

# Parents 2018: Going Beyond Good Grades





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# Executive Summary



Learning Heroes was founded to help parents become their children’s best education advocates. Since 2016, we have conducted extensive research to understand how K-8 parents think, feel, prioritize, and talk about their children and their public schools in order to better equip parents with the information they need to help their children succeed. Over three years, one alarming finding has remained constant: Nearly 9 in 10 parents, regardless of race, income, geography, and education levels, believe their child is achieving at or above grade level. Yet national data indicates only about one-third of students actually perform at that level. In 8<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics, while 44% of white students scored at the proficient level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 2017, only 20% of Hispanic and 13% of African-American students did so.

**NEARLY 9 IN 10 PARENTS, REGARDLESS OF RACE, INCOME, GEOGRAPHY, AND EDUCATION LEVELS, BELIEVE THEIR CHILD IS ACHIEVING AT OR ABOVE GRADE LEVEL. YET NATIONAL DATA INDICATES ONLY ABOUT ONE-THIRD OF STUDENTS ACTUALLY PERFORM AT THAT LEVEL.**

This year, we delved into the drivers of this “disconnect.” We wanted to understand why parents with children in grades 3-8 hold such a rosy picture of their children’s performance and what could be done to

## About Learning Heroes

Founded by Bibb Hubbard in 2014, Learning Heroes “meets parents where they are” by conducting an unprecedented amount of research among K-8 parents to deeply understand their hopes, dreams, frustrations, and engagement levels when it comes to their children’s education. Driven by the finding that 9 in 10 parents believe their child is at or above grade level in reading and math, when only about a third of students actually perform at grade level, Learning Heroes collaborates with trusted partners – the National PTA, Univision, Scholastic, the National Urban League, UnidosUS, and state and local education agencies – to give parents a complete and accurate picture of their children’s achievement, a first step to ensuring their academic success.



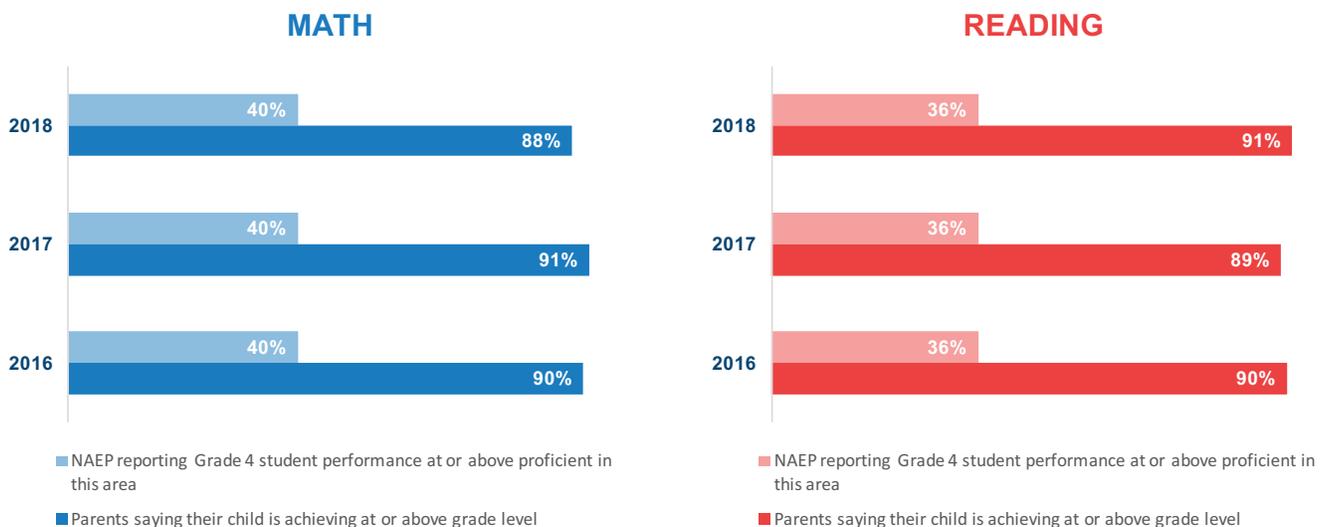
move them toward a more complete and accurate view. By having a more informed and holistic picture, parents can find the best resources for their children at home and partner more effectively with teachers to keep their children on track for college and life success. They also can demand more of their schools.

The 2018 research includes a deep segmentation of the parent population, informed by behavioral science, to help think about how to reach different subsets of parents. It also includes Learning Heroes' first-ever nationally representative survey of public school teachers in grades 3-8, in addition to parents, to understand the barriers to better communication. We also conducted 12 focus groups with parents of public school children in grades 3-8 in six states, and more than 70 in-depth interviews with guidance counselors, principals, teachers, and parents and their upper elementary or middle school children to see how parents', educators', and children's views about academic performance converge and diverge.

Parents have high aspirations for their children. Eight in 10 parents think it's important for their child to earn a college degree, with African-American and Hispanic parents more likely to think it's absolutely essential or very important. Yet if students are not meeting grade-level expectations, parents' aspirations and students' goals for themselves are unlikely to be realized. Today, nearly 40% of college students take at least one remedial course; those who do are much more likely to drop out, dashing both their and their parents' hopes for the future.<sup>1</sup>

There is an opportunity to solve this disconnect and ensure students are on track. When parents are exposed to a few pieces of understandable and relevant information together, including a report card grade, state test results, and a school performance rating, their thinking shifts – from nearly 9 in 10 believing that their child is at or above grade level before exposure, to just over half (52%). Parents deserve all the pieces of the puzzle regarding their children's performance presented in a way that's both clear and actionable.

## THE DISCONNECT REMAINS UNIVERSAL



<sup>1</sup> See Table 2 in Chen, X. [2016] Remedial Coursetaking at US public 2- and 4-year institutions: Scope, experiences, and outcomes. Statistical Analysis Report (NCES 2016-405). Washington DC: National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016405.pdf>

# Learning Heroes' 2018 Research



Building on our last two years of research, in 2018, we decided to delve deeply into *“the disconnect” – parents’ widespread belief that their children perform at or above grade level versus national data suggesting only about one-third of students actually do so.*

Through in-depth, national research, we aimed to shed light on the underlying reasons for this disconnect and what could be done to ensure parents have access to more accurate, understandable, and actionable information so they can better help their children succeed now and in the future. The research includes: national surveys of both parents and teachers of public school students in grades 3-8, focus groups with parents of children in grades 3-8 in six states, and individual interviews with parents, their children, teachers, principals, and guidance counselors.

