



One Dream, Two Realities

Perspectives of Parents on America's High Schools

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Introduction

The critical role parents can play in the education of their children is often a blind assumption or a target of attack. Our education debates often end in the blame game – pointing fingers at parents who do not care enough to ensure their child succeeds in school or at teachers who do not do enough to include parents in the process of learning. We think the story is more complex and interesting and points to concrete steps that can reform our schools, improve the engagement of parents in the educational lives of their children, and prepare more students for a demanding and exciting world.

Today in America, there are approximately 25 million parents who have children in American high schools. Their role in the educational achievement of their children is profound. Students with involved parents, regardless of their family income or background, are more likely to earn higher grades and test scores, enroll in higher level classes, attend school and pass their classes, develop better social skills, graduate from high school, attend college, and find productive work. The opposite is true for students whose parents are less engaged. Research confirms what common sense suggests: parents are central to the educational success of their children.

In an effort to give parents a voice and to provide ideas on how schools and parents can work more effectively together to strengthen the education of children, we conducted a series of focus groups and a nationally representative survey of 1,006 parents of current and recent high school students in urban, suburban and rural communities across America. Parents identified whether their children attend or attended high-performing, moderate-performing or low-performing schools based on the objective criterion of the proportion of students from those high schools who go on to college. A complete summary of our methodology is provided at the end of this report.

Parents are clearly ready to help their children succeed academically, but they need better information and tools from the schools to do so — ranging from how to help with homework to how to get into college. We hope this report will prompt dialogue and action at all levels to foster meaningful collaboration between schools and parents to help more children fulfill their potential and realize their dreams.

Executive Summary

The findings in our report show that America is rich with parents who have high aspirations for their children, a knowledge that children need parents involved in their high school experience, an understanding that today's economy demands more education of their children, and, among a significant portion of them, a dissatisfaction with how schools are educating their children and engaging them as parents. Parents see two very different school systems in America – one that is largely fostering academic achievement in their students and another that is not; one that is effectively engaging parents in the academic lives of their children and another that is failing to do so.

Our findings show that regardless of incomes, education, and performance at the school, parents believe that their involvement is central to their child's academic success. But parents need an access point – a way in – and many are not finding it in their child's school. Our principal findings are:

Parents Share Similar Views About Education

Regardless of their income, race, ethnicity or school their children attend, parents share common beliefs about the importance of education today. Furthermore, parents with less education, lower incomes and children in low-performing schools are the most likely to see a rigorous education, and their own involvement, as critical to their child's success.

- **Parents see a more demanding world. More than six out of ten parents (61 percent) of all backgrounds believe that what their children have to learn today to graduate, attend college and compete in the workforce is much different than it was 20 years ago when they were students.** Seventy percent of parents with a high school degree believe this is

true, compared with 52 percent with a college degree and 49 percent with a graduate degree.

- **Parents share high aspirations for their children; African American and Hispanic parents see the need for college the most.** Ninety-two percent of African-American parents and 90 percent of Hispanic parents consider going to college very important, compared to 78 percent of white parents.
- **Parents, especially parents of students in low-performing schools, know their involvement is important. Eighty percent of all parents, and 85 percent of parents of students in low-performing schools, say parents should be involved as advocates for their children** when it comes to picking courses and teachers.

Parents Experience Different School Systems

Although parents generally share similar views about the value of education today, there is a stark contrast in views of how schools are preparing their children for the future. Parents of children in low-performing schools are seething with frustration at how poorly their children are being prepared.

- **Only 15 percent of parents of students at low-performing schools feel that the school is doing a very good job challenging students, compared with 58 percent of parents of students at high-performing schools.** More than anything else, parents believe schools should make their curriculum engaging and classes challenging.
- **School performance drives parent satisfaction more than a child's grades.** Among parents in our survey, **43 percent of parents whose children received bad grades but attended a high-performing school said they were satisfied** with how well the school

prepared their children for the future, while **only 35 percent of parents whose children got good grades but attended a low-performing school were equally satisfied.**

- **Parents have vastly different views of how well schools are helping their children:** prepare for college; develop confidence, maturity & personal skills; develop a special talent; and prepare for a good job. **While 50 percent of parents with students in high-performing schools believe that their child's high school did a very good job with such help, less than 20 percent of parents with students in low-performing schools say their child's school did a very good job in each of these four categories.**

Parents See Diverging Levels of Parent Engagement

While all parents recognize the importance of their engagement and most visit their child's school, only parents from high-performing schools feel they are regularly and meaningfully engaged in the academic success of their children.

- **Parents of students in all school types visit the school with some regularity —** 70 percent of parents of students at low-performing schools and 78 percent at high-performing schools visit school at least three times a year.
- **Parents of students in low-performing schools are much less likely than their peers to talk with their children's teachers.** Only 51 percent of parents of students at low-performing schools compared to 70 percent of parents of students at high-performing schools have had good conversations about their child's performance with at least half of their children's teachers.

- **High-performing schools do a better job of communicating with parents.** Eighty-three percent of parents with students in high-performing schools said their school was doing a very or fairly good job communicating with them about their child's academic performance, compared to only 43 percent of parents with students in low-performing schools. Seventy percent of parents whose children attend high-performing schools say the school does a good job informing parents of the requirements for graduation and college admission, compared with only 38 percent of parents of students in low-performing schools.
- **Most parents who are not engaged enough feel like they need to do better.** Only 42 percent of parents of students at low-performing schools feel they are as involved as they should be, while 68 percent say the same at high-performing schools.

Barriers to and Opportunities for Parental Involvement

While lack of time is a critical barrier to parental participation, more than one-third of parents identified real and perceived disconnects between school and home. The reasons for their lower levels of involvement may be a lack of information or communication from the school, their own lack of knowledge about what is being taught at school, resistance from the school, or the desire to have more contact from the school.

- **Higher performing schools are more likely to be perceived as encouraging parental involvement.** Only 47 percent of parents with students in low-performing schools reported those schools were doing a very or fairly good job in encouraging parents to be involved, compared with 85 percent of parents with students in high-performing schools.

- **High-performing schools are more likely to engage parents in deeper ways than low-performing schools.** More than twice as many parents of students in high-performing schools (68 percent) versus parents of students in low-performing schools (30 percent) report that those schools give parents an opportunity to be involved in selecting their child's courses. About the same ratio (57 percent versus 29 percent) report that their child's school informed them about whether their child is on track to go to college.
- **High-performing schools are also more likely than low-performing schools to notify and engage parents if their child is having performance issues at school.** High-performing schools are more likely than low-performing schools to inform parents right away if their child is having academic or disciplinary problems (53 percent versus 25 percent); and to encourage parents to be actively involved and to make them feel welcome in the schools (82 percent versus 51 percent).

Parents Point the Way Forward

Given the overwhelming evidence of the importance of involving parents in the educational lives of their children, what is the way forward? What are the concrete steps that can be taken to ensure that parents are integrally involved in the academic and social achievement of their children in America's schools that lead to successful entry into college, the workplace and civic life? Parents of all backgrounds and with children in all types of schools are relatively united in their views about what schools could be doing to help them more effectively support the education of their children.

- **Prompt notification of academic or other problems.** Sixty-one percent of all parents want schools to promptly notify parents if

students are having academic problems, skipping school, or cutting classes.

- **Earlier contact in 8th/9th grades on what constitutes success.** Fifty-two percent of all parents say it would be extremely helpful for schools to reach out to parents early (8th/9th grade) to ensure they know what their child needs in order to be successful. Many parents in our focus groups highlighted the complex transition from middle school to high school, with the increasing demands for academic achievement, the uncertainty about whether parents still felt welcome in the schools, and the transitions their own students were experiencing as they enter high school.
- **More information about requirements for graduation and college admission.** Fifty-two percent of all parents want schools to better educate parents at the start of high school about the requirements for graduation and getting into college; many parents in our focus groups expressed concern that they were often in the dark about what their children were expected to learn and the requirements for high school graduation and college admission.
- **Single point of contact, homework hotlines, and flexible conferences.** Fifty-two percent of all parents want a faculty advisor assigned to each student to monitor student performance and maintain contact with parents; 50 percent of all parents want more homework hotlines that both parents and students can use; and 51 percent want flexibility in scheduling parent-teacher meetings for full-time workers. Parents in our survey and focus groups want one teacher, advisor or advocate for their child to be in regular contact with parents, not just when problems occur, but to engage in a dialogue about ongoing academic performance and integration into school life.

