original CAP analysis. See Appendix for the full methodology in Meg Benner and Abby Quirk, "One Size Does Not Fit All: Analyzing Different Approaches to Family-School Communication" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2020), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/?p=479902>.

- Teachers different from others
- ◆ School leaders different from others
- ❖ School leaders and teachers different
- ★ All groups different

A 2011 survey found that few parents looked to social media for information from their child's school, even though their interest in using other types of technology for school communication was relatively high.⁵⁸ Nearly a decade later, even as social media has permeated more aspects of daily life, CAP's survey found similar disinterest in social media as a school-parent communication tool. Only one-third of all participants reported that their school used social media, and it received lower value ratings than other systems: 58 percent of parents, 47 percent of teachers, and 67 percent of school leaders said that social media was mostly or extremely valuable. Notably, far more teachers and school leaders—46 percent and 38 percent, respectively—listed social media as a system their school used than did parents, at 24 percent, suggesting that parents may not even know about existing social media channels.

Overall, however, the survey results do not suggest that systems relying on newer technology are used more or less than other systems, or that they are considered more or less valuable. The systems found most valuable were those involving individualization—whether they use technology, such as a web portal with individual student information, or do not use technology, such as parent-teacher conferences.

Teachers reported both the systems that they personally use and systems their school uses, even if they personally do not. These results provide important insights into teacher perceptions of communication. The prevalence of parent-teacher conferences and the focus on individual student achievement can sometimes make it seem like teachers entirely drive school-parent communication. However, there are actually many ways in which schools communicate—such as through websites or automatic text messages—that are often outside of teachers’ control. Furthermore, teachers may not have a clear picture of how communication happens outside of their classroom. A higher percentage of teachers than parents or school leaders reported that their school used most communication systems, suggesting that teachers may think that parents have more access to information than they actually do. More coordination between school administrators and school staff can address this discrepancy.

Since the survey design only asked respondents to rate the value of systems that they or their schools use, the value ratings for some of the communication systems might be lower if all respondents were asked to rate all systems. Even so, this analysis demonstrates that all of these systems have some value to a certain proportion of the sample.

School-level differences are more prevalent than differences at the individual level.

CAP set quotas for the parent sample based on the demographics of the current U.S. K-12 public school student population in order to compare differences in communication perceptions across racial and ethnic groups. CAP also asked respondents about their school characteristics in order to disaggregate by school type. School-level differences had a bigger impact on communication perceptions than did differences by parents’ race and ethnicity.

As mentioned above, grade level also affected perceptions of the amount of information shared and the ability of that information to help parents engage. There were also some differences by self-reported poverty level of the school, such that parents, teachers, and leaders from higher-poverty schools reported less frequent communication and slightly less engagement; however, these differences were relatively small. Other school differences, including differences in urbanicity, charter status, and racial composition of the student body, did not have a significant effect on the responses.

Parents' race and ethnicity also did not seem to determine perceptions of communication or overall engagement. Asian American parents reported the lowest levels of importance of information and value of systems used, while Black or African American parents' ratings were typically highest. There were no differences in current or ideal frequency by parents' race and ethnicity. There were also no significant differences in engagement with student learning, although Black or African American parents did report slightly higher engagement with the school community as a whole. Previous research about parent engagement does suggest that there may be differences among the types and quality of communication for parents of different races and that teachers' and school leaders' perceptions of engagement may be influenced by parents' race, so more exploration in this area is needed to better understand the survey findings.⁵⁹

Review of Title I school district parent engagement plans

Teachers and families are often the center of school-parent communication, but federal policymakers and federally funded education programs often play a significant role in facilitating effective family communication and engagement.⁶⁰

Various federal policies encourage or require school-parent communication in elementary and secondary schools. For instance, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires schools to notify parents as soon as a disability is suspected and to include parents as partners in evaluation meetings to determine eligibility for special education services.⁶¹ The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires school districts that receive Title I, Part A funds to reserve 1 percent of their allocation to carry out parent engagement activities outlined in the law. Specifically, ESSA requires school districts to conduct “an annual evaluation of the content and effectiveness of the parent and family engagement policy in improving the academic quality of all schools,” “involve parents in the activities of the schools,” and “provide the coordination, technical assistance, and other support necessary to assist and build the capacity of all participating schools.”⁶²