Our research about “the disconnect” uncovered three key insights:

1

**Parenting Styles Drive How Parents Engage in Their Child’s Education:** Most parents believe they are involved in their child’s education as much as they should be, yet depending upon their parenting style, they have different thresholds for involvement, leaving teachers to navigate a range of approaches from parents.

2

**Report Cards Sit at the Center of the Disconnect:** Parents rely heavily on report card grades as their primary source of information and assume good grades mean their child is performing at grade level. Yet two-thirds of teachers say report cards also reflect effort, progress, and participation in class, not just mastery of grade-level content. Teachers have many more data points about student performance than parents do.

3

**The Disconnect Is Solvable:** Providing parents with a few already available pieces of information in one place in a clear, decipherable format leads many parents to reconsider their views about their child’s performance.



# Parenting Styles Drive How Parents Engage in Their Child's Education



**While most parents generally have a rosy, overconfident picture of their child's performance, they differ in how they engage in their child's educational journey, how they track progress, and how open they are to new information.**

This year, Learning Heroes wanted to understand if parents have certain characteristics or parenting styles that could help educators more effectively tailor outreach and support to meet them where they are. Based on the quantitative research, and tested through subsequent qualitative research, we identified four parent mindsets, based on their attitudes and self-identified behaviors, that can be used to inform outreach and communications:

- **A-OKs:** About 25% of parents describe their children as independent, academic achievers. They are confident of their child's performance in the classroom and on state tests and look at both to track achievement. They know they don't need to spend a lot of time overseeing academics. They report being more involved in their child's education than the average parent surveyed, with a relatively small gap between their "ideal" and "actual" levels of engagement. **They are open to more information but feel like they have what they need. A light touch or prompt from teachers is sufficient.**
- **Problem Solvers:** Only about 22% of parents believe their child is struggling academically, socially, and/or emotionally. These parents already spend a lot of time communicating with teachers and trying to address challenges at school: 71% say they attended a parent-teacher conference in the last year, and 64% say they communicated with their child's teacher outside of a conference, the highest of any group. These parents are already grappling with big issues. Information about the "disconnect" is secondary, since they're already worried their child is not doing well in school. **They welcome more engagement and indicate that there's more they could be doing.**
- **Protectors:** Another 23% of parents have high hopes for their child, but it's a false sense of security because they are more likely to rely on report card grades than other parents do. This group reports the highest level of involvement, with 40% saying they attended a PTA/PTO meeting in the last year. Information about the "performance gaps" gets their attention, and they begin to question their assumptions. **They are keenly interested in more information and in engaging to close the disconnect for their child.**
- **Accepters:** The remaining 30% of parents are more hands off –they are less college-oriented and believe their child is "fine," so they expend less energy worrying about academic achievement. This group of parents reports the lowest involvement in school of any segment; only 9% strongly agree their parents were involved in their education. They are skeptical regarding information about the "disconnect." **They will be the hardest group to engage on this topic and on interventions and therefore will require explicit strategies to reach them.**

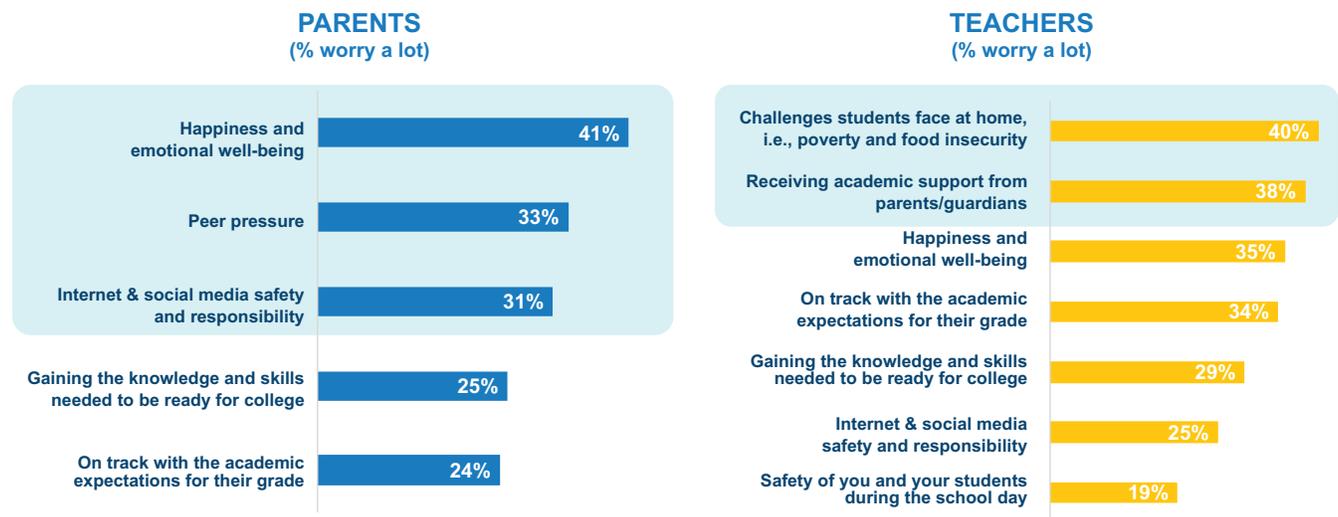
## Parents' rosy view spills into their beliefs about their child's happiness and stress.

Parents naturally care about their whole child. They see their child's social, emotional, and cognitive development as part and parcel of academics; a view confirmed by other research. So, it's not surprising that social and emotional worries keep parents up at night. Parents' top three worries are their child's happiness and emotional well-being, peer pressure, and safe and responsible use of the internet.

In contrast, teachers' top concerns are the challenges students face at home, such as poverty and food insecurity, and whether students are receiving the academic support they need from their parents or guardians.

Just as most parents think their child is at or above grade level academically, survey findings suggest most parents think their child is happy in school and do not describe their child as "stressed."

