



Family-School Communication

A Study of the Burlington School District

November 2013

Acknowledgments

Dozens of people contributed to the production of this report.

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For more information about Youth Catalytics, go to www.youthcatalytics.org.

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Executive Summary

In May 2013, Partnership for Change, a grant-funded collaboration between the Burlington and Winooski (VT) public school districts, commissioned a study of family-school communication in the two communities. The study came at the end of a two-year public planning process expected to result in substantial changes in the way middle and high school students learn. The purpose of the current study was to assess the types and quality of communication between schools and parents/guardians in both districts, with an ultimate goal of improving communications and, by extension, educational outcomes for all students.

In Burlington, this study was based on personal interviews with 137 parents/guardians of children entering 7th through 12th grades. Interviewers conducted lengthy, semi-structured interviews with 51 parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English; with 22 parents/guardians whose students qualify for free/reduced-price lunch; and with 64 parents/guardians in neither category. Parents and guardians were asked about their personal experiences talking with the schools about their children; how useful they considered the schools' standard communication tools such as report cards and Jupiter Grades; and how familiar they were with Partnership for Change and innovations it supports. To augment the interviews, four mixed Burlington/Winooski focus groups were also conducted, including one each for Bhutanese and Somali families. Finally, multilingual liaisons were interviewed for their perspectives on the unique communication needs of newer American families.

Findings showed that most parents and guardians are relatively satisfied with how the schools communicate with them, both about their own children's academic progress and about general school news and events. Yet consensus emerged about several areas that families say should be improved. Parents and guardians say they want school staff to return calls and emails quickly (within one or two days); inform families without delay when children are struggling academically, socially or behaviorally; use Jupiter Grades consistently and update it regularly; and be in more frequent, regular communication with them about their children.

Families also pointed to more complex issues. For instance, they say they need more help with college planning; a clearer understanding of what role parents are expected to play in middle school; more information about services and supports available to struggling children; and more transparent policies on a range of issues, including bullying, class credits, and grading. Parents and guardians say they want to hear more about what is going well for their children, but they also want schools to be honest with them about whether their students can expect to qualify for college. This was particularly true for parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English, who are disconnected from many standard forms of communication and who sometimes have no help from multilingual liaisons. Regardless of language or economic status, interviewees ask that schools hold their children to high standards, and be direct with them about how they can support their children's achievement.

With regard to Partnership for Change, 64% of interviewees had heard of the collaboration and about half of these knew details about proposed changes coming to the district. Despite having many questions, the majority were excited about two upcoming innovations described to them—personalized learning plans and student learning in the community. Generally families liked the idea of students having a larger role in deciding how and what to learn. Concerns tended to be about how the changes would affect students' preparation for college, how schools would manage and sustain new programs, and whether the new approaches would be right for all students or just some.

Introduction

In May 2013, the Partnership for Change, a grant-funded collaboration between the Burlington and Winooski school districts, commissioned Youth Catalytics to conduct a study of family-school communication in the two districts. Improving how schools and families communicate is considered essential to the Partnership's long-term goal of fundamentally "remodeling" middle and high school education to better meet the demands of a fast-evolving, technologically driven society. Communication between schools and families is challenging everywhere, but those challenges are particularly complex in Burlington and Winooski, where large numbers of parents/guardians speak languages other than English, and families in general vary greatly in their ability to navigate the school system. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of district communication strategies and make practical recommendations on how to improve communication so that all parents and guardians are fully engaged in their children's education.

The key research questions were designed to:

- Identify the ways schools and families communicate with one another;
- Evaluate the effectiveness of that communication;
- Identify the factors that lead to positive and negative communication between schools and families; and
- Assess families' general awareness of the Partnership for Change and its activities.

Study Design

We used identical processes to gather large quantities of data from parents and guardians in both Winooski and Burlington. That data has been analyzed separately and presented as two different reports, one for Burlington and one for Winooski. This report focuses on the experiences of parents/guardians of middle- and high-school-aged students in the Burlington School District.