These ideas support what research tells us about these and other effective strategies for improved parental engagement:

Greater Involvement in a Student's Academic Success

- **Each teacher should incorporate homework assignments that involve families** into every course.
- **Schools should develop and distribute parent information packets** about the school and about the courses each child is taking.
- **A meeting should be arranged during the student's first year of high school between the parents, the school contact person, and the student.** This meeting should offer the opportunity for parents to learn about the requirements for graduation and college attendance, plan the courses their children should take in high school, and begin an ongoing relationship between the school contact and the parents.

Involvement Around Parents' Lives

- **Schools should make strong efforts to accommodate the varying needs of parents,** whether it involves translating the student handbook to help immigrant parents, offering bus service for parents to attend teacher conferences, or incorporating home visits to parents who do not have telephones or face other impediments to school-based involvement.
- **Parent volunteers should be recruited** to serve as liaisons between the school and other parents, helping to identify ways of including otherwise disengaged parents.
- **Schools should look for ways to offer stipends or other benefits to teachers** who spend time after hours working with parents.

Giving Parents the Resources and Knowledge They Need

- **Schools should consider partnering with community organizations to offer parent involvement classes** to provide the resources parents need in order to be adequately engaged in their children's education. Classes should be offered at times most convenient for parents, and child care should be provided so that single parents can attend.
- **Schools should work with parents to identify the ways in which parents want to be more involved,** and facilitators should ensure that parents have adequate knowledge of the helpful ways they can be involved, the requirements for graduation and attending college, and the process of applying to college and seeking financial aid.

Bring Parents to the Center of the National Education Debate

- **The perspectives of parents should be integrated into the 100 dropout summits in all 50 states** occurring over the next few years through the America's Promise Alliance. These summits will drive local plans to increase high school graduation rates and college and workforce readiness.
- **The U.S. Department of Education should use Parent Information Resource Centers to support the types of parent engagement** that are most likely to help students meet the requirements they need to graduate from high school and get into college.



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- **Across the country, local parent summits should be held** to convene parents with superintendents, principals, teachers, counselors and students so that parents can express what they believe will strengthen their working relationship with the schools.
- **Federal and state governments and foundations should consider providing challenge grants to organizations that can test effective strategies to systematically engage large numbers of parents in the academic achievement of students,** foster appropriate reforms in high schools, and coordinate efforts with local, state and federal policymakers to ensure parent engagement is a top priority and becomes an institutional practice.
- **National organizations that regularly hold conferences on issues of importance to parents, as well as national educational organizations, should begin building parental involvement tracks into their panel and speaker agendas** as a way to heighten greater awareness that not all parental involvement is equal and that resources exist to improve educational outcomes through parental involvement.

When parents are involved in their children's education, it makes a profound difference. Students whose parents are engaged in their school experience do better academically, socially, and vocationally, regardless of their socioeconomic status. But parents need an access point — a way in — and many are not finding it in their child's school. If we care about boosting academic achievement among our nation's students, then we must also care about how schools engage parents. As public debates about the most promising reforms for America's schools continue, we ignore at our peril the nation's more than 25 million parents with children in high school.

Parents Across America Share Very Similar Educational Goals for their Children

Parents generally share high aspirations and common dreams for their children and are united in their beliefs about what preparation their children need to be successful in today's world. Regardless of their race, ethnicity, income or the school their children attend, parents today share a common view of America: they see college as increasingly important because of how the world is changing, and they believe this has serious consequences for their children's high school education and their involvement in it. In particular, parents of all backgrounds share three important beliefs:

- They believe the world has changed so significantly in the past 20 years that their children need to be prepared differently than they themselves were as high school students;
- They want their children to have a high school education that leads to college and a better paying job; and
- They believe that their involvement in their children's education is critically important to their children's success.

"And when you come out of high school, theoretically, you're supposed to be equipped to sustain yourself, to be able to make it in society, whether it be to go on to college or just get into the workforce and be a productive member of society. That's not happening now. I do realize that I, as a parent, bear some of the responsibility, because I can't send my kid to school and expect them to raise him for me. I have to equip him."

— *Parent from Nashville*

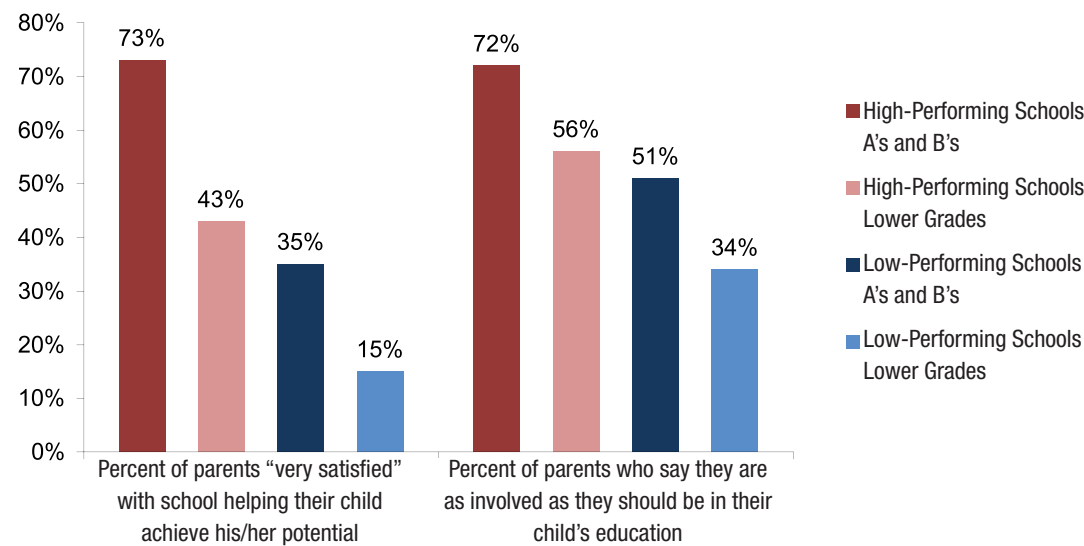
The reality, as we know from volumes of existing research, is that alarming numbers of high school students are not thriving in high school and not entering college as prepared as they should be.¹ The result is that many students across the nation are dropping out of high school, and those who graduate are increasingly ill-equipped for the demands of today's colleges and workforce. It is vital that we as a society understand why there exists such a mismatch between the high aspirations parents have for their children and the education their children are receiving.

But Parents Experience Radically Different Schools

The main reason why this mismatch exists, as our findings show, is that some parents' children attend high-quality schools and others attend lower-quality schools – and this matters greatly. What is particularly surprising in our findings is that parents' satisfaction with their child's school is more

dependent on the quality of the school the child attends than it is on the grades their child receives. Parents whose children get bad grades but attend high-performing schools are more satisfied with those schools than parents whose children get good grades and attend low-performing schools. While 43 percent of parents whose child receives low grades at high-performing schools are very satisfied, only 35 percent of parents whose child receives high grades at low-performing schools said that they are very satisfied with how the school helps their child achieve his or her potential. Likewise, parent involvement may also depend more on school quality than on student performance. Fifty-six percent of parents whose child receives lower grades at high-performing schools say they are as involved as they should be, compared with 51 percent of parents whose child gets A's and B's at low-performing schools.

Parent Satisfaction and Involvement by School Type and Student Performance



"I always was there to put them on the bus. I was there for them in the morning. I was there for them at night. It was just us. I taught them that school is like a job. I have to go to work every day. You better be in school every day."

— Parent from Cincinnati

It is well known that education is the major means for advancement in America, but we as a nation are not providing these opportunities on an equal footing consistent with America's creed of equal opportunity. Some high schools are equipping students well, and it is usually those same schools that are enlisting the help of parents in the process. Others are not. And the parents of students in those low-performing high schools know it. Their knowledge results in resentment toward their child's school and lower levels of support and engagement. Ultimately, it is the students themselves who suffer.

A Changing Landscape

Any consideration of parental involvement in a child's education has to take into account the seismic nature of the changes confronting American families today. Most parents recognize that the demands of high school have changed in the past 20 years and their role in the education of their children has become increasingly complex. Parents know that what a high school student needs to learn today to graduate, attend college, and compete in the workforce is very different from a generation ago, when they themselves were students.

Their beliefs about how rapidly the world has changed are justified. In just the past 30 years, the difference between what college graduates earn compared to high school graduates has climbed to

its highest level since 1915 when far fewer Americans pursued higher education.² This trend is at the heart of how the knowledge economy affects everyday Americans. The greater one's education, the greater are both a person's current earnings and the financial growth that person can expect over time.