### DIFFERENT WORRIES KEEP PARENTS & TEACHERS UP AT NIGHT



In Learning Heroes' March 2018 report, *Developing Life Skills in Children*, parents indicated they wanted a strong academic foundation for their child, as well as a number of social, emotional, and cognitive skills and traits, including respect, self-esteem, and social skills. This year, 64% of parents say their child respects parents, teachers, and other adults—the number one skill parents want for their child. But only 36% say their child learns from mistakes, 33% say their child takes on challenges, and 27% say their child exhibits self-control; all of which brain science suggests are important skills, attitudes, and mindsets for learning. At the same time, few parents believe their child has social or emotional difficulties (just 11%). Parents of children in grades 3-8 also are not likely to admit that their child is anxious (just 17%) or stressed (9%). Nearly 7 in 10 (68%) say their child was extremely or very happy during the past school year.

Parents' confidence about how their child is doing both academically and socially may lead them to believe they don't need to be more involved in their child's schooling than they already are: 33% say they are already as involved as they want to be; 28% want their child to take responsibility; and 21% say their child is doing well, so they don't need to be more involved. Another 32% say they have limited time to be more involved.

### Why Accepters may be the hardest to reach:

A closer look at these parents suggests some of the reasons it may be harder to engage them around a more accurate picture of their child's performance. They have the lowest involvement in school of any parent group and are more likely to rate their child as independent. "She needs to have responsibility for herself," said one New Hampshire parent. "I can't force her to do it. I'm not going to do it for her. She needs to deal with the consequences."

A Sacramento parent said, "Only if I absolutely have to go down to the school will I. I don't want my kid to be known as the one whose parent was always in the office." Compared to other parents, these parents did not have a good school experience themselves. They rely on their child's mood and whether he or she struggles with homework to determine how their child is doing academically. They place less faith than other parents in external measures of performance, whether report card grades or test scores. Although their confidence in whether they have an accurate picture of their child's performance drops after reading about the "disconnect," they are still least likely to believe the disconnect applies to them. They are more likely to be white, from rural or small towns, and to have daughters.



## Both teachers and parents prioritize parent involvement in education but differ in how much they think it is happening and what strong involvement looks like.

While both parents and teachers think communication between home and school is important, they have starkly different views about how effective that is today. Parents, on average, think they should be extremely involved in their child’s education (8.6 on a 10-point scale). And, on average, most think they are actually that involved (8.0 on a 10-point scale). Teachers have a similar view about the importance of parents’ involvement. But, on average, teachers rate parents’ actual involvement much lower than parents do (6.1 on a 10-point scale).

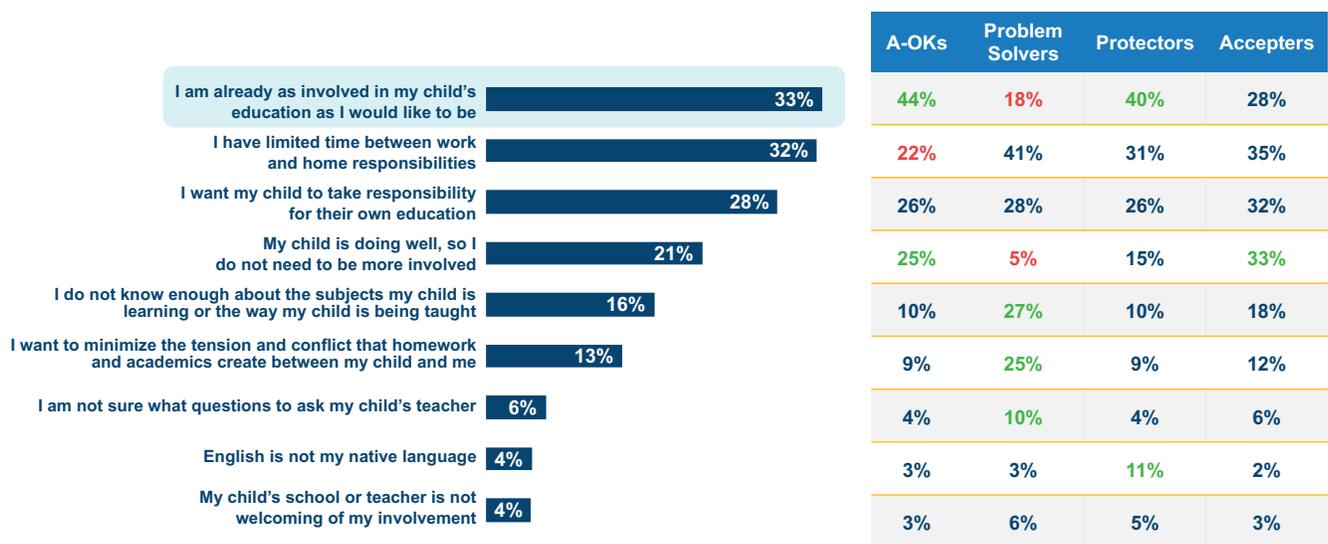
Focus groups and interviews suggest one reason for these differing perceptions is that parents and teachers prioritize different types of communication between home and school. Parents believe that teachers should keep them informed, especially if there’s a problem. “I think the teachers wait,” said an elementary school parent in Massachusetts. “If you’re having an issue right now, I want to know about it on Monday, not next Monday.”

In contrast, teachers prioritize parents responding to their e-mails and coming to parent-teacher conferences, and interpret those as signs of engagement. “I think the parents have stepped out when it comes to school work. Some I can’t get on the phone all year,” said an elementary school teacher in Texas. “There needs to be more parent engagement.”

Nearly 8 in 10 teachers (78%) agree<sup>2</sup>, “The students whose parents regularly communicate with me tend to do better academically than students whose parents do not communicate with me.”

According to parents, highly communicative teachers provide regular e-mail communications, frequently update online portals, call or text, will schedule additional parent-teacher meetings, and send completed work home. Teachers say their most engaged parents attend parent-teacher conferences, respond to teacher communications, help their children with homework, and reach out to the teacher independently.

## OVERCONFIDENCE IN ACADEMICS CAN DRIVE A LACK OF INVOLVEMENT



Which of the following prevents you from being as involved in your child's education as you would like to be? Select all that apply.

Green/red indicates statistically higher/lower differences between audiences

<sup>2</sup> Selected a four or five on a five-point agreement scale.

## Problem Solvers engage most with teachers but still want more:

These parents report that their child has among the lowest academic achievement: 59% report their child is below grade level in at least one subject. They already communicate more with their child's teachers and principal than other parents do; 64% say they communicated outside of a parent-teacher conference, the highest of any group. But they want to be even more involved. They are more likely to have had a mixed experience in school themselves. "They passed me along. They didn't care about me as much," said one Pittsburgh father. "It is why I am on top of her. She has a different experience, but I am worried it will be similar." Although these parents communicate with their child's teacher regularly, they still worry that they don't have an accurate picture of their performance. They are more likely to be white and to have sons. Twenty-eight percent say their child has an individualized education plan.