The study collected information in three different ways:

- Phone and personal interviews with 137 randomly selected parents and guardians
- Four focus groups attended by a total of 25 parents/guardians and two students¹
- Interviews with eight multilingual liaisons

Extended interviews with parents and guardians made up the bulk of this project and yielded most of the findings included in this report. Findings from the other smaller data collection activities have been incorporated, where appropriate, to support findings from the parent/guardian interviews. With the schools' help, we divided parents/guardians in each district into three subgroups: 1) parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English; 2) parents/guardians whose children are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch; and 3) parents/guardians in neither of these groups. Families were subdivided in this way because students from these groups tend to have different academic outcomes, and

¹ The focus groups were promoted widely throughout Burlington and Winooski. The composition of the groups varied, with three of the four focus groups including participants from both cities and one including participants only from Burlington. Two focus groups included students who accompanied their parents.

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Partnership for Change wants to understand how communication can be better tailored to the varying needs of families. In this study, we randomly selected 25% of the parents/guardians in each subgroup to interview. This sampling technique helps ensure that the number of parents interviewed from each group is proportional to the group’s actual size in the community.

Scheduling and conducting interviews was a multi-step process that lasted throughout the summer. All parents/guardians of incoming seventh to twelfth graders were informed about the study in mid-June through a written notice sent home with children, through Alert Now, and through district and school website postings. We began contacting parents on June 24 and continued scheduling and conducting interviews through August 29. All parents/guardians in our original sample lists were contacted twice by phone and at least once by email (where email addresses were available). Multilingual liaisons contacted and conducted phone or in-person interviews with parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English.

After we made appointments with all parents/guardians who agreed to be interviewed, we redrew samples and went through the process once more. As in any such large research project, some intended participants could not be reached, some did not return messages, and some declined to take part. A substantial number scheduled meetings but did not keep those appointments. In Burlington, we contacted or attempted to contact 325 parents/guardians for interviews. A breakdown of those attempts by subgroup sheds some light on the challenges involved in engaging different subgroups of parents (see Table 1, below).

In a perfectly representative study, 27% of all Burlington interviewees would have been from the free/reduced lunch-eligible subgroup; 26% would have been parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English; and 46% would have been “other” parents/guardians (those in neither of the first two categories). In the actual study, 16% of all interviewees were from the free/reduced lunch-eligible category; 37% were parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English; and 47% were from the “other” category. In other words, the study includes *more* parents/guardians who speak a language other than English than was required, and *fewer* primarily English-speaking

Non-Free/Reduced Lunch-Eligible ('Other')	
Non-working Phone #s in Sample	0
Individual Contacts Attempted	156
Individuals Who Declined	7
Appointments Made	71
Appointments Not Kept	7
Number Interviews Completed	64
Free/Reduced Lunch-Eligible	
Non-working Phone #s in Sample	11
Individual Contacts Attempted	104
Individuals Who Declined	14
Appointments Made	38
Appointments Not Kept	16
Number Interviews Completed	22
Primary Language Other than English	
Number of Interviews Assigned	54
Number Interviews Completed ²	51

² Multilingual liaisons from the two school districts were successful in interviewing most of the parents and guardians assigned to them. Altogether in both districts, between 15 and 20 parents/guardians could not be reached, were too busy to be interviewed, had left the school districts, or declined to be interviewed for some other reason. In these cases, substitute participants were selected.

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lower-income parents/guardians. Focus groups made up for this imbalance to some extent. It is also worth noting that there is considerable overlap between lower-income status and families whose primary language is other than English.

Demographics of Selected Parents and Guardians

In the end, we interviewed 137 parents/guardians of students entering grades 7-12 in September 2013.

Most interviewees were a biological parent, though eight were foster parents, guardians, stepparents, or grandparents. Together, those parents/guardians represented a total of 208 students. Fig. 1 shows the class distribution of children whose parents/guardians participated in interviews.