Current school district parent engagement plans

School districts that receive an allocation from Title I, Part A of ESSA develop a written parent engagement plan, with required input from parents, and incorporate it into the district’s overall Title I plan that is approved by the state.⁶³ While not intended to be a comprehensive nationwide analysis, CAP reviewed six of these parent engagement plans. As shown in Table 3, the authors selected plans from three local education agencies (LEAs) of varying sizes in two states—Colorado and Pennsylvania—to provide geographic diversity and analyze how the plans differ based on the size of the LEA. The authors found that although the plans varied in detail, all of them covered the federal requirements for parent engagement and, as a result, had similar underlying strategies.

TABLE 3
Selected school district characteristics

Colorado	Denver Public School District	Poudre School District	Mesa County Valley School District
Number of schools	198	52	43
Number of students	90,482	29,674	21,984
Free and reduced price lunch eligibility	69%	31%	48%
Top three represented racial and ethnic groups	Hispanic: 56% Black: 14% White: 23%	White: 73% Hispanic: 18% Two or more races: 4%	White: 70% Hispanic: 24% Two or more races: 4%

Pennsylvania	School District of Philadelphia	Erie Public Schools	Bensalem Township School District
Number of schools	218	18	9
Number of students	133,814	11,495	5,411
Free and reduced price lunch eligibility	100%	100%	52%
Top three represented racial and ethnic groups	Black: 51% Hispanic: 19% White: 14%	White: 42% Black: 36% Hispanic: 14%	White: 56% Hispanic: 17% Asian: 13%

Note: The authors selected and reviewed Title I parent involvement plans for six school districts located in Colorado and Pennsylvania. See Meg Benner and Abby Quirk, "One Size Does Not Fit All: Analyzing Different Approaches to Family-School Communication" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2020), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/?p=479902> for more details about how the districts were selected. Sources: A full list of sources is available at <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2020/01/29121126/SchoolParentCommunicationTable3Sources.pdf>.

Specifically, all six plans discussed how the district would assess the quality of parent engagement activities annually, mostly through surveys and annual meetings. In addition, each school district has provisions in their plan to include parents in the development of their Title I programs. Most districts have a similar requirement for individual schools to include parents in Title I program development. All districts require schools with Title I programs to engage parents in the school’s annual review and improvement process and to establish a school-to-parent compact outlining how they will work together to improve student achievement.

Best practices

Of the six plans, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) has the most detailed and comprehensive plan. It also describes multiple types of communication approaches geared to improve district and school communication with families.

Beyond the common practices found in most of the other school district plans, SDP reports using technology and virtual resource centers to better communicate with parents, increasing the amount of information that is available to parents without overburdening schools or individual teachers. SDP has established a district call center that offers one-on-one case management support, an online knowledge management system with FAQs, and a new parent and family portal that allows families to personalize the level of detail and method of school communication.⁶⁴ The district has also discussed using Facebook and Twitter to increase the amount of information available to parents.

SDP describes the need to “provide multiple entry points” to ensure that more families can participate in their children’s learning. In addition to the district’s use of technology, it also hires family and community engagement coordinators to help work with parents and build trusting relationships.

SDP acknowledges barriers to family engagement and mentions “paying reasonable and necessary expenses ... including transportation and child care costs” to encourage more parents and families to participate in activities.⁶⁵ In addition, SDP describes its districtwide translation and interpretation center, which breaks down barriers to engagement for families that speak a language other than English.⁶⁶ SDP also mentions that it will provide professional development “facilitated by caregivers” for school leaders as a strategy to effectively engage parents and families.⁶⁷

Other school districts also have interesting family engagement activities and policies, though they are not directly related to communication approaches. Bensalem Township School District in Bensalem, Pennsylvania, for instance, requires that the annual evaluation of parent engagement activities examines differences across all racial and ethnic subgroups and articulates the unique barriers faced by different families, such as limited literacy, economic disadvantage, or limited English proficiency.⁶⁸ The Bensalem plan highlights that it will ensure coordination in parent involvement activities across other federal, state, and local programs.