## Parents and teachers pull back on educational involvement during middle school, even as the expectations on students increase.

Middle school is a time of enormous transition for young people physically, socially, and emotionally. At the same time, their educational experience shifts markedly: typically, students move from smaller elementary schools with a single classroom teacher to larger middle schools with multiple teachers teaching different subjects.

Yet as the expectations on students increase, Learning Heroes research found that both parents and teachers pull back from home-school communication during these grades. In focus groups, parents described their roles as becoming more muddled and the barriers to effective communication becoming steeper.

Only 38% of middle school parents, compared with 43% of elementary school parents, say they want to be extremely involved in their child's education. They are more likely to say they want their child to take responsibility for their own education (31% vs. 25%). They are much more likely than elementary school parents to access their child's grades through an online portal (65% vs. 48%). But they are less likely to have attended a parent-teacher conference in the past year (61% vs. 70%) or to have communicated with their child's teacher outside of a parent-teacher conference (52% vs. 57%).

"I'm not involved as much with my older as with my younger because as kids get older, I try to give them independence," said a father from Cincinnati. "Once you get to middle school, I'm not talking to your teacher anymore," said a Sacramento parent. "[I say to my child,] 'You talk to them.'"

Middle school teachers also have lower expectations about communicating with their students' parents compared with their elementary school counterparts. For example, fewer middle school teachers feel it's very important<sup>3</sup> to make sure "parents have a clear picture of how their child is achieving academically" (83% vs. 94%), to ensure "parents have a clear understanding of grade level academic standards for the year" (76% vs. 85%), to "tell parents when their children are struggling academically" (86% vs. 93%), or to "encourage parents to support their children's education" (84% vs. 91%).

"A frustrating thing that I've found is the older they get, you don't get that communication about missing assignments," said the parent of a middle schooler from Cincinnati.

While some of these shifts reflect a real desire on the part of parents and teachers to give maturing adolescents more autonomy and independence, some of it is structural: middle school teachers see many more students each day. Parent-teacher conferences often become optional, with some parents referring to them as "speed dating" given the number of students that teachers have. Young people themselves become less communicative at home, and parents are less likely to see homework or classwork. Given teachers' course loads, many parents feel reluctant to reach out unless there's a real problem. "Unless your kid is doing super bad, they don't care to do a parent-teacher conference," said one middle school parent in Pennsylvania.

"As they get older, there is a natural tendency to be withdrawn," said a Texas parent of a middle schooler. "It's hard to know [how they're doing] if you're not there."

Given the sharp drop in student performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress between elementary and middle school, and the percent of students who drop out in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, middle school is a critical time to understand and address learning gaps to keep children on track for career and college readiness.



<sup>3</sup> Selected a four or five on a five-point agreement scale.

# Report Cards Sit at the Center of the Disconnect



## Teachers have many data points about student performance, while parents see and rely largely on report cards.

Parents' strong sense of confidence that their child is meeting grade-level standards appears to stem from their heavy reliance on report card grades as their primary source of information. But teachers know that report card grades also reflect effort, progress, and participation in class, not just academic mastery.

It's not surprising that parents base their sense of their child's performance on report cards. Report cards are the one piece of information parents reliably receive—and those report cards generally tell them their child is doing fine. Parents rate grades on their child's report card as the most important way to assess how their child is achieving. African-American parents, in particular, prioritize report card grades over other sources of information.

More than 6 in 10 parents report that their child receives mostly A's and B's on their report card, with 84% of parents assuming this indicates their child is doing the work expected of them at their current grade.

"For most parents, if your kids don't get D's and F's, you assume they are doing well," said a New Hampshire parent. "Until you get that notice, you assume they are doing OK."

Yet a recent study by TNTP found that while nearly two-thirds of students across five school systems earned A's and B's, far fewer met grade-level expectations on state tests. On the whole, students who were earning B's in math and English language arts had less than a 35% chance of having met the grade-level bar on state exams.

In focus groups, many parents said they also rely on talking with their child, and on their child's mood and body language, as indications of how well their child is achieving academically. This is particularly true for Hispanic parents. But children may give parents only part of the story about how things are going in school, based on Learning Heroes' interviews with upper elementary and middle school children. "I don't really open up to my mom as much as I feel I should," said a Pittsburgh middle school student. "I pretty much only tell her good things that happen, since it's just me and her."

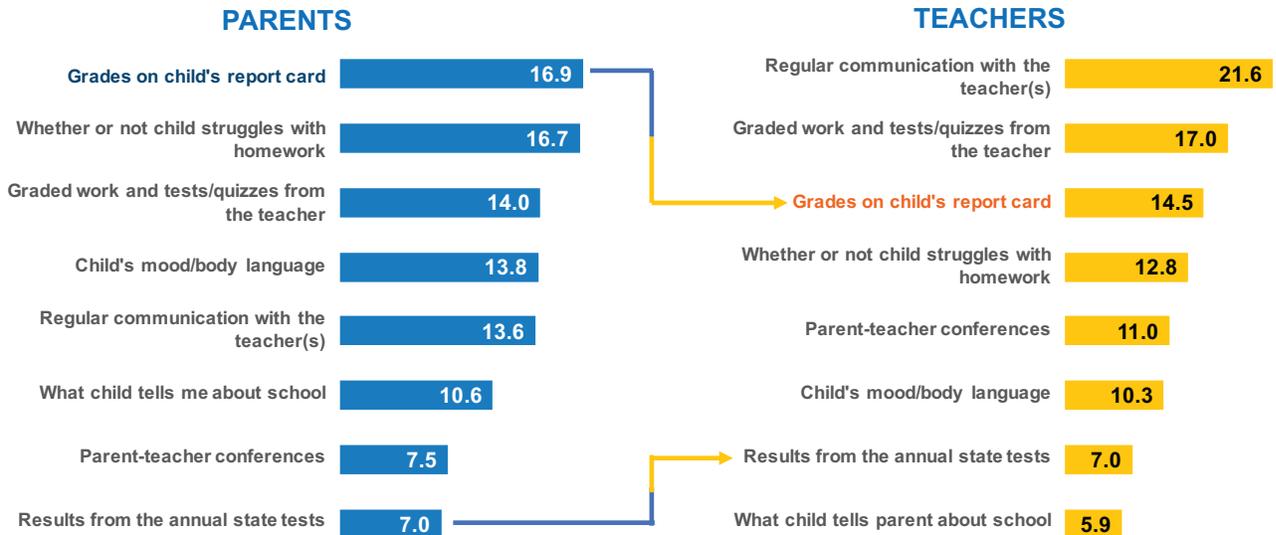
"They always ask me how I'm doing in school, and I lie to them," said an elementary school student in Texas. "I tell them it's going good when it's really bad."