Figs. 2 and 3 show the racial/ethnic breakdown and primary languages of interviewees. Note that these statistics reflect only the parents/guardians with whom we conducted interviews, not those who participated in focus groups. Where focus group participants are quoted in the text of this report, we have noted it.

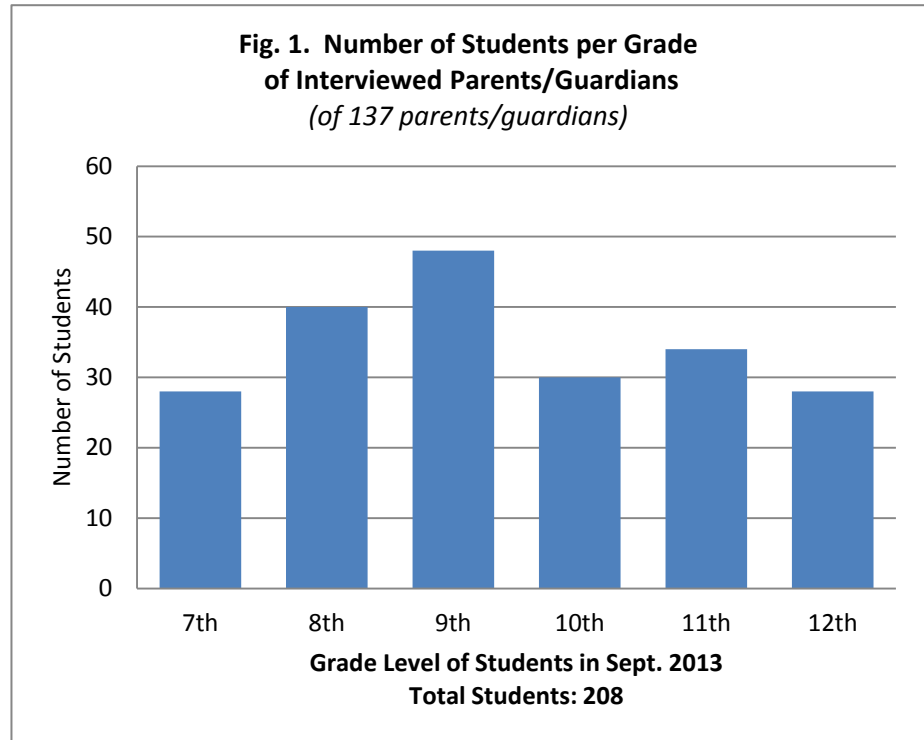
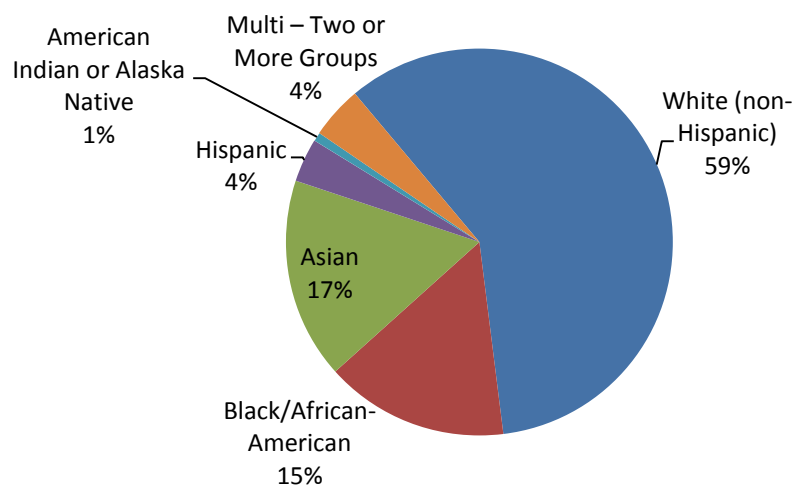
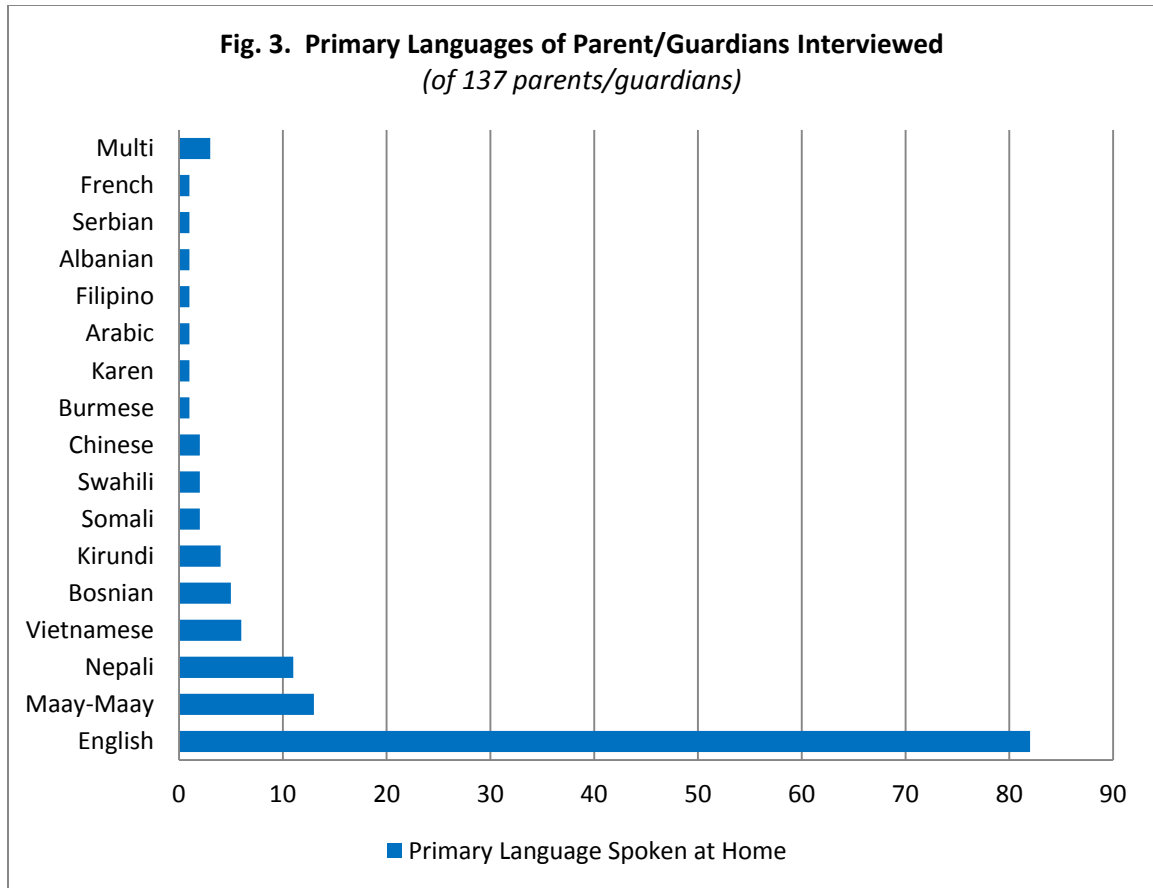