The Mesa County Valley School District in Grand Junction, Colorado, does not discuss leveraging technology in its plan but commits to using federal parent engagement funds to hire a parent involvement coordinator within the district office. The plan also requires each school that receives Title I funds to establish a parent liaison.⁶⁹

Policy recommendations

CAP's analysis provides new context for the existing research and recommendations on school-parent communication. It demonstrates that while communication about student achievement and progress is important, parents also highly value other types of information. As a result, communication systems and strategies should include information and data about areas other than student achievement.

In addition, parents prioritize types of information differently and value different types of communication methods. Members of the family engagement team from the National PTA shared that in their conversations with families, two parents of the same child may have different preferred methods for receiving school communication.⁷⁰ Although social media received some of the lowest value ratings in CAP's survey, Principal Williams touted it as the most effective method for reaching a wide audience, particularly given Sidney Lanier High School's high student mobility and the problem of frequently outdated contact information for individual parents.⁷¹ Social media capitalizes on systems that parents already use and does not require them to create a new login or learn a new system.

Moreover, parents' interest in different types of information changes across grade levels. As a result, communication systems and strategies should cast a wide net and offer parents multiple points of entry. The federal government should encourage districts and schools to adopt different strategies and approaches based on the needs and interests of parent populations.

Federal policymakers should consider parents as partners in federal education programs and maintain Title I parent engagement funds. States and school districts should leverage this money and help develop systems, platforms, or expectations; advise on strategy and provide adequate funding to improve parent communication; and foster greater parent engagement. Communication should be more frequent, more consistent, and, most importantly, exist through multiple channels. As SDP's plan acknowledges—and as CAP's survey results confirm—not all forms of communication work for all families, so offering multiple points of entry is crucial to ensuring that parents both know of and engage with the information they receive from their child's school.

The authors identify specific recommendations to help improve overall school-family communication based on existing research and CAP's survey analysis.

Federal recommendations

Federal policymakers can encourage states, districts, and schools to value parent partnerships in the development of policies and in the planning and execution of education programs. Specifically, federal policymakers should:

- **Focus on parents and families as crucial partners in federal education programs.** Parent involvement is frequently discussed at the student or school level, but parents have long advocated for educational change at the state and national levels.⁷² The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act stipulates that parents must consent to an evaluation for special education, have the ability to request an evaluation, and participate in the development of an individualized education program for their child, if needed. In addition to ESSA's Title I, which sets aside funds for parent engagement, ESSA also requires that parents are consulted during the development of state and district plans and that state report cards are provided in a language that parents understand.⁷³ The U.S. Department of Education should help districts adhere to this requirement, and federal education policy should consider parent input and advocacy in the creation of new programs; strengthen language about parent partnership to signal to states and districts that engagement is a priority; and provide resources and guidance for both parent engagement and parent involvement in the development of new state or district initiatives.
- **Maintain funding specifically for parent engagement under Title I of ESSA.** Effective communication with parents requires time and resources. The federal government can highlight its support for these activities and help school staff implement communication policies by setting aside funding specifically for this purpose. ESSA currently requires school districts that receive Title I, Part A funds to reserve 1 percent of their allocation to carry out parent engagement activities. As evidenced in CAP's review, these plans have allowed all districts to conduct annual reviews of their parent engagement policies, and several districts have added unique and creative practices such as parent liaisons and technology centers. Maintaining this stipulation and providing additional guidance about how to use the funds, such as through a bank of current best practices in different districts, will help ensure that schools with limited resources are still able to implement effective parent communication strategies.