In contrast to parents, teachers rate report cards third in importance for understanding how students are achieving, behind regular communication with them and graded work on classroom assignments or tests and quizzes. Fewer than half of teachers agree<sup>4</sup> that report cards are the best way to know how students are achieving. That's in part because two-thirds of teachers say grades also reflect progress, effort, and participation in class, in addition to mastery of academic concepts. Among teachers, 64% think "parents focus too much on report card grades alone."

Nearly 6 in 10 teachers (58%) agree "report cards and annual test scores together are the best way for a parent to understand how their child is doing academically."

<sup>4</sup> Selected a four or five on a five-point agreement scale.

## PARENTS, NOT TEACHERS, SEE REPORT CARDS AS MOST IMPORTANT FOR UNDERSTANDING ACHIEVEMENT



NOTE: Any score above 12.5 is an above-average score.

### Teachers see communicating with parents as critical, yet the public education system does not incentivize hard conversations between parents and teachers.

Nine in 10 teachers report that it's important<sup>5</sup> for them to make sure parents have a clear picture of how their child is achieving academically. A similar percentage says it's important to tell parents when their child is struggling. More than 8 in 10 teachers say they are expected to contact parents when their child is not meeting grade level standards, or is in jeopardy of or is receiving failing grades.

But teachers also report a number of barriers to providing parents with more information about their child's performance—particularly when the news is not good. When asked why some teachers might find it difficult to communicate negative information about students' academic performance to parents, 71% say "parents blame the teacher when their child isn't performing at the appropriate level," and 51% say "parents might not believe the teacher, especially if the information contrasts with what the parent sees at home." More than 1 in 5 say "parents could elevate the matter to the school principal, which could create problems for the teacher." And nearly 1 in 4 say "teachers are not given the proper support from school administrators to relay this type of information."

Fifty-three percent of teachers have no formal training or workshops on how to have difficult conversations with parents. Only 29% are very satisfied with their support in these situations.

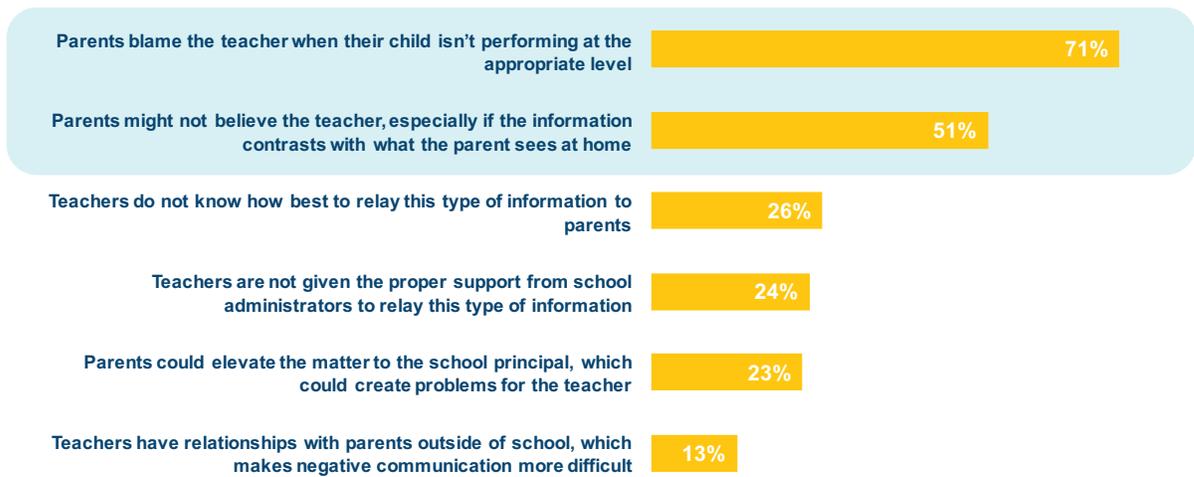
<sup>5</sup> Selected a four or five on a five-point agreement scale.

“There are many teachers who avoid those tough conversations. I know quite a few,” said a Cincinnati middle school teacher. “They were waiting for something good to happen ... But I say don’t wait. Tell them now and then call back when something good happens. It’s never too late to provide that training, but it should be timed better. We only get training after a teacher got bit in the butt on something—after she’s already reached out and it went wrong.”

Teachers report they are more likely to contact parents about behavioral problems (82%) than about academic problems, such as lack of progress over the grading period (79%), dropping more than one letter grade (73%), receiving low scores on standardized tests throughout the year (71%), or failing to meet grade-level standards on annual state tests (70%). Middle school teachers report being less likely to reach out to parents for any of these reasons than elementary school teachers.

## TEACHERS WORRY ABOUT BEING BLAMED BY PARENTS

### Why do some teachers find it difficult to talk to parents?



*Some teachers find it difficult to communicate with parents when students are not performing at the appropriate level. From your experience as a teacher, why do you think some teachers might find it difficult to communicate negative information about student academic performance to parents? Select all that apply.*

## Teachers provide insights into why it’s important to look at more than report cards.

While parents rely heavily on report cards to know how their child is performing academically, nearly half of teachers (48%) agree<sup>6</sup> that report card grades measure effort more than they measure achievement.

Teachers provide a variety of insights for why they place less emphasis on report cards than parents do. Though nearly 8 in 10 say achievement or mastery of concepts factors into report card grades for their students, nearly 7 in 10 also factor in progress over the grading period, effort put forward over the grading period, and participation or engagement in class.

<sup>6</sup> Selected a four or five on a five-point agreement scale.

“Teachers are all different. Sometimes their report card grade doesn’t really match their Istation<sup>7</sup> grade or scores,” said a principal in Texas. “They want their kids to do good and they give them the grades. I’ve had talks with teachers about not doing that.”