Math and science credits for high school graduation have increased since 1987. In 1987, 18 percent of states required three math credits for high school graduation compared to 50 percent in 2002. A similar increase was found in science credits for graduation with 40 percent of states in 2002 requiring three science credits compared to 8 percent of states in 1987.³ The SAT has become more of a standard step in the high school educational process than an assessment mechanism utilized only by those expecting to go to college. And recent research has shown that both employers and college professors want to see recent high school graduates with the same high levels of knowledge and skills. The nature of work has evolved in America so that even jobs that do not require a college degree still demand advanced thinking and problem-solving skills.⁴ The long-term effects of a high school education grow more significant as Americans live longer lives and change careers more often and as our nation grows more diverse. The manner in which schools foster academic excellence grows more complex and arguably more important.

Seventy percent of parents with only a high school education or less believe that what high school students need to know is very different than 20 years ago, compared to 63 percent with some college, 52 percent with a college degree, and 49 percent with a graduate degree.

A Changing World

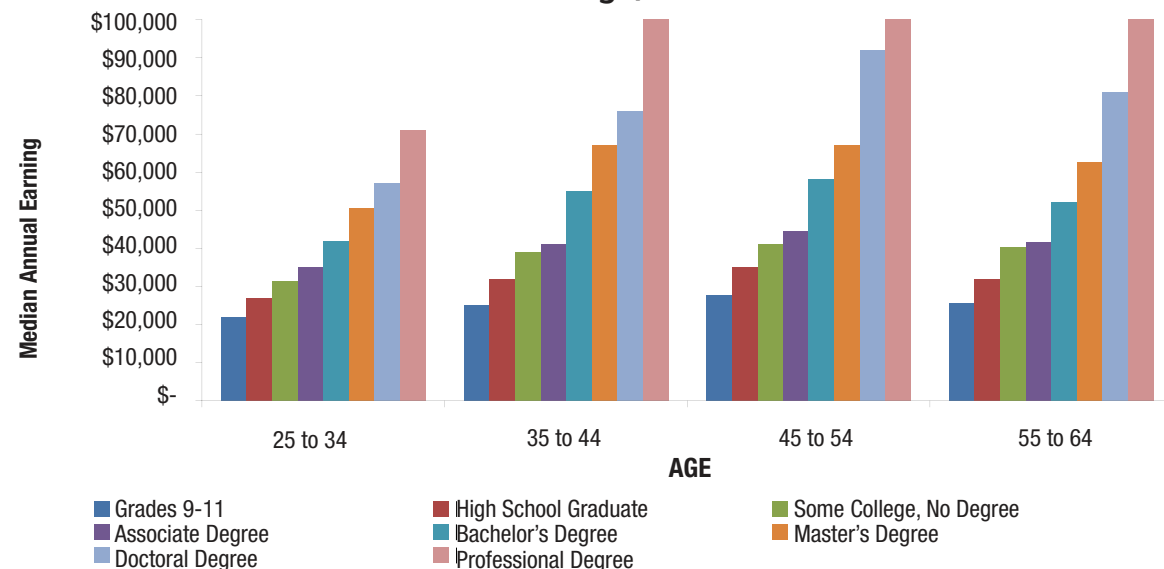
- Since 1980, the value of a college education compared to a high school education has increased to levels not seen since 1915 when comparatively fewer Americans pursued higher education. (Goldin and Katz, "The Race Between Education and Technology.")
- Among men, median earnings of four-year college graduates were 19 percent higher than median earnings of high school graduates in 1975. The gap grew to 37 percent in 1985, 56 percent in 1995, and 63 percent in 2005.
- A young worker with a college degree experiences significant wage gains by the time she is middle-aged compared to a worker with a high school degree, and workers with professional degrees see even greater gains. (College Board, "Education Pays.")
- Compared to 1980, the average credits required to graduate from high school in America have grown in every subject area, and for math and science the number of credits have grown 57 and 62 percent, respectively. (Stevenson and Shiller & National Center for Education Statistics)
- Americans are living 10 percent longer now compared to in 1970. (National Center for Health Statistics, "Health, United States, 2006.", Table 27)
- The number of single parent households has increased from less than four million (9 percent of all families) in 1970 to more than 12 million (32 percent) in 2004. (US Census Bureau, 2004.)
- The percent of women in the workforce has also grown from 43 percent in 1971 to 59 percent today. (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008)

Average Credits Required by each State for High School Graduation

	1980-1984	2006	Difference	% change
Core Subjects	9.7	12.0	2.3	24%
English	3.7	3.9	0.2	5%
Math	1.7	2.7	1.0	57%
Social Studies	2.7	2.8	0.1	6%
Science	1.5	2.5	1.0	62%

Sources: Stevenson and Schiller & National Center for Education Statistics

Median Annual Earnings by Level of Education and Age, 2005



Source: College Board, "Education Pays"

In a society demanding more higher education and better secondary education requirements for all of its citizens, consensus is forming that America's public schools need dramatic improvement in every aspect of student development. And no one is more acutely aware that students need a different level and quality of education than their parents. Yet many wonder whether they are fully equipped to meet the challenges of an involved parent today.

Parents Know the World is Changing...

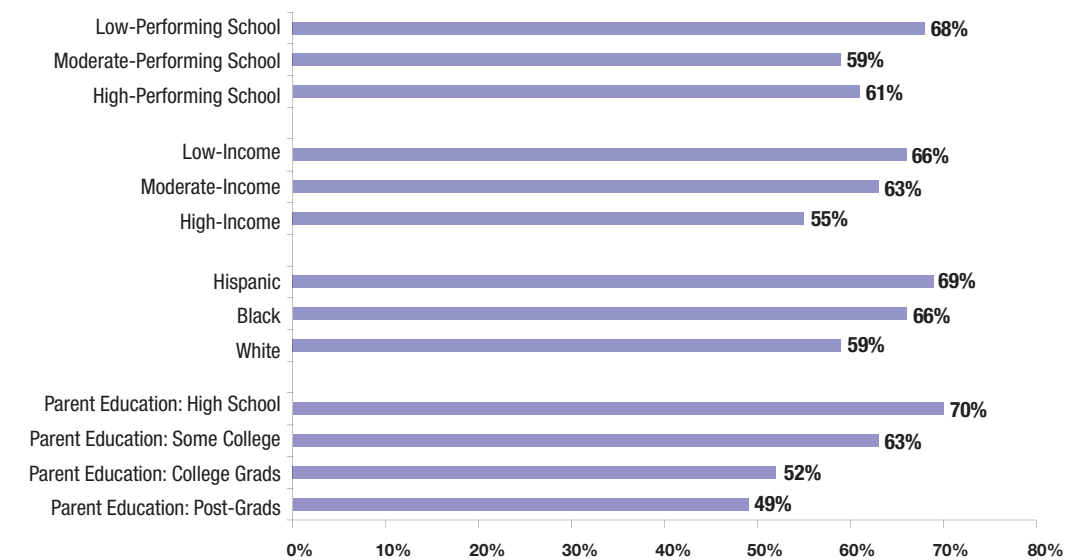
One might suspect that parents who know the most about what today's economy requires – presumably because they themselves are most active in it and benefiting from it the most – are the most likely to feel the need to get involved in their children's education to ensure they are equipped for the future. The findings presented in this report suggest the opposite is true. Not only are the majority of parents from all types of racial, educational, and income backgrounds united in their sense that the world

has changed, they are *more* inclined to feel this way if they have *lower* income or *less* education or their children attend *lower* quality schools. If parents are not as involved in helping their children get equipped for a changing world as they should be, it is not for a lack of understanding that new demands are being placed on their children. Rather, it is likely a lack of capacity to act on that knowledge, or a belief that their children are in schools that prevent them from acting on that knowledge.

"They're a lot more advanced than we were. What I learned, or even what my oldest daughter learned, my youngest daughter is learning two or three years earlier. My youngest is in fifth grade. I'm beyond helping with math. I can't help and I've asked for help and asked for help and she's not getting it."

— Parent from Nashville

Percent of Parents who say, "compared with twenty years ago, the things a student needs to learn today are very different"



Our findings show that 68 percent of parents with a child in a low-performing school believe that what high school students need to know today is very different than 20 years ago, compared to 61 percent of parents with a child in a high-performing school. Furthermore, 70 percent of parents with only a high school education or less believe this is so, compared to 63 percent with some college, 52 percent with a college degree, and 49 percent with a graduate degree. In other words, the *less* the educational attainment of the parent, the *more* he or she feels that the world has changed significantly. This counterintuitive finding suggests that the knowledge economy has truly come to dominate the American societal landscape, and that those least prepared to adapt to the changes feel those changes the most.