- **Provide technical assistance for parent engagement.** The No Child Left Behind Act, in effect from 2002 to 2015, included a grant program for nonprofit Parental Information Resource Centers (PIRCs), which appropriated approximately \$40 million on a yearly basis until 2012. ESSA revitalized these grants through the Statewide Family Engagement Centers (SFEC) program, which gives “financial support to organizations that provide technical assistance and training to State educational agencies (SEAs) and local educational agencies (LEAs) in the implementation and enhancement of systemic and effective family engagement policies, programs, and activities that lead to improvements in student development and academic achievement.”⁷⁴ Thirteen states have been awarded grants through the new program so far. Still, the SFEC program receives less than one-quarter of PIRC’s previous funding.⁷⁵ Reinvesting in this grant program and providing additional federal guidance through the U.S. Department of Education’s family and community engagement team could further help all states maintain comprehensive training and support.

State-level recommendations

State policymakers can also encourage districts and schools to prioritize school-parent communication, family input, and family engagement. Specifically, state policymakers should:

- **Provide technical assistance to develop parent engagement plans.** As required by ESSA, every school district that receives Title I funds must set aside 1 percent of their overall funding to support parent engagement.⁷⁶ Districts must develop and articulate a plan to use those funds in the Title I plan that they submit to their state education agency. States should provide technical assistance to help school districts develop engagement plans to meet the needs of their population. For instance, the state may help analyze survey data, if available, to identify specific schools that are effectively engaging parents as well as schools that need to significantly rethink their parent engagement efforts. Also, states could connect school districts within the state that have similar demographics or dynamics to share strategies that have been successful. States should engage a diverse committee of parents as they develop these types of support in order to improve parents’ communication and engagement and receive a wide range of opinions.

- **Encourage parent surveys to look at parent attitudes toward schools and disaggregate data as much as possible.** States should consider administering statewide parent surveys to better understand parents’ attitudes toward schools, specifically including questions to assess the quality of school-parent communication. States can disaggregate the information by school and student characteristics—including by race and ethnicity, income, home language, and disability status—to help districts identify which schools may benefit from strategic changes and to focus technical assistance in areas that need it most. For example, Illinois conducts an annual survey of teachers, students, and parents to gather information on effective leaders, collaborative teachers, involved families, school environments, and rigor of instruction.⁷⁷ The Illinois State Board of Education makes these data publicly available, reports the information by school, and uses the information to better support school districts.
- **Offer professional development opportunities for districts and school leaders on how to effectively engage families.** In addition to the SFEC grant program, the National PTA and other organizations offer grants for states to implement programs that assist district and school leaders in developing parent engagement plans.⁷⁸ States can develop expertise internally or work with their state universities and nonprofits to create training opportunities. Several states have begun to pass legislation to increase capacity-building school practices: Nevada, for example, provides training for teachers to work with parent liaisons, while New York conducts training programs to help parents participate in local governance structures.⁷⁹ These training opportunities help build familiarity and confidence in engagement strategies and effective communication systems; moreover, they guide educators to work with their communities in order to adapt policies to unique family and student populations. For example, Massachusetts’ SFEC grant proposal was developed by the Federation for Children with Special Needs;⁸⁰ Minnesota put students from racially diverse and low-income backgrounds front and center in its proposal;⁸¹ and South Dakota emphasized a focus on engagement strategies for English language learners.⁸²

School district recommendations

School districts can help build systems and policies to simplify communication efforts at the school level. They should:

- **Effectively use Title I parent engagement funds.** A strong district plan can help set strong, consistent school-parent communication expectations within a district and create the infrastructure to facilitate communication within individual schools. The authors' review of six parent engagement plans across two states was limited but found that school districts show various levels of detail and strategy and that there is room for improvement. Some districts go beyond federal requirements and have tested new strategies for effective family engagement. For instance, using technology in partnership with targeted personnel such as parent liaisons or coordinators can provide parents with multiple options for engagement. Parent-oriented websites and social media can also transcend the need for updated individual parent contact information, which can be especially difficult for schools with high turnover.
- **Hire technology advisers to support family engagement efforts.** As evidenced by the CAP survey, most parents believe that certain technology platforms, such as websites and web-based platforms, are valuable for parent communication. Schools may not have the resources or expertise to explore, select, and customize tools, so LEAs should consider working with technology advisers. One parent whose children have attended schools in multiple districts said she appreciated having the ability to log into a web portal with individual information about her children. She noted that the absence of such a portal in her current school district required more effort from both parents and teachers to find and create personal communication channels, as they could not take advantage of existing ones that updated automatically online.⁸³ Technology advisers may be able to recommend technological changes to meet the needs of various schools or communities. They also may be able to help schools select communication tools that fit their capacity and community. Alternatively, these advisers may develop a tool or build a platform to meet the needs of various groups of schools with similar needs.
- **Reinforce parent communication as a central responsibility of every teacher and every school, and allocate sufficient resources to ensure that teachers and other school staff have the capacity and tools to communicate with parents.** Effective parent communication can be time-consuming for school leaders, teachers, and other staff. According to a 2019 Learning Heroes report, less than one-third of elementary, middle, and high school teachers felt very satisfied with the support they received from their school to communicate difficult information to parents.⁸⁴ In fact, many middle and high school teachers did not believe that parent communication was a central job responsibility.⁸⁵ The Data Quality Campaign has found that while parents crave more data about student achievement, teachers do not feel prepared to use