Many teachers report feeling pressure from administrators when it comes to report card grades: 56% say they are expected to let students redo work for additional credit, and 34% are expected to avoid giving too many low report card grades. Among those who feel pressure to avoid giving too many low grades, 47% say that expectation comes from their principal, 41% from their school district, and 32% from other administrators at their school or from parents.

## TEACHERS SAY GOOD GRADES = MASTERY + EFFORT + PROGRESS



Report cards are the best way to know how a student is achieving academically.

60% of parents agree  
47% of teachers agree



64% of teachers agree that parents focus too much on report card grades alone.



58% of teachers indicate report cards and annual test scores together are the best way for a parent to understand how their child is doing academically.

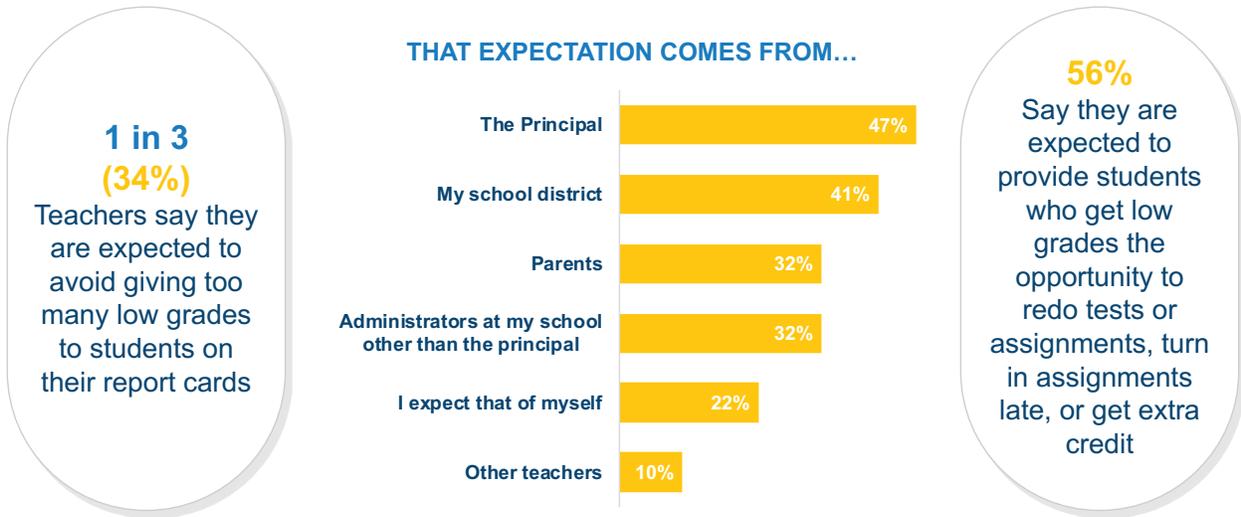


<sup>7</sup> Istation is a nationally normed, computer-adaptive measure of student growth.

“I think grades have been inflated for years. 100%,” said an elementary school teacher from New Hampshire. “I think most teachers would be lying if they didn’t say a B-, C+, C are the lowest kids.”

Said a middle school teacher in New Hampshire: “The parents, I think they just see [the grade] ... say, “Yay! They have a B!” and they don’t care about the other stuff. I cover the B and say [the state test results] aren’t good so what can I do to get her at least above this line?”

## SOME TEACHERS FEEL PRESSURE TO AVOID GIVING LOW GRADES



On the last screen, you indicated that you agreed with the following statement(s). From the list below, please indicate where that expectation comes from. Select all that apply.

### Connecting with Protectors:

This parent segment prioritizes report card grades. But there is an opportunity to make them aware of multiple measures of performance because they have extremely high hopes for their children. “Progress is discipline and sacrifice. That’s what I told my son,” said a parent from Texas. “The key is to study. My daughter wants a house with a pool—you need to study. My daughter is going to be a doctor, my son an engineer.” These parents already worry more than other parents about their child’s academics and happiness and are extremely involved in their child’s education. They think they have an accurate picture of performance, but they are most likely to believe the “disconnect” applies to them after getting more information. Compared to other parents, they are the youngest, skew Hispanic, and are more likely to have sons. They are open to new information.



## Neither parents nor teachers prioritize state tests.

Neither parents nor teachers put annual state tests, which can be a more objective picture of performance, on equal footing with report card grades. When asked to choose the most and least important items in assessing how well a child is doing in school, both parents and teachers rated results from the annual state tests at or near the bottom.

In focus groups and interviews, parents and teachers gave a number of reasons why state test results are currently devalued as a measure of student performance. They raised serious concerns about these tests generally, including: the high stakes that have been placed on such results over the past decade; the test-related stress and concerns that all children do not test well; the time delay between when tests are given and when parents and teachers see results; concerns that the tests do not align with what's being taught in the classroom and capture only a moment in time; and, for some parents, a lack of interest in comparing their child's performance to that of students in other districts or states who may have had different advantages. Some parents described teachers themselves as discounting or de-emphasizing state test results.

"Some kids are horrible test takers," said a Massachusetts parent.

"The state test has changed so much over the last 10 years, to me it's almost like an arbitrary grade," said a Cincinnati parent.

"We don't get the scores until a week into school [the next year]. It's not timely," said an elementary school parent in New Hampshire.

Still, a majority of parents (53%) and teachers (53%) agree that the results from annual state tests indicate where students have done well and where they may need some additional help. Forty-six percent of teachers agree that state test results help them to tailor instruction for their students.

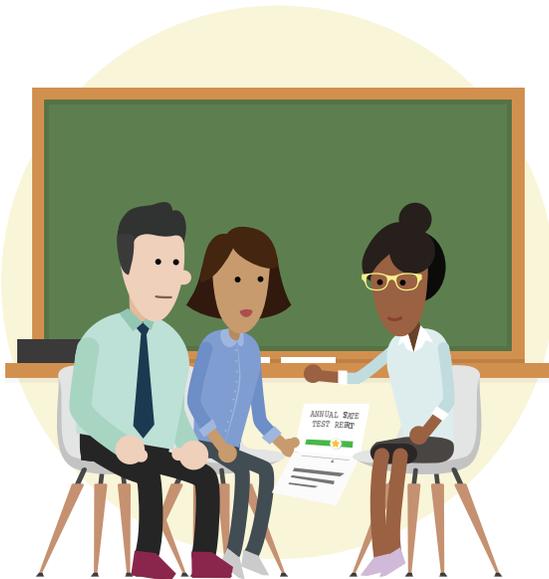
Still, some parents and many teachers in focus groups and interviews described the value of understanding state test results in combination with other data. "MCAS [the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System] will tell me where my kids fall compared to everyone else," said an elementary school parent in Massachusetts. "Sometimes I don't know if they should be getting a tutor or if they are average. I look at teacher's feedback and the test. I look at that as proof."