Fig. 2. Parents/Guardians Interviewed, by Race/Ethnicity
(of 137 parents/guardians)





The Interview Process

Interviews of parents/guardians whose primary language is English were all conducted by phone (with one exception). With parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English, 42 were conducted in person and 9 by phone. Overall, interviews were conducted in person in 43 cases and by phone in 94 cases. Most interviews took between 25 minutes and 45 minutes, but occasionally they stretched to an hour or longer. The interviewers—a team of eight staff from Youth Catalytics and 10 multilingual liaisons from the Burlington and Winooski school districts—asked each parent/guardian a total of 57 questions that covered three basic areas of inquiry:³

1. The experiences parents and guardians have had communicating with school personnel about their children;
2. How parents and guardians use several standard tools of communication, such as Jupiter Grades and report cards, and how they get general news about school events or initiatives; and
3. What parents/guardians currently know about Partnership for Change, and how they feel about personalized learning plans and learning in the community (two of the five focus areas being considered by the Partnership).

³ See the [interview in the Appendix](#).

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The interview was semi-structured in format, meaning that it included many open-ended questions that allowed parents and guardians to elaborate on their experiences, thoughts and feelings. The format also allowed interviewers to prompt parents and guardians for additional information when necessary. This interviewing technique is designed to yield a great deal of information, both qualitative (in the form of verbal comments) and quantitative (focusing on the numbers of parents/guardians who expressed certain opinions). Throughout this report, quantitative information is usually expressed in the form of charts, while qualitative information has been synthesized, summarized and put into context.

How to Read this Report

For clarity, we have created sections focusing on each of the three primary areas of inquiry. Section I, “Families’ Experiences Communicating with the Schools” addresses the quantity and quality of family-school communication, and includes comments from parents and guardians about the times communication has worked well and the times it hasn’t. Click on the highlighted links for more information and comments.

Section II, “Forms of Communication and Their Effectiveness,” includes one- and two-page summaries describing how parents/guardians use Jupiter Grades, report cards, parent-teacher conferences and other standard family-school communication tools. Each summary includes a chart, a breakdown of the major themes that emerged from interviews, a small representative sample of comments from parents and guardians, and a set of action steps that the school can take to improve that particular form of communication. At the bottom of each summary, links are provided to additional material in the Appendix that includes many more comments, plus extra recommendations from parents/guardians.

Section III focuses on Partnership for Change and two educational innovations currently being planned. These units are a bit longer, which seems appropriate given the many questions and comments interviewees wanted to share. Again, those interested in reading more can click on the links that are highlighted there.

Verbatim comments from parents and guardians appear throughout the report. Those comments appear as they were spoken, with any additional explanatory information in brackets. Occasionally comments have been paraphrased for efficiency. The difference between the two types of quotes will be apparent to the reader. Where comments were made by focus group participants, we have noted it.

In creating charts for these sections, we have sometimes considered the entire group of 137 interviewees as a whole. Other times we have broken down the interviewees into subgroups, either two (primary English-speakers and primary language other than English) or three (by language and then by free/reduced lunch status). Decisions about how to present these charts were based on whether differences between the various subgroups were large enough to warrant providing an extra level of detail. With a relatively small sample group of 137, it is important to see these statistics as providing a general indication of the experiences and opinions of parents and guardians, not as an ironclad predictor of the way all parents and guardians would answer the same questions.

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Readers should note that throughout this report, findings and recommendations are based on a number of factors. While we listened closely to the opinions that parents and guardians expressed, we also paid attention to *how* they expressed those opinions. Most parents and guardians had a good deal to say, but most also cared about one or two issues above all. This report goes beyond simple statistics to reflect those core concerns, presenting, as accurately as possible, a true picture of families' actual experiences and feelings.

Finally, throughout this report, we have used two different styles of bullet points in lists.

