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Pandemic Parents Are More Engaged. How Can Schools Keep It Going?

Communication will be key

By Alyson Klein — September 14, 2021 6 min read

— Pep Montserrat for Education Week

This story is part of a special project called Big Ideas in which EdWeek reporters ask hard questions about K-12 education's biggest challenges and offer insights based on their extensive coverage and expertise.

Shanita Burney, the engagement officer for the District of Columbia public schools, once viewed technology as a barrier between schools and parents, especially those from underserved populations.

Then, DCPS—and school systems across the country—shifted to all-virtual instruction during the pandemic. Suddenly, Wi-Fi connections and devices—some of which the district helped to provide for needy families—became the lifeline between teachers and school administrators and students and their families.

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"It allowed us to reach exponentially more families than I have ever reached in my career," Burney said. The district saw increases in attendance for parent meetings and for parent-teacher conferences. Families who couldn't make an information session in real time were able to log on at their convenience.

In many places, communication between schools and parents is turning out to be one of the bright spots in an otherwise chaotic and uncertain era of education. And, it is a golden opportunity for schools to push parent engagement to a higher level this year and beyond.

"Family engagement had to move to the top of the priority list now because no learning, no teaching, no education is happening without communication with families," said Karen Mapp, a senior lecturer at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education, who has studied the interactions between parents and schools for years. "So now you've gone from something that was low priority to something that is probably right at the top."

That priority shift is echoed in some surveys.

More than three-quarters of educators said that parent-school communication increased during the pandemic. And more than a third—37 percent—said it increased "a lot," according to a survey by the EdWeek Research Center. Just 9 percent said parent-school communication decreased.

And educators think better parent communication had big benefits for student achievement. In fact, a whopping 79 percent of educators who said parent communication increased, including teachers and school and district leaders, surveyed by the EdWeek Research Center, said that the upswing in communication had a positive impact on academic outcomes.

During the pandemic, the content of the communication changed, Mapp said, with a greater focus on children's individual learning needs, since parents were a huge part of supporting classroom instruction.

"The conversations switched away from discipline and 'this is what your child isn't doing' to 'here's what we can do together to make sure that your child continues to learn and grow,'" Mapp said. "Families have responded quite positively to that change."

> Parent communication is up among some of the most vulnerable groups of students, whose parents are typically the hardest to reach.

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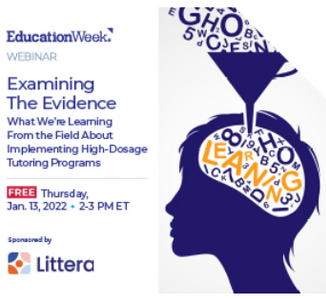
The pandemic's unusual circumstances have meant it isn't just the helicopter moms and dads—those who have means and hover over every aspect of their children's academic and personal lives—who are connecting with teachers and administrators more. Parent communication is up among some of the most vulnerable groups of students, whose parents are typically the hardest to reach, according to a separate survey conducted this spring by Rutgers University of 1,000 parents with children between the ages of 3 and 13, and total household incomes below the national median of $75,000 annually.

Fifty-seven percent of Black parents, 56 percent of families with incomes below the federal poverty level, and 52 percent of Hispanic parents say they now feel more confident in helping their kids with schoolwork than they did before the pandemic.



That's a big change from life before the pandemic.

Parents also now have a keener sense of what goes on in their child's school, in part because they now know what it's like to sit just a few feet away from their child's Zoom class or log in to a learning management system to help with assignments. Sixty-two percent of parents surveyed by Rutgers said they have a better picture of their child as a learner than they did before the pandemic, including their academic strengths and weaknesses. And two-thirds reported that they have a stronger sense of what their child is learning in school.

These developments could be potentially game-changing for student learning.

"When he's in class, I'm in class. I got to go back to preschool," said Naomi Nedd, whose 4-year-old son is in a state-supported program for children with significant learning and thinking differences. Through that experience, "I understood things about the way that my son learns that would have taken me years to figure out." She was able to give and get feedback from his teachers and even borrowed some of the classroom lingo, telling her child to use his "listening ears, looking eyes, and quiet hands" at home.

And, yet, those strengthened bonds may turn out to be fragile. After all, it's hard to replicate the experience that parents had when family living rooms literally became classrooms.

So how will schools and parents be able to sustain that cooperation for the long haul now that most students are back in school buildings? School districts acknowledge it's a tough nut to crack.

"We have to be thinking, how do we allow families to participate from the comfort of their home, not having to travel, not having to take the additional time to do some of that work?" said Monica Roberts, the chief of community, family, and community advancement for Boston public schools. She's wondered, for instance, whether she should have virtual parent nights—but send home a dinner kit, or a snack kit, to replicate the PTA night snack table.

> It's hard to see parent communication remaining as strong down the road, at least not without some big structural shifts.

Even with that kind of strategizing, it's hard to see parent communication remaining as strong down the road, at least not without some big structural shifts. It isn't practical for most parents to take the kind of hands-on role that they did this school year—they can't just take off work to sit in their child's classroom and collaborate closely with educators the way they had to during remote learning, unless school buildings start shutting down again due to the Delta variant.

But some parts of the pandemic family-engagement success may be important to keep and not too hard to sustain. For instance, there's no reason that meetings between parents and teachers need to be in person, or that back-to-school nights can't have a virtual option. This will show families schools are ready to meet them where they are.

Mapp is optimistic that the pandemic's impact on family communication has shown educators what's possible and that they will find a way to make sure it continues.

"We've turned the corner," she said. "For some people, there's no turning back. I've heard a lot of teachers, and a lot of principals say we are never going back to the way it was before when it comes to family engagement. We stick with [it], because we see the value."

But that is likely easier said than done.

Mapp acknowledged that, if improved family engagement—one of the few silver linings of the pandemic—is going to continue, there will need to be considerable resources and support behind it.

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That puts the onus on states and school districts. Are they willing to build on this parent engagement momentum by devoting resources to it? Or will this opportunity slip away as schools move back to largely ineffective pre-pandemic approaches?

What we see this school year will begin to answer those questions.

Alyson Klein FOLLOW

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