In focus groups, parents were more likely to see value in state tests if teachers mentioned them during parent-teacher conferences, or if parents had seen teachers use the results to identify a potential issue with their child. "I know when I have parent-teacher conferences, they go over copies of the test and where they score the highest and the lowest," said a parent from Cincinnati.

A mother from Cincinnati said, "When the teacher told me [my daughter] wasn't reading like she should, then we were on it. It was nice to have someone on it. The teacher noticed it from the state test scores, but I don't get them as soon. She reached out about her reading comprehension before I even saw them."

## A-OKs already value multiple measures of performance:

These parents describe having confident, self-motivated kids. They report their child is an achiever who does well academically and performs above average on state tests. These parents worry less about their child's academics and happiness than other parents and so do not intervene. "With my son, it's the teacher and him communicating and I'm off alone," said one Massachusetts parent. "He seems to be doing great." These parents tended to have a good experience in school themselves. They are confident they have a clear picture, based on prioritizing report card grades and tests, but they are open to more information. They tend to skew slightly older and more educated, are more likely to have daughters, and are slightly more likely to be Asian than other segments.



# The Disconnect is Solvable — A Call to Action



**Providing parents with a few, already available pieces of information in one place in a clear, decipherable format leads parents to reconsider their views about student performance.**

As part of Learning Heroes 2018 Parent Research, we presented parents with statements and scenarios that combined a few key pieces of information about student performance in one place.

## A LITTLE INFORMATION GOES A LONG WAY IN MOVING THE NEEDLE



### % THINK THEIR CHILD IS AT OR ABOVE GRADE LEVEL IN MATH WHEN TOLD...

- Child receives a B in math
- Doesn't meet expectations on state test



- Child receives a B in math
- Doesn't meet expectations on state test
- Child's school received an overall performance rating of C

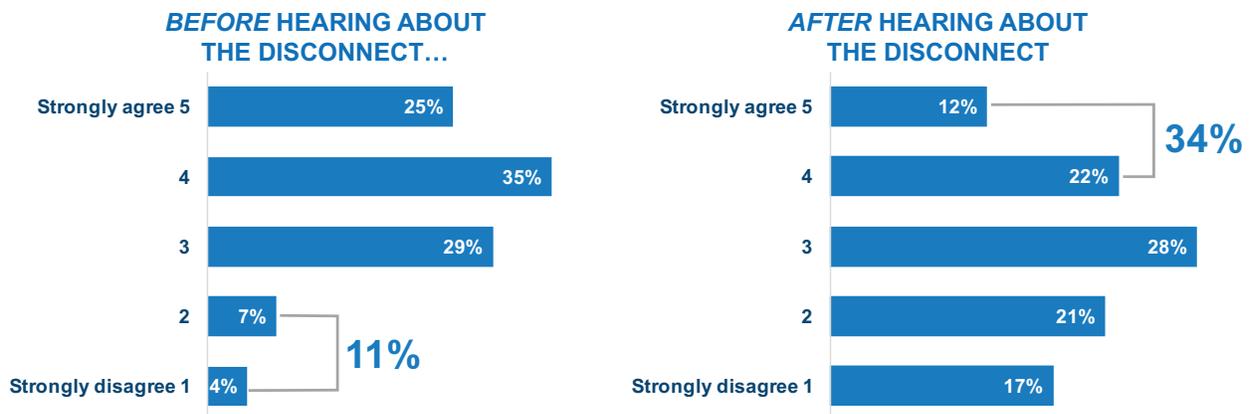


For example, parents in the survey read the following text: “A 2017 national parent survey found that 9 in 10 parents of Kindergarten-8<sup>th</sup> graders believe their child performs at or above grade level in math and reading. Yet, a nationally representative assessment of American students shows only about one-third of students perform at grade level. And, only 39% of teachers say their students start the school year prepared for grade level work.”

Half of parents then read one of two statements: “These results mean that most parents think that their children are performing at a level higher in the classroom than they likely are,” or “These results mean that most parents don’t know how their children are actually performing in school.”

After reading this passage, the percent of parents who say they feel extremely or very confident that they have a clear understanding of how well their child is achieving dropped from 82% to 65%. Their confidence in report cards also shifted, with 34% now agreeing that “report card grades are not a good way to tell if students are performing at grade level,” and 39% agreeing that “teachers, especially those in elementary school, do not want to give students bad grades on their report cards.”

## WITH MORE INFORMATION, PARENTS’ FAITH IN REPORT CARDS DROPS



Report cards **are the best way** to know how my child is achieving academically

Report card grades **are not a good way** to tell if students are performing at grade level

Even so, parents are more likely to see how the situation described could apply to parents in low-performing schools (54%) or to “other parents of children at my child’s school” (53%) than to “me and my child” (36%). Parents of color are most likely to see how the “disconnect” could apply to them (40% of African-American parents and 43% of Hispanic parents).

Among teachers, 59% say the “disconnect” **describes their own experience**; a perception that rises to 63% for teachers in Title I schools and 64% for middle school teachers.

In another scenario, parents were told to imagine their child received a B on his/her report card in math, and annual state test results indicated their child did not meet expectations in math. They also were told that their child's school received an overall school performance rating of C. After reviewing this information, the 88% of parents who initially rated their child as at or above grade level in math dipped to 52%. Hispanic parents and middle school parents' views wavered most: only 50% of Hispanic parents and 47% of middle school parents thought their child performed at or above grade level in math after being given this scenario.

This is information schools already have—but parents seldom see it presented clearly and understandably in one place. That's the challenge and the obligation to act.

## Getting to a more accurate picture.

As part of our 2018 research, both parents and teachers were presented with a Learning Heroes' designed From Puzzle to Plan: A Family Worksheet, a simple tool that puts a grade level indicator based on test scores side-by-side with feedback from the parent, teacher, and child. It also provides parents with questions they can ask their child's teacher in a parent-teacher conference and references to tailored, skills-based resources they can use to help their child at home. The Worksheet is designed so parents might question what they think they know to engage in a more productive conversation with teachers about their child's learning.