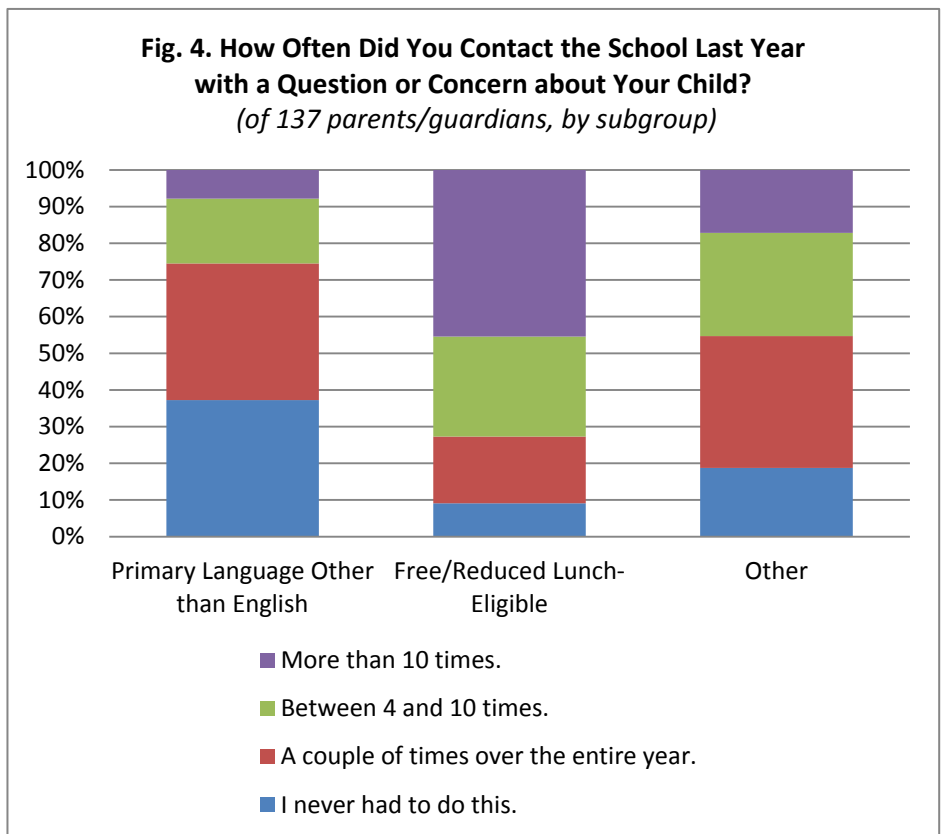
- Round bullet points, as seen here, indicate comments made by parents and guardians.
- Chevron bullet points, as seen here, appear under two headings. Under "Takeaways," they indicate important findings that the schools should act upon, based on general themes that emerged from the interviews and focus groups. Sometimes those "takeaways" suggest specific changes schools should make; other times, they simply note a general consensus among parents/guardians that a particular problem exists and should be resolved. Under "Other Recommendations from Parents and Guardians," the chevrons indicate suggestions or recommendations that were made only once or twice, but that nonetheless may be helpful to the schools.

Communicating with the School about Your Child

In this section we examine parents' and guardians' experiences talking with the schools about their children. We started by asking interviewees how often in the last year they had contacted anyone at the school with a question or concern about their child. Because many parents have more than one child in middle or high school, we asked them to focus on the child about whom they had the most school discussions last year. We went on to ask whom they usually contacted, how easy it was for them to get all the information they wanted, and whether they felt their concerns were understood by the people with whom they spoke. We wanted to know if they had ever asked the school to make adjustments for their child, such as providing extra help in a certain area or changing a class schedule. If so, we asked whether they were satisfied with the way the issue was resolved. Clear, efficient communication is not about whether every issue is resolved in a particular way, of course. The point here is not to assess whether families are always happy with the decisions that teachers, guidance counselors and other school staff make regarding their children, but to assess whether families felt heard and understood, and whether they got clear, complete answers from the school. The questions we put to parents and guardians were meant to uncover areas where schools seem to be doing well, and areas where they could probably improve.

How Often Did Parents and Guardians Contact the School?

In the 2012-13 school year, most parents and guardians contacted someone at the school at least once to ask a question or voice a concern about how a child of theirs was doing (academically, behaviorally, socially, or any other way). About one-third of parents/guardians contacted the school only once or twice over the whole year. One-quarter contacted the school between 4 and 10 times, and 18% contacted the school more than 10 times. Of all interviewees, parents and guardians whose primary language is other than English were least likely to initiate contact—only 7% contacted the school more than 10 times, compared to 24% of other parents/guardians. Parents and guardians whose children were eligible for free/reduced lunch were *most* likely to have contacted the school more than 10 times (Fig. 4).