...But Not All are Prepared to Deal with It

Parents who feel most strongly that the world has changed are those who also feel the least equipped to prepare their children for it. Parents with children in lower quality schools feel they have fewer options for making decisions about how to equip their children for the future than parents with children in higher quality schools. In our survey, 73 percent of parents with a child in a high-performing school say they have good sources of information beyond school-provided materials to help them decide which courses their child should take to prepare for success after high school, compared with only 51 percent of parents with a child in a low-performing school. These data track consistently with the educational levels of parents as well: 71 percent of parents with a college degree or higher, compared with only 54 percent of parents with a high school degree, say they have adequate information to prepare their children for the future. Only 22 percent of parents of a child in high-performing schools report they have a difficult time finding good sources of such information outside the school, compared to 42 percent of parents of a child in a low-performing school.

Seventy-three percent of parents with a child in a high-performing school say they have good sources of information beyond school-provided materials to help them decide which courses their child should take to prepare for success after high school, compared with only 51 percent of parents in low-performing schools.

It is clear that while the majority of parents understand that our society is going to ask new things of their children, and that those of lower socioeconomic status understand this fact most acutely, those whose children attend low-performing schools are trapped. These parents do not have confidence that they know where to turn to find the information they need. They are, essentially, voyaging forward without an accurate compass to guide them.

Shared Aspirations, Uneven Results

Most parents have high aspirations for their children and recognize that a high-quality education is central to those dreams. But the reality of whether that education emerges and those dreams are met is driven by what kind of school children attend. Our findings are stark:

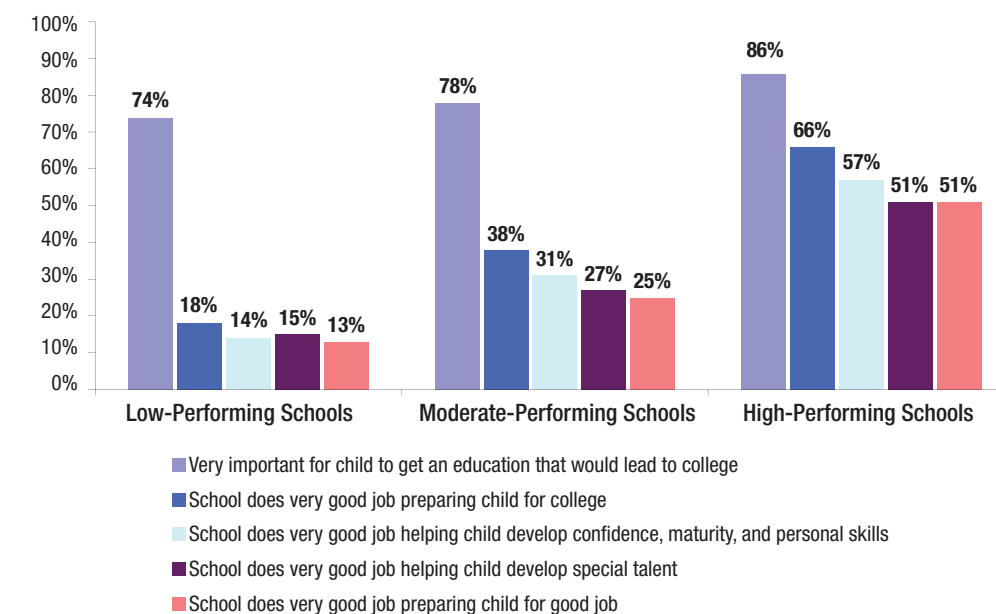
- 74 percent of parents with a child in a low-performing school, 78 percent of parents with a child in a moderate-performing school, and 86 percent of parents of a child in a high-performing school agree that an education leading to college is very important to them.

- 66 percent of parents of a child who attends a high-performing school said their child's school is doing a very good job preparing students for college, in contrast to just 18 percent of parents from low-performing schools.
- Parents from low-, moderate-, and high-performing schools all agree that the most important way a school can improve is to have an engaging curriculum or offer challenging classes.
- Only 15 percent of low-performing school parents say that their child's school does a very good job in challenging students, and only 14 percent say it does a very good job in keeping students engaged. In contrast, 58 percent of high-performing school parents say their child's school challenges its students, and 53 percent say it keeps students engaged.

Common Understanding of Importance of College

Regardless of race, ethnicity or where their children attend school, the vast majority of parents share high aspirations for their children and want them to succeed in school. Because parents are aware of the changing nature of today's educational and economic environment, they hold fairly even aspirations that their children will get a college education. In addition to the high percentage of parents who said that an education leading to college was very important to them, parents also believe preparation for college should outpace other aspects of a high school education. Fifty-seven percent of parents from high and moderate-performing schools and 47 percent from low-performing schools said graduating ready for college was the most important aspect of a high school education compared with developing confidence and maturity, graduating prepared for a good job, or discovering a special ability. Also, African Americans and Hispanics were more likely

Common Dreams for the Future, Differing Satisfaction



than whites to say that an education leading to college was very important. Compared to 78 percent of white parents, 92 percent of African American parents and 90 percent of Hispanic parents felt this way. Parents at all income levels held this view in similar proportions, though parents with a college degree were more likely to feel this way compared to those with just a high school degree.

Diverging Satisfaction on How Well the Schools Prepare Students for the Future

Although parents from all school types agree that having their children prepared for college is an important high school goal, parents from different schools have vastly differing views on how well their children’s school prepares its students for the future. In each of four categories – preparing students for college; helping students develop confidence, maturity, and personal skills; helping students develop a special

talent; and helping students prepare for a good job – more than 50 percent of parents whose child attends high-performing schools reported being very satisfied with how well their child’s school is preparing him or her for the future. Sixty-six percent of parents with a child attending a high-performing school said they were very satisfied with how their child’s school was preparing him or her for college. In contrast, less than 20 percent of parents from low-performing schools were very satisfied in each of the four categories, with only 18 percent saying they were very satisfied with how well the school was preparing their child for college.

The differences in satisfaction with how well schools are preparing students for the future match differences in college attendance. Because only half of the sample is made up of parents whose child has already finished high school, sample sizes are smaller and comparisons are less statistically robust.

Nonetheless, while parents report that 60 percent of students who graduated from high-performing schools are enrolled full-time in a four-year college, the same is true for only 23 percent of low-performing school graduates.

Shared Desire for an Engaging and Challenging Curriculum

Because parents have high expectations and hopes for their children’s future and expect their high school experience to prepare them adequately, they naturally care about the academic rigor within their children’s schools. When asked which aspect of education is most important to parents, the leading response for parents, regardless of the type of school their child attends, was having a curriculum and approach to learning that keeps students interested and engaged. The second most common response for every group of parents was challenging students and setting high standards for what students are expected to do and learn. Parents from low-, moderate-, and high-performing schools feel that

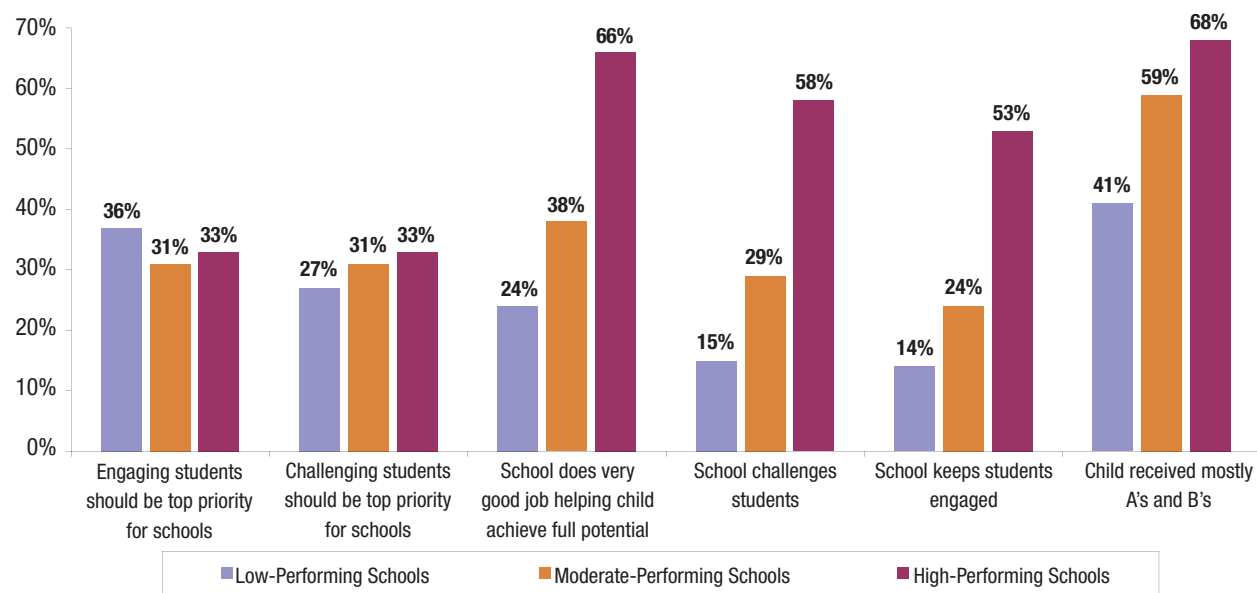
the most important things a school can do is have either an engaging or a challenging curriculum. Parents want their schools to push their children, to present lessons that are interesting, and to provide a curriculum that students will embrace.