A recent survey of teachers by the Data Quality Campaign found that 85% think data gives them an objective place to start a conversation with parents; 75% want their school to do a better job of getting parents information about their student’s progress in school.

Nearly 7 in 10 parents rate the Family Worksheet extremely or very useful “for giving you a clear picture of how well your child is achieving academically.” Nearly 8 in 10 say they were extremely or very likely to work with their child and their child’s teacher to fill out the information. In particular, 85% of parents say “having all this information in one place” is extremely or very useful; 79% say “references to resources to support your child at home” are extremely or very useful; and 79% say “discussion questions for a conversation with your child’s teacher(s)” are extremely or very useful.

“I would feel like there was a partnership between me and the teacher,” said a Cincinnati parent, after viewing the Worksheet. “We’re both working on it. Now we have a plan. I love it. I want a copy of this. I like having a plan, and I think my son would like it.”

“It gives more info than just ‘got a B,’ ‘joy to have in class;’” said a middle school parent in Pittsburgh.

“I think it’s very comprehensive; it covers everything, like how to communicate with the teacher,” said a parent from Sacramento. “It’s very informative.”

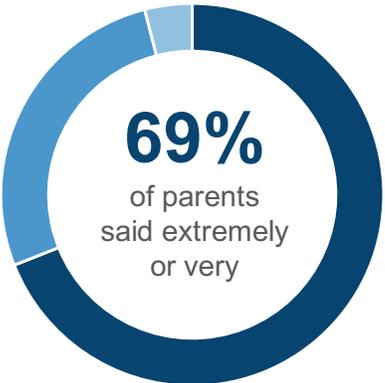
Parents say they would be most likely to use the information if it came from their child’s teacher.

Among teachers, 70% say they are extremely or very interested “in having a handout like this sent home to all of the parents of students in your school,” and 75% say it is extremely or very useful “for giving parents of your students a clear picture of how well their child is achieving academically.”

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## BOTH PARENTS AND TEACHERS FIND THE FAMILY WORKSHEET USEFUL

**PARENTS: USEFUL FOR GIVING YOU A CLEAR PICTURE**



■ Extremely/Very useful ■ Somewhat useful ■ Not useful

**TEACHERS: USEFUL FOR GIVING PARENTS OF YOUR STUDENTS A CLEAR PICTURE**



■ Extremely/Very useful ■ Somewhat useful ■ Not useful

Seventy-five percent of teachers say they'd be extremely or very likely to work with parents of their students to help fill out the information. Similar to parents, teachers place the most value on having all the information in one place, followed by the reference to resources, and the discussion questions for starting a parent-teacher conversation. Eighty-four percent of teachers agree<sup>8</sup> "completing this handout would show me that a parent is involved in their child's education."

Closing the disconnect between what parents believe about their child's performance and whether their child is actually meeting grade-level expectations is doable. Providing parents and teachers with the same set of clear, decipherable information can lead to more meaningful teacher-parent discussions, which will help parents to be more engaged and better prepared to support their child at home. It can provide a starting place for building deeper teacher-parent partnerships on behalf of all children.

**THIS WOULD BE SOMETHING I MAY GIVE OUT AT THE BEGINNING OF THE YEAR BEFORE OPEN HOUSE. SOMETIMES PARENTS DON'T KNOW THE QUESTIONS TO ASK IN CONFERENCES.**

**ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER,  
PITTSBURGH**



<sup>8</sup> Selected a four or five on a five-point agreement scale.

# Methodology



## 1

### Phase 1: Qualitative Research, April-July 2018

Focus groups of parents of public school students in grades 3-8, parent-child dyads, and in-person and virtual interviews with educators explored how parents, their children, and educators measure and monitor academic achievement and how they make sense of information suggesting that parents' views of their child's grade-level performance may not be accurate. All sessions also enabled participants to review and provide feedback on collateral designed to help parents obtain a more accurate picture of their child's academic achievement.

This phase included:

- Eight focus groups of parents of public school students in grades 3-8 in Houston, TX; Bedford, NH; Braintree, MA; and Pittsburgh, PA. These sessions included parents from mixed racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. One focus group was conducted in Spanish; one focus group was conducted among African-American parents only.
- Twenty-four dyads with a parent and their child in the above locations, including parents from mixed racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. Two dyads were conducted in Spanish; two were conducted among African-Americans only.
- Forty-four in-person and virtual interviews of educators from K-8 schools in the above locations (28 teachers in grades 3-8, eight counselors, and eight principals). These interviews included educators from urban, suburban, and rural schools and a mix of Title I and non-Title I schools.

## 2

### Phase 2: National, Online Surveys of Parents and Teachers

This phase included:

- An online survey of 1,705 parents with public-school children in grades 3-8, with oversamples of African-American parents (n=535), Hispanic parents (n=535), and charter school parents (n=108). The oversamples enabled data review among these audiences in addition to other subgroup analyses. The survey was fielded between August 6-24, 2018, in both English and Spanish.
- An online survey of 1,035 public-school teachers in grades 3-8. The survey was fielded between August 16-25, 2018, and included a mix of teachers from Title I and non-Title I schools.

Participants were recruited through Survey Sampling International (SSI), an online non-probability panel provider. SSI's Consumer Online Panel is currently composed of over 7 million adult participants (age 18+) across the U.S. The panel is built using multiple certified sources; respondents are authenticated and incentivized for participation. As with all online surveys, these surveys are non-probability samples. Quotas were set so that both surveys are representative by key demographics.

## 3

### Phase 3: Additional Qualitative Research with Parents and Teachers

This phase pressure-tested the survey findings and delved deeper into the dynamics of parent-teacher engagement. It also provided a final check of From Puzzle to Plan: A Family Worksheet, the collateral designed to help give parents a more accurate picture of their child's achievement. It included:

- Four in-person parent focus groups and eight virtual interviews among teachers between October and November 2018, among residents of Cincinnati, OH, and Sacramento, CA. One parent focus group was conducted in Spanish; one was among African-American parents only.

Throughout this process, Learning Heroes and Edge Research worked with partner organizations and expert advisors to design the focus group guides and the survey instrument and to review interim findings that helped shape the final report. For the purposes of this report, "parents" includes guardians, caregivers, or any other adult primarily responsible for a child.



# LEARNING HEROES



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