or communicate data effectively.⁸⁶ School districts can prioritize the importance of parent communication and ensure that schools allocate adequate resources to support teachers and facilitate the sharing of information. For instance, school districts can set norms for all schools; adopt communication systems to share information; create professional development opportunities to help teachers provide key information; and adjust staffing to ensure that teachers and other staff have time to use effective communication methods. According to a 2018 Learning Heroes report, about one-half of teachers report having had no training to communicate difficult information to parents, and only 30 percent of teachers report being very satisfied with the support they receive for these difficult conversations.⁸⁷ Staffing is especially important, given that parents expect teachers to provide regular emails and calls and to frequently update online portals—tasks that teachers with large class sizes or few prep periods may not have time to do.⁸⁸

- **Connect information back to individual student achievement.** The CAP survey found that information about individual student achievement was extremely important—if not most important—to most parents. Specifically, 98.9 percent of parents reported that information about their child’s individual academic achievement was at least somewhat important, and 37 percent of parents said it was the most important type of information to communicate—the item parents most commonly named most important by a factor of three.

Given these results, school districts should connect information about individual student achievement to other information that districts, schools, or teachers want parents to consider. For instance, while 95.3 percent of parents rated information about schoolwide achievement as at least somewhat important, only 3 percent of parents said it was the most important type of information. Connecting schoolwide information to individual student information more directly could help communicate these insights to parents.

- **Disaggregate data intentionally and provide context.** The Data Quality Campaign found that parents are especially interested in information about how their child’s school educates students from similar demographic backgrounds.⁸⁹ To provide parents with this information, data should be disaggregated as much as possible, including by race and ethnicity, disability status, income levels, and English proficiency.

However, it is also critical to provide context. In interviews with parents, Learning Heroes found that noncontextualized disaggregated results can feel stigmatizing to some families.⁹⁰ Many parents, especially parents of color, shared that they felt this information proved their “kids can’t learn.” As a result, data showing results

by race and ethnicity, income, or any other subgroup should use language that explains why the data have been disaggregated. In a sample report card based on this research, Learning Heroes provides template language about how information “is broken down by group to show whether or not a school is serving all of its students well” and clarifies how schools will use the information accordingly.⁹¹

- **Ask parents what they want and offer different ways to get it.** While it may sound obvious, all school districts should engage parents in the development of parent engagement plans. Parents should help schools determine what issues are most important to communicate, the most valuable or actionable methods and tools, and the desired frequency of communication to develop policies that are specifically aligned to the needs of the community. School districts can engage parents by surveying them, conducting focus groups, establishing a parent committee, or creating systems and providing funds that allow parents to meet across schools or districts so they can learn about effective practices that have been implemented elsewhere. For example, CAP’s survey did not include school safety plans as its own type of information; the National PTA, however, has found that this is a primary concern for parents and has accordingly created a resource for parents to ask questions and find out more information.⁹² More proactive work from schools and districts would ensure that all parents have access to this information, not only the parents who seek it out. School districts should also consider working with other community or advocacy organizations to help parents learn what to ask for and how to suggest different, out-of-the-box methods of communicating information.