Low-Performing Schools Fail to Engage and Challenge

Despite the importance parents place on having a challenging curriculum, there is grave dissatisfaction with how schools are doing on this front, primarily among parents of students in low-performing schools but also among those in moderate-performing schools. Parents whose children attend low-performing schools are far less likely to feel that the school is engaging and challenging their children. Less than one-quarter of parents whose children attend low-performing schools are very satisfied that the school helps their children achieve their full potential. In contrast, 66 percent of parents from high-performing schools say their child’s school helps him or her reach his or her full potential, 58 percent say it challenges its students, and 53 percent say it is doing a good job keeping students engaged.

These higher levels of school performance correlate with higher grades. Parents report that more than two-thirds (68 percent) of students at high-performing schools earn mostly A’s and B’s, compared with only 41 percent of students at low-performing schools. The correlation between lower grades and lower levels of engaging and challenging curricula confirm other findings that show that having a relevant and challenging curriculum is one of the keys to improving student academic performance.

Shared Desire for Engagement and Challenge, Divergent Satisfaction and Performance



“I think it’s up to us, as parents to know what the curriculum is, what’s being taught in the curriculum, to know what the grading is, to know what is expected of our child, to know what the homework is. We need to get each teacher’s syllabus, make sure to go to open houses, communicate with them. You have to be proactive with your kid. You can’t just say, ‘it’s the schools fault.’ But then, sometimes, when you advocate for your child they come back and tell you to back off. ‘Your child should be doing this on his own. They’re in high school.’”

— Parent from Cincinnati

Shared Commitment to Involvement, Divergent Experiences

As the world changes around them and they struggle with how to help their children academically, how strong is parents' involvement in their children's education? Without a doubt, academics and parental involvement are related: a significant body of research shows that parental involvement and student academic achievement are positively correlated. Parental involvement has a positive effect on student grades, scores on standardized tests, attendance, social skills, graduation rates, and college attendance.⁵ Higher levels of parental involvement also better prepare students for pre-K education, elementary school, and college,⁶ as well as increasing the amount of time spent on homework while decreasing the amount of time spent watching television.⁷

The fact that the majority of parents have college aspirations for their children and believe that their involvement as parents is highly important for their children's success shows that parents either knowingly or instinctively grasp what the research bears out. They are aware that education and their involvement in their children's progress matter now perhaps more than ever. The world has changed, and therefore so has theirs. Sadly, when it comes to how schools are engaging parents in the school experience of their children, the results are uneven:

- Compared with only 78 percent of parents at high-performing schools, 85 percent of parents at low-performing schools think that it is important for parents of high school students to be involved as advocates for their child.
- Only 42 percent of parents from low-performing schools said they were as involved in their child's education as they should be, compared with 68 percent of high-performing school parents.

"The reason why I was so upset is because it would have been different if I never went there when he was getting in trouble, or they never saw me, but I was almost constantly just trying to make sure he stayed on path. I'm sending e-mails every day, well, how'd he do today? I had one teacher that said they don't have the time, which I understood. I just felt like I didn't have any help, and I felt like I was really trying."

— *Parent from Nashville*

- 51 percent of parents at low-performing schools have had good conversations with at least half of their child's teachers, while 70 percent of parents at high-performing schools have done the same.
- 83 percent of parents in the high-performing schools group said their school was doing either a very good or fairly good job communicating with them about their child's academic performance, compared with 43 percent of those in the low-performing schools group.
- 70 percent of parents whose child attends a high-performing school say the school does a good job in informing parents of the requirements for graduation and college admission compared to 38 percent of the parents of students in low-performing schools.

Parents Know Their Involvement Is Important

Not only do parents have high aspirations for their children and concerns about how they will fare in a rapidly changing world, but they also believe that their involvement in their children's education is a critical component for their children's success. Furthermore, parents feel more strongly about the

importance of their involvement the lower the quality of the school their children attend. Compared with only 78 percent of parents with a child at a high-performing school, 85 percent of parents with a child at a low-performing school think that it is important for parents to be involved as advocates for their child. They think that parents ought to make sure their children are being placed in the right courses with the teachers who are best suited to teach them rather than leaving those decisions up to the school. This shared commitment to being involved in their children's education is corroborated by studies that show that parents from all backgrounds can and do help their children.⁸

Parent Involvement by School Type

When asked whether, realistically speaking, they were as involved in their child's education as they should be, only 42 percent of parents from low-performing schools answered affirmatively, compared with 68 percent of high-performing school parents. This finding is consistent with research demonstrating that high poverty schools tend to have lower rates of parental involvement.⁹

In terms of basic forms of involvement, most parents make an effort to visit their children's school. Parents with a child in a low-performing school are nearly as likely to visit the school as parents with children in high-performing schools, with 70 percent from low-performing schools and 78 percent from high-performing schools saying they visit school

"If you don't ask questions, they don't really tell you. You have to initiate, and you have to ask. They don't send anything home. If there's nothing wrong, then they don't really say anything."

— *Parent from Cincinnati*

three or more times a year. Ten percent of parents at low-performing schools say they never visited their child's school, compared to only four percent at high-performing schools.

When looking at other measures and penetrating below the surface of parental engagement, however, parental involvement in low-performing schools decreases significantly. Parents at low-performing schools are less likely to have good conversations with their child's teachers about their child's performance. While 70 percent of parents at high-performing schools have had good conversations with at least half of their child's teachers, just 51 percent of parents at low-performing schools have done the same. Even more troubling, 23 percent of parents at low-performing schools have had good conversations with "hardly any teachers," while the same is true for only seven percent of parents at high-performing schools. Conversations with teachers are valuable for reasons beyond simply making parents familiar with their children's school. They are important academically. Research shows that parent-teacher conferences and phone conversations between parents and teachers are associated with student achievement.¹⁰

Involved Parents, Busy Parents, and Shut-out Parents: Why Some Parents are Less Involved

If parents know that involvement is important, why do we see such divergent results? Most parents who described themselves as less involved than they should be identified time conflicts as the source of their lower levels of involvement. Thirty-eight percent of parents identify work or a full-time job as a major obstacle and 26 percent said that a lack of time and scheduling conflicts interfered with their involvement. These two groups represent more than two-thirds of all parents who are less involved than they should be, regardless of where their children go to school. This is a relatively unsurprising finding, given an existing

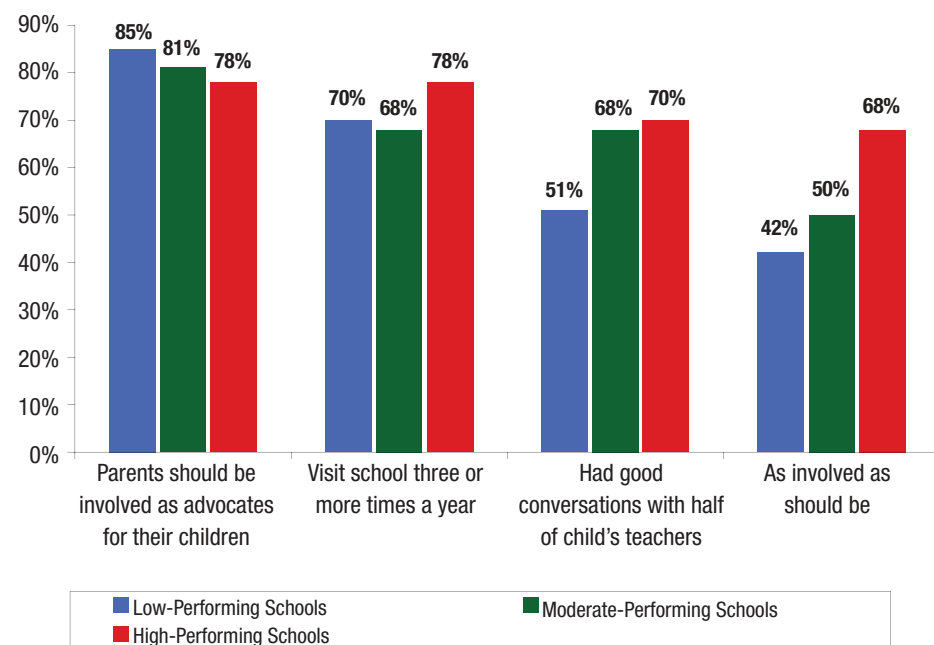
body of research that confirms that time is a major barrier to parental involvement.¹¹