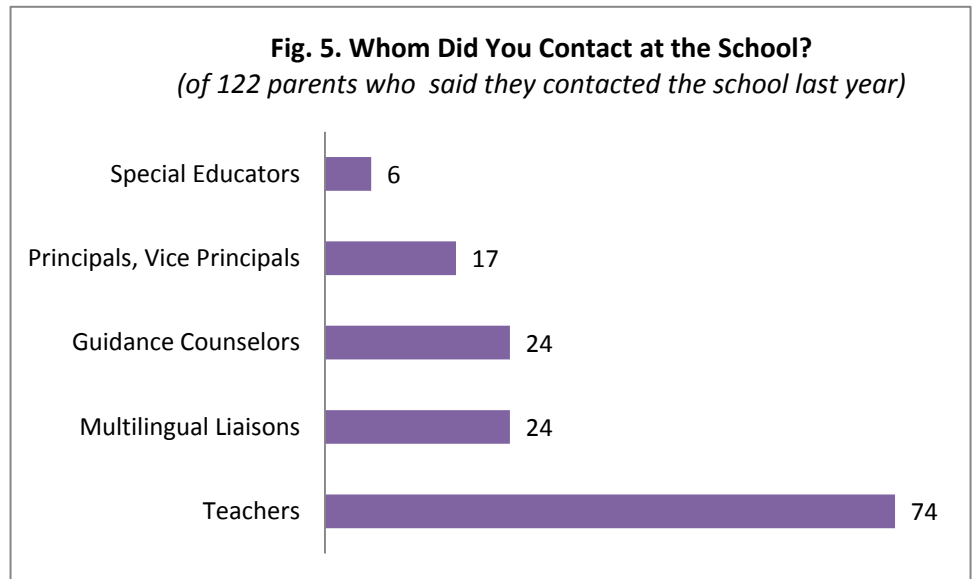
Who Parents and Guardians Contacted

As might be expected, parents and guardians contacted teachers more frequently than any other school personnel, often for quick check-ins about assignments due or work expectations (Fig. 5). Interviewees repeatedly stressed how much they value feedback from teachers; they regard them as the individuals who know their children best and are most likely to

have valuable insights into their strengths and challenges. When something has gone seriously wrong from a parent/guardian's perspective, it is usually because a teacher did not let them know their child was struggling, or didn't follow up with them after they voiced a concern. Over and over parents said they don't want to hear that their child is doing "fine" academically or socially when they see signs that tell them otherwise. They want "real" information—information they can use to help their children reach their full potential, whatever that may be. They want teachers' insights about their child's interests and challenges, work styles, and relationships with peers. One parent described talks with teachers as the gold standard of communication. "Any time I can have a human being talk to me about my child, I'm thrilled. And if it's somebody who actually understands them, it's such a gift."