Conclusion

Principal Williams’ successful approach at Sidney Lanier Senior High School illustrates a key takeaway of CAP’s analysis: “Different strategies are conducive to support from parents with different situations,” he mused. “As a result, I do not believe any strategy is ineffective.”⁹³

Policymakers at the federal, state, and district levels need to continue to focus on increasing parent engagement, using communication tools as a lever. To be sure, effective communication between parents and schools relies on trust and personal connections;⁹⁴ Williams’ “coffee and chats” at Lanier are not for nothing. Still, system-level changes can help teachers and schools better share information that is important to each stakeholder group in efficient ways that are tailored to the needs of school communities.

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Appendix

This appendix details the survey methodology and limitations as well as the authors' review of Title I parent engagement plans.

Survey methodology

In fall 2019, the Center for American Progress used CloudResearch—a crowdsourcing data acquisition platform, formerly called TurkPrime, that conducts panel studies with Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) workers—to administer a study comparing teachers', parents', and school leaders' attitudes toward school-parent communication.⁹⁵

CloudResearch's panel service, Prime Panels, integrates many different platforms for the purposes of research.⁹⁶ Each platform has its own participant pool, referred to as an opt-in panel. Participants on these panels are profiled on hundreds of variables, and invitations for this study were sent via email and dashboard notifications to specific participants based on their demographic profiles.

Parents were identified as people who previously indicated that they were parents of children who were of K-12 school age; these people were then prescreened to ensure that their children attended a public school. Teachers were identified as people who previously indicated that they were a K-12 teacher and were then prescreened to ensure that they were currently teaching in a public school. School leaders were identified as people who previously identified that they were in a K-12 school leadership position and were then prescreened to ensure that they were currently working in a public school.

Participants first answered questions about the importance of types of information and then had a forced choice to select the single most important type of information. Next, they reported on the frequency of those same types of information. One-half of all participants were randomized to see questions about current frequency first, while the other half of participants were randomized to see questions about ideal fre-

quency first; question order did not significantly affect the findings. Next, participants selected every system their school used to communicate with parents—with teachers instructed to select every system they personally used, as well as systems their school uses but they personally do not—and then rated the value of each system they previously selected. The survey ended with questions about participant demographics and school characteristics.

Participant demographics and school characteristics

In order to ensure a racially representative sample of parents, Prime Panels set quotas using the 2015 public school enrollment estimates for Asian/Pacific Islander, Black, Hispanic, and white parents, as well as parents from another or more than one race.⁹⁷ No quotas were set for teachers or school leaders. Of the initial sample, 44 parents, 11 teachers, and 25 leaders were excluded for failing an attention check, indicating that they did not actually work in or have a child attending a public school or did not successfully complete the survey.

Across all parents, teachers, and school leaders, participants in the final sample included 932 parents, 419 teachers, and 408 leaders from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, who were predominantly white (61.5 percent) and female (58.0 percent). The schools where participants worked or sent their children were somewhat evenly split across grade levels, with 39.4 percent from elementary school, 23.4 percent from middle school, and 28.8 percent from high school. The schools were also mostly traditional neighborhood schools (88.9 percent) in suburban (46.1 percent) or urban (34.5 percent) areas.

TABLE A1
Survey participant demographics

	Overall	Parents	Teachers	School leaders
Total number of respondents	1759	932	419	408
Gender				
Male	41.8%	42.9%	39.4%	41.9%
Female	58.0%	57.1%	60.1%	58.1%
Race and ethnicity				
East Asian, Southeast Asian, South Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Other Pacific Islander	3.5%	4.2%	3.3%	2.0%
Black or African American	10.6%	14.4%	7.4%	5.4%
Latinx, Hispanic, or Spanish origin	16.5%	24.4%	6.9%	8.3%
White	61.5%	45.6%	78.3%	80.4%
Education level				
High school diploma	N/A	56.8%	Not asked	Not asked
College degree	N/A	25.8%	Not asked	Not asked
Advanced degree	N/A	15.2%	Not asked	Not asked
Income	N/A	M = \$50K–75K	Not asked	Not asked
Age	Mean = 40.1 Standard deviation = 9.3	Mean = 39.4 Standard deviation = 8.2	Mean = 41.7 Standard deviation = 11.7	Mean = 40.1 Standard deviation = 8.4
Location by state	All	All but South Dakota and Vermont	All but Alaska, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming	All but Alaska, Arkansas, Delaware, Idaho, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Vermont, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming

Note: Some percentages shown in the table do not add up to 100 because participants selected another response or did not respond to the question.