In contrast, almost one-quarter of parents attribute their lack of involvement to non-time related reasons. Twelve percent cite a lack of information, communication and knowledge of what is going on, six percent say they would like to have more contact from the school. Only five percent cite their own lack of education and knowledge about what is being taught at school as a barrier to their involvement in their own child's academic success. We refer to these parents as 'shut-out' — although they have time to be involved at school, they are not as involved as they should be. In all, parents from low-performing schools are far more likely to be shut-out than are parents whose child attends a high-performing school. Thirty-seven percent of low-performing school parents list one of those four reasons for lower levels of involvement, while only 21 percent of high-performing school parents do.

Parents who list time-related reasons for lower involvement in many ways resemble parents who say they are as involved as they should be. Presumably, busy parents may by their nature be fully engaged in work and other commitments, and would likely be highly involved in their children's education if circumstances were different. Parents who list other reasons for lower involvement, on the other hand, may have the time and the desire to be involved with their children's education, but some other obstacle is keeping them from doing so.

Busy parents show higher levels of satisfaction with their child's school than parents who cite other reasons for lower involvement. The percent of parents who are satisfied with the high school's efforts to help students reach their potential is similar for busy parents and involved parents: 74 percent and 80 percent, respectively. In contrast, only 60 percent of shut-out parents are equally satisfied.

Levels of Parental Involvement



How Well Schools Reach Out to Parents

Although only a minority of parents in our survey said they are less involved than they should be because of deficiencies on the part of the school, this group represents millions of parents in America who see room for improvement in the way their children's schools reach out to them. When asked to rate how well their child's school was communicating with them about their child's academic performance, 83 percent of parents in the high-performing schools group said the school was doing either a very good or fairly good job, compared with 43 percent of those in the low-performing schools group. The majority of the high-performing school parents in this group expressed very high levels of satisfaction, while only a small minority among the low-performing school parents felt this way. The percentages are similar (85 percent for high-performing schools versus 47 percent for low-performing schools) when the parents were asked how they would rate their school on how well it was encouraging involvement by providing the right kinds of opportunities for parents to be engaged. There is therefore a clear correlation between the kind of outreach to parents a school performs and the level of involvement and satisfaction of those parents. A real or perceived lack of effort on the part of schools correlates highly with lower levels of involvement and satisfaction.

"I had my daughter when I was 20, and, you know, there wasn't a lot of parental involvement. I'll tell you that from the starting gate. I was still going to school at the same time too. I was a single parent. It wasn't feasible for me to be at parent day in kindergarten, for half the day, two times a week and volunteer. I'm not making \$50,000 a year or staying at home, but I do believe in being an example for my child."
 — Parent from Los Angeles

While causal connections between high-performing schools and their manner of involving parents are hard to verify, a strong correlation between school quality and how well a school reaches out to parents is evident. Far higher numbers of parents whose children attend high-performing schools say the schools do a good job of:

- informing parents of the requirements for graduation and college admission compared to parents of students in low-performing schools (70 percent versus 38 percent, respectively);
- giving parents an opportunity to be involved in selecting the courses their child takes (68 percent versus 30 percent); and
- informing parents about whether their child is on track to be able to go to college (57 percent versus 29 percent).

The gap also exists for arranging a meeting between a counselor or advisor and a parent at the beginning of high school to discuss the importance of college (46 percent versus 22 percent), and encouraging parents to be involved in their child's education (85 percent versus 47 percent).

In none of these areas do more than 50 percent of parents of students in low-performing schools feel the school does a good job. In contrast, the responses of parents of students in high-performing schools only drop below 50 percent once, in the case of arranging a meeting with a counselor at the beginning of high school in order to discuss the importance of college. Similar results were found in a 2005 survey, which concluded that a higher percent of families above the poverty level feel that their child's school "makes it easier for the family to be involved" than families below poverty.¹² The gaps between high- and low-performing schools are sobering and reveal a very real divide in America.

“There’s just really not a lot of parental involvement. You know they’ll call you for the negative things, but never for the positive, and that’s something important to me. I want to know if my child is doing well too.”

— Parent from Cincinnati

The percentage of parents from low-performing schools who feel their child’s school is doing well in each area of working with parents is far lower than the percentage of parents from high-performing schools. Parents at low-performing schools consistently rate their child’s school far worse when it comes to how it involves parents than do parents at high-performing schools. It is reasonable to expect that when parents feel schools are not keeping them informed about their children’s performance, encouraging parents to actively participate, or giving parents an opportunity to help choose classes for

their children, the parents respond by being less involved in their children’s education.

The gaps in responses from parents provide cause for concern as well as reason to expect the possibility of dramatic improvement. Parents at low-performing schools are clearly dissatisfied with the ways their children’s schools reach out to them. This failure on the part of schools leads parents to lower levels of involvement. Research conclusively establishes the relationship between parent involvement and student performance, showing that while parent involvement is not sufficient to guarantee a good education, it is necessary.¹³ Research, our parent survey, and the practices employed by high-performing schools for engaging parents provide a starting point for identifying ways in which schools can improve student performance through enhanced parental involvement.

Next Steps

When parents are more involved, students perform better. Unfortunately, parents are frequently not as deeply involved as they should be, especially

in low-performing schools. What is the way forward? How can schools and families work together to ensure that more students benefit from their parents’ involvement in their education? Schools are not responsible for making parents better parents or teaching them what is best for their children, but they can be a great help to parents by improving the ways they make it possible for parents to be involved in the life of the school and the course of their children’s education.

What schools may find encouraging about our findings is that (1) a significant majority of parents of all racial and income backgrounds share high aspirations for their children, (2) they believe that parental involvement is necessary for their children’s success in school, and (3) the majority of parents who are not as involved as they should be generally believe there are things, supported by research, that schools can do to foster greater involvement. Schools, by and large, do not need to embark on a campaign to persuade parents that their children’s education matters or that they as parents need to understand the importance of their role. Rather, they need to find new, practical and systematic ways to encourage parental involvement and create new types of opportunities so that parents will be able to act more effectively on the knowledge and concern they already have. Furthermore, schools should avoid waiting until there is a disciplinary problem to contact parents. Parents should be given opportunities for involvement early in the high school educational process so that the first call they receive is not the one telling them their child is in trouble.

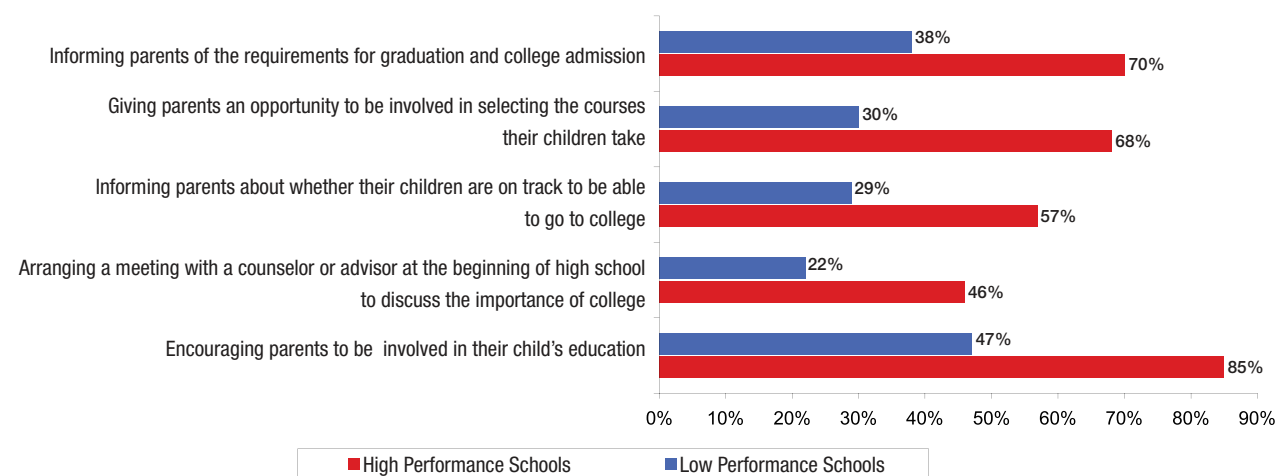
Parents Identify Helpful Strategies

There is not a single strategy that will completely improve parental involvement at any given school. A majority of parents believe, however, that any one of a number of interventions would be extremely helpful to increase involvement. And in most cases, parents with a child in a low-performing school and