Source: Original CAP analysis. See Appendix for the full methodology in Meg Benner and Abby Quirk, “One Size Does Not Fit All: Analyzing Different Approaches to Family-School Communication” (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2020), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/?p=479902>.

TABLE A2
School characteristics for all survey respondents

	Overall	Parents	Teachers	School leaders
Grade level				
Elementary school (K-5)	39.4%	45.0%	41.3%	24.8%
Middle school (6-8)	23.4%	26.5%	20.3%	19.4%
High school (9-12)	28.8%	28.5%	27.2%	31.1%
Urbanicity				
Urban	34.5%	30.4%	31.1%	47.3%
Suburban	46.1%	47.9%	48.5%	39.4%
Rural	19.4%	21.7%	20.4%	13.3%
Racial composition				
Entirely nonwhite	2.1%	1.0%	3.6%	3.2%
Mostly nonwhite	17.5%	15.2%	23.8%	16.3%
Equally nonwhite and white	37.5%	39.8%	27.6%	42.1%
Mostly white	33.3%	32.9%	37.0%	30.3%
Entirely white	5.7%	4.2%	6.7%	7.9%
Free and reduced price lunch composition				
Entirely eligible	22.6%	24.2%	22.2%	19.6%
Mostly eligible	23.7%	19.2%	29.2%	28.5%
Equally eligible and not eligible	27.2%	27.8%	20.5%	32.7%
Mostly not eligible	16.4%	15.1%	23.1%	12.6%
Entirely not eligible	2.4%	1.5%	1.4%	5.4%
Type of school				
Traditional public school	88.9%	92.5%	88.5%	81.1%
Charter school	8.6%	4.7%	9.5%	16.4%
Magnet/specialized school	1.9%	2.2%	1.4%	2.0%

Note: 148 teachers and school leaders reported grades across multiple school levels. These responses were not included in the elementary, middle, or high school percentages or in analyses that split by grade level.

Source: Original CAP analysis. See Appendix for the full methodology in Meg Benner and Abby Quirk, "One Size Does Not Fit All: Analyzing Different Approaches to Family-School Communication" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2020), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/?p=479902>.

Survey limitations

The survey had several limitations. First, while the authors set quotas for race and ethnicity in the parent sample, the way the survey was administered limited the diversity and validity of the sample. Most importantly, only parents who speak English and have internet access could be included. In addition, parents with multiple children who attend multiple schools may have conflated their experiences or not have known which one to consider in their responses.

Additionally, the use of self-reported measures may not necessarily capture actual school practices. For example, participants were only asked to rate the value of the systems they reported using. This may have artificially inflated value ratings, as parents may not use the systems they find least valuable. For the sake of timing and in an effort not to bias responses, the survey also intentionally did not define terms such as “engagement” or provide examples of systems such as “web-based platforms” or “paper notifications,” which may have confused some parents or led to different interpretations. Additionally, demographic information relied on self-reported estimates for the racial composition and poverty level of schools, only capturing respondents’ perceptions of the percentage of white students and the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced price lunch.

Title I review methodology

The authors of this report reviewed three plans from districts in Pennsylvania and three plans from districts in Colorado to gauge the context and specificity of their Title I parent and family engagement plans; identify any themes; and develop recommendations for improvement based on the findings of the online survey. The authors chose districts that ranged in enrollment numbers to consider changes in approaches based on district capacity and the number of schools. The sample is very limited, and the authors do not presume that it is representative or inclusive of the policies that exist in states and districts nationwide. Moreover, the authors did not consult district staff, parents, or schools within any of the districts to verify if the districts were implementing the policies indicated or had implemented additional activities or to evaluate the effectiveness of the policies.

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