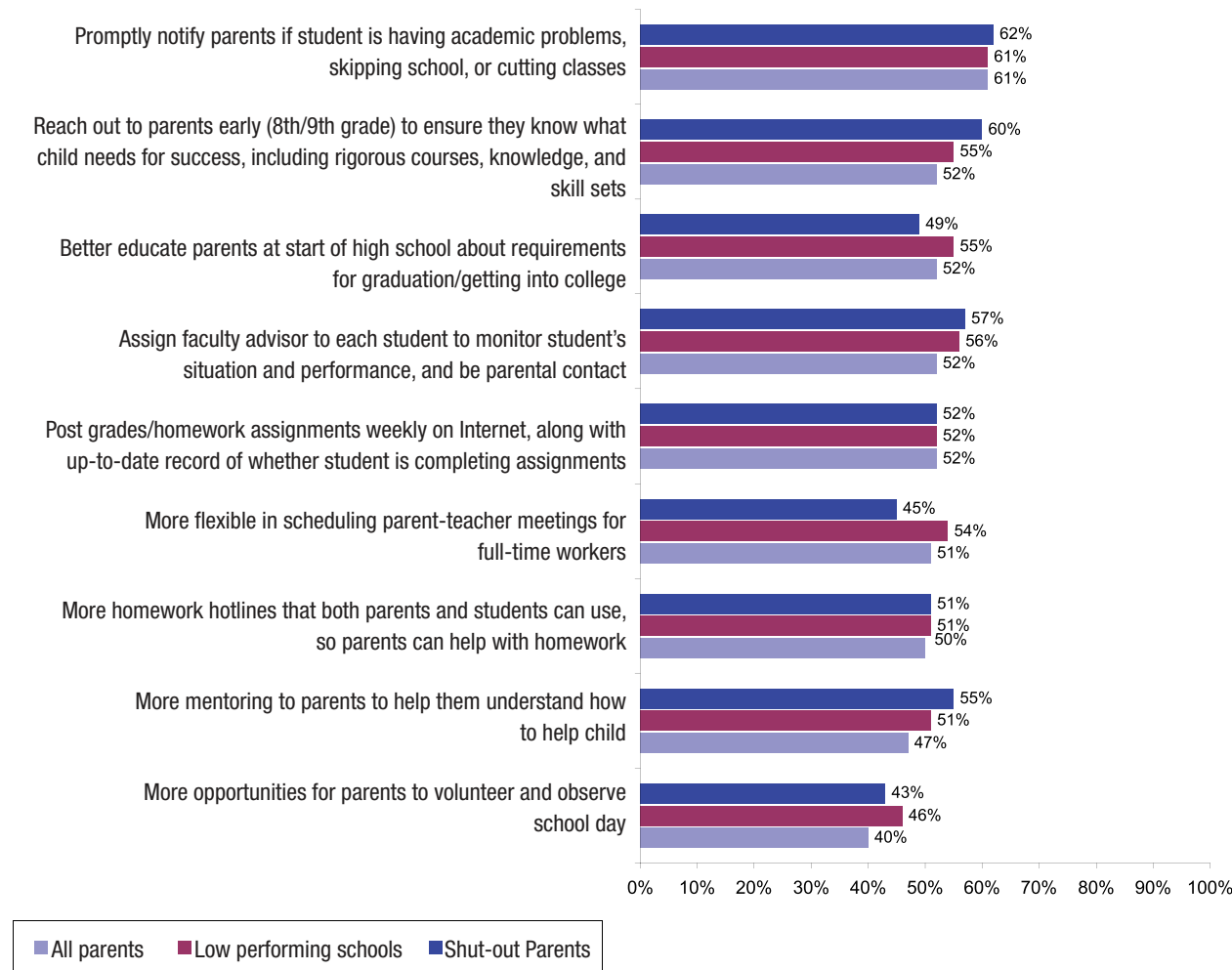
shut-out parents were at least as supportive of the various strategies – if not more – than the average of all parents’ responses. For instance, compared to 52 percent of all parents, 60 percent of the shut-out parents said that early outreach from their children’s schools to help them understand what their children need for success would be extremely helpful. Parents of students in low-performing schools believe in greater numbers than parents as a whole that they should be educated at the start of high school about the requirements for graduating and getting into college. This is evidence that a considerable number of parents who are currently not as involved as they could be are open to important types of engagement. In general, a majority of parents believe that early outreach and early notification of problems would be valuable ways for schools to involve them as parents.

So where does a school begin? For starters, parents need to be involved more thoroughly in the academic preparation of their children and not just offered opportunities to help with bake sales or special events. While the latter are important, the chief aim of parental involvement is to bolster their children’s academic performance. Schools also need to take steps to ensure that opportunities to be involved fit well with the kinds of lives that parents are living today. Compared to a generation ago, there is a greater share of two-parent households in which both parents work, and because of welfare reform, more single-parents are working full-time jobs, as well. Schools should take an active role in educating parents about the benefits of their involvement, the different types of involvement that are available to them, and the requirements their children must meet for graduation and college admission. Finally, we need to begin a national dialogue that places parents at the center of debates over how to improve student performance.

Percent of Parents who Feel Schools do a Good Job...



Percent saying each would be an extremely helpful way for high schools to help parents support their children's education



Greater Involvement in a Student's Academic Success

There is good evidence that the more parents help their children with their schoolwork and the more involved they are as parents overall, the better their children perform academically. For example, a study found, after controlling for a variety of demographic variables, that when parents participated in more activities at their children's schools during preschool and kindergarten, their children showed increased reading performance, passed eighth grade at higher

rates, and had lower rates of special education.¹⁴ Other research shows that academic achievement is highly correlated with parents discussing school with their children at home,¹⁵ and active parent-school involvement helps children develop the skills needed for success in all school subject areas.¹⁶

Recommendations:

- Each teacher should incorporate homework assignments that involve families in every course.

- Schools should develop and distribute parent information packets about the school and about the courses each child is taking.
- A single contact person should be assigned for each student so that parents always know who to get in touch with when they have questions or concerns. This can be a guidance counselor, an advisor, or an administrator.
- A meeting should be arranged during the student's first year of high school between the parents, the school contact person, and the student. This meeting should offer the opportunity for parents to learn about the requirements for graduation and college attendance, plan the courses their children should take in high school, and begin an ongoing relationship between the contact and the parents.

Involvement Around Parents' Lives

The more effort a school makes to ensure that parents can accommodate their school obligations with their other life commitments, the more likely parents will be involved. Experts argue, for instance, that schools must rethink their approach to parental involvement in order to provide the opportunities and support that will engage parents most productively. Effective parental involvement plans, they explain, must take into account the time constraints parents face, overcome cultural and language barriers in order to bridge the gaps between schools and parents, restructure the schools' workings in order to create an environment welcoming to parents, and reach beyond traditional supports to take advantage of other resources in the community.¹⁷

Engaging Parents in their Children's Schoolwork

One new program that has shown early signs of success is Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS). TIPS involves the use of interactive homework assignments designed by teachers that students are required to complete with the help of their families. The program aims to overcome barriers to parent involvement by scheduling the homework assignments at regular times (once a week or once every two weeks, for instance), orienting students and parents about how the process works, and inviting family members to write questions for the teacher while working on the homework. Completion rates of TIPS assignments exceeded 90 percent in one class that was studied, and satisfaction rates were 100 percent for families and 96 percent for students.

See Epstein (2006) and <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/P2000/tips/index.htm>.

Other experts point out that programs that successfully engage diverse families must respect class and cultural differences.¹⁸

Recommendations:

- Schools should periodically undertake a survey to assess the resources parents have available to them in order to create a specific plan for including all parents at the high school.
- Schools should make strong efforts to accommodate the varying needs of parents, whether it involves translating the student handbook to help immigrant parents, offering bus service for parents to attend teacher conferences, or incorporating home visits to parents who do not have telephones or face other impediments to school-based involvement.
- Parent volunteers should be recruited to serve as liaisons between the school and other parents, helping to identify ways of including otherwise disengaged parents.
- Schools should look for ways to offer stipends or other benefits to teachers who spend time after hours working with parents.

“I think the bottom line is the teachers should monitor the progress of your kid academically, and have some kind of agreement, maybe even before school starts, between the parent and teachers involved. Then you have collaboration between the two before school starts. If there’s any sort of difficulty, you have that. The schools should offer a working relationship with the parent.”

— *Parent from Cincinnati*

Giving Parents the Resources and Knowledge They Need

As noted earlier, a majority of parents in our survey believe that they would be more likely to get engaged in their children’s schools if the schools had educated them early about what would be required for their students to succeed, meet graduation requirements, and get into college. Experts and educators across the nation are finding that many schools do not do an adequate job in this area.

“They know firsthand what the kids are doing. The first signs of downfall begin at school, and we are not there in class, we need an early reaction from the teacher about what is happening.”

— *Parent from Los Angeles*

Parents clearly want their children to succeed and they generally have an understanding of the importance of their involvement. However, they frequently do not have an adequate grasp of what their involvement actually produces in their children’s performance or how the school benefits from their engagement. For these reasons, it is important for schools to know that just because parents believe involvement matters does not mean that parents know how to get involved. Early outreach and orientation are crucial, especially for parents less familiar with the American public education system. Studies show that orientation programs can be extremely beneficial in empowering parents to engage actively in their children’s education, although there is some evidence that too much orientation can be less helpful than smaller amounts.¹⁹

Recommendations:

- Schools should consider partnering with community organizations to offer parent involvement classes to provide the resources parents need in order to be adequately engaged in their children’s education.
- Classes should be offered at times most convenient for parents, and child care should be provided so that single parents can attend.
- Schools should work with parents to identify the areas for which there is the greatest demand, and facilitators should ensure that parents have adequate knowledge of the helpful ways they can be involved, the requirements for graduation and attending college, and the process of applying to college and seeking financial aid.

“Some things I was aware of, and some things I wasn’t. No one called me. I’m trying to help him, but they’re not trying to help me help him.”

— *Parent from Nashville*

Overcoming Barriers to Involvement

The rural setting and high poverty rates of Atenville, West Virginia, make it hard for parents to be active with the school. A comprehensive program to address the barriers to involvement includes a network of parents that disseminate information by mail and word-of-mouth to families without telephones. Teachers and principals offer rides to school meetings and events for parents who lack transportation. The school hired a parent-coordinator who, along with parent volunteers, conducted home-visits to assess the needs of the parents. The school also created a family center to provide space at the school for parent workshops, PTA meetings, and kindergarten registration. During the first four years of these new interventions, parent volunteering increased from 1,000 hours to 7,000 hours, and student achievement rose from an average of 59th percentile to 71st percentile (third graders) and from 58th percentile to 63rd percentile (sixth graders).

See Funkhouser & Gonzales (1997).

Educating Parents about Involvement

The Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE) offers classes to immigrant parents to help them learn about effective roles they can play in their children's education. Started in 1987 by a retired minister, PIQE began as a single two-hour discussion with recent Hispanic immigrants and grew into a set of eight-week long training sessions for immigrant parents of all backgrounds. The subject discussed during the sessions ranged from home-school collaboration, to academic standards, to the road to the university. Parents attend classes held in their native language and are provided with translations of all course materials. Research has demonstrated that these orientation classes enhance parents' feeling of empowerment, encourage them to communicate with the school, and help them serve as more effective advocates for their children. In San Diego, 93% of the children of PIQE participants graduated from high school, far above national averages for Latino students and all students.

See Chrispeels & Rivero (2000). See also <http://www.piqe.org/>. See also Vidano & Sahafi (2004).

Bring Parents to Center of National Education Discussion

Given the importance of parental involvement in student performance and the urgent need for continued reforms to America's educational system, there is a need for a heightened national focus on the contributions and roles of parents. Federal policy already provides some incentives for parental engagement in their children's education. The No Child Left Behind Act requires that parents are notified before the start of the school year if their children's school is determined to be in need of improvement, and it also requires that parents be involved in drafting the corrective action plans for failing schools. Additionally, the Department of Education funds Parent Information Resource Centers (PIRCs) around the nation to help local communities find ways to engage parents in productive ways. These efforts provide a good environment for additional reforms that involve parents in their children's education in ways that truly help strengthen academic performance. As our findings suggest, parents of all backgrounds, are aware that they can and should be engaged early in ensuring that their children are meeting the requirements to graduate from high school and are ready for college and work.

Recommendations:

- The perspectives of parents should be integrated into the 100 dropout summits in all 50 states occurring over the next few years through the America's Promise Alliance that will drive local plans to increase high school graduation rates and college and workforce readiness. The parent voice, together with the perspectives of students, educators, administrators and community leaders, will help ensure that these plans recognize the important roles that parents and others play in the education of children;

- The US Department of Education should use Parent Information Resource Centers to support the types of parent engagement that are most likely to help students meet the requirements they need to graduate from high school and get into college. The leverage the U.S. government has across the nation to foster and share best practices is critical to advance parental involvement in schools;
- Federal and state governments and foundations should consider providing challenge grants to organizations that can test effective strategies to systematically engage large numbers of parents in the academic achievement of students, foster appropriate reforms in high schools, and coordinate efforts with local, state and federal policymakers to ensure parent engagement is a top priority and becomes an institutional practice; and
- National organizations that regularly hold conferences on issues of importance to parents, as well as national educational organizations, should begin building parental involvement tracks into their panel and speaker agendas as a way to heighten greater awareness that not all parental involvement is equal and that resources exist to improve educational outcomes through parental involvement. If parents are to become central in strengthening the academic performance of children, their perspectives must be heard and reforms to engage them must be advanced.

Conclusion

The demands of our schools and the workforce have increased in the past generation and the parents who recognize this the most have children trapped in low-performing schools. These parents see the landscape changing and feel least equipped to respond to help their children cope. All parents generally have high expectations and big dreams for their children. They know that the more they are involved in the educational lives of their children both at home and in schools, the better their children are likely to do in school and the workforce. But many parents in America have children attending low-performing schools and are dissatisfied with the way those schools are engaging, challenging, developing and supporting their children. In turn, these parents feel they do not have adequate information and tools from the schools to support the education of their children.

America itself has two school systems — one that is largely equipping children for the demands of high school, college and the workforce and another that is too often failing them; one that is effectively engaging parents in the education of their children and another that is failing to do so. Such a landscape is inconsistent with America's promise of equal opportunity. Schools and parents have clear pathways to begin to improve one element that we know has a dramatic impact on the education of children — the sustained engagement of parents who play vital roles in educating their children and nurturing them into the future.

Acknowledgements and Note

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Civic Enterprises is a public policy development firm dedicated to informing discussions on issues of importance to the nation.

The authors, together with Peter D. Hart Research Associates, would like to give thanks to the more than 1,000 parents who participated in the survey and focus groups and shared their thoughts and reflections about the education of their children in America's high schools.

The views reflected in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Methodology

From June 21 to July 8, 2007, Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc. conducted a nationally representative survey among 1,006 parents of current and recent high school students, including over-samples of 53 African Americans, 52 Hispanics, and 101 parents from areas with low-performing schools. Only parents who said they were responsible for raising that child were eligible to participate in the survey. Among other important demographic information, the sample's racial breakdown is 12% African American, 13% Hispanic, and 70% white. Half of the parents currently have children in high school and the other half are the parents of children who have been enrolled in high school in the last five years. Over 9 out of 10 (91%) are parents of current or recent public school students. The remainder are parents of private school students. The survey is geographically representative both regionally and by community type. Parents from large cities (18%), medium-to-small cities (25%), suburbs near a city (17%), small towns not near a city (19%), and rural or country areas (20%) are represented in this survey. At the 95% confidence interval, the statistical margin of sampling error associated with the base sample is ± 3.2 percentage points, although sampling tolerances for subgroups are larger.

Almost half of parents (47%) have or had a child in high-performing schools, one-third (34%) have or had a child in moderate-performing schools, and 15% have or had a child in low-performing schools. The categorization of high, moderate, and low performance is done by the parents themselves, but is based on their estimation of an objective criterion — the proportion of students from that high school that go on to college. High-performing schools are ones for which parents report that most students go to college. Moderate-performing schools are ones for which parents report that while many students go to college, many do not. Low-performing schools are ones for which parents report that while some students go to college, many or most do not.

Endnotes

NOTE: References in the endnotes are cited in short form. See the bibliography for full citations.

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- ¹⁶ Marcon, “Positive relationships between parent school involvement and public school inner-city preschoolers’ development and academic performance.”
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