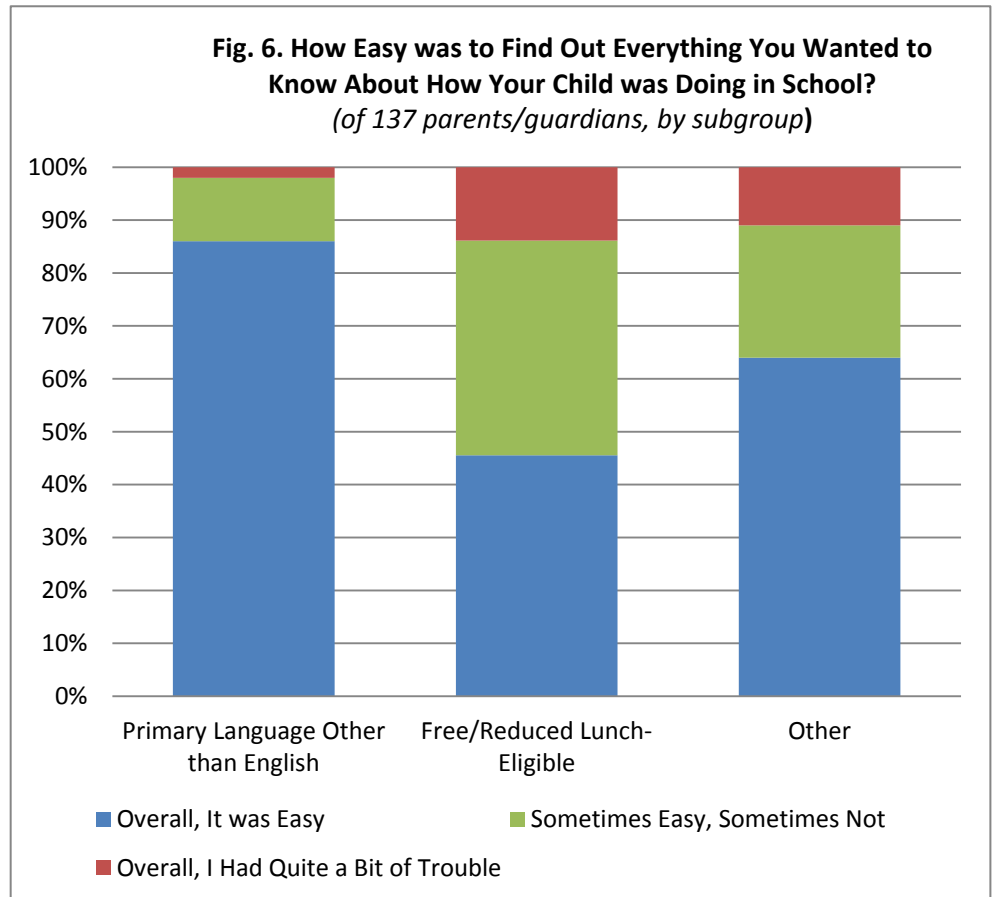
Guidance counselors are also extremely important to parents and guardians, particularly when their children have learning, social or behavioral issues that go beyond just one class. Many parents offered high praise to guidance counselors for crafting expert responses to their children's problems, while a few complained that the guidance department was where communication tended to bog down. Several parents said they didn't know who their children's guidance counselors were, or weren't sure what they did.

For families whose primary language is not English, multilingual liaisons are a vital link between school and home; when parents/guardians initiate contact with the school, it is usually through them. The role of the MLLs will be discussed many times throughout this report.



Getting Information about Your Child

Parents and guardians get information about their children from many sources: report cards, Jupiter Grades, parent-teacher conferences, standardized test results, and conversations with school staff conducted in person, by phone, or by email. Some of these communications are standard; every parent/guardian is updated at the same time and in the same way. Other communication is personal, taking place between families and teachers, guidance counselors or other staff in response to some issue that one or both thinks needs attention. We asked study participants how easy it was for them last year to find out everything they wanted to know about how their child was doing, given all the standard communication tools plus extra contacts that they or the school made. (If interviewees had more than one child going into grades 7-12, we asked them to focus on the child they communicated most with the school about last year.)



As seen in Fig. 6 above, most parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English reported it was easy for them to find out everything they wanted to know about their child's progress. That may be because they tend to have multilingual liaisons (or family members) who convey information back and forth to the school and interpret for them. But in our interviews with multilingual liaisons, the MLLs suggest another reason: many parents/guardians don't understand enough about the American school system to know when to be concerned and when to simply trust "the system." Many come from cultures where schools don't want or expect family input, so the collaborative nature of education in this country can be perplexing to them. Of primary English-speaking families, parents and guardians whose children qualify for free/reduced lunch report having *more* difficulty finding out everything they want to know than other parents. From interviews and focus groups, it appears that these families are somewhat less likely to use the internet tools that would allow them to track their children's progress in real time, and either need or prefer to have phone or in-person conversations.

Does the School Understand Your Concerns?

We asked parents and guardians whether they have generally felt that the school has understood their questions and concerns. Seventy-five percent of interviewees reported that they did usually feel understood (Fig. 7). Somewhat surprisingly, a breakdown by subgroups indicates that parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English report feeling understood *more often* than other parents, presumably because so much of their communication is conducted through multilingual liaisons. Parents/guardians whose children were eligible for free or reduced lunch were somewhat *less likely* to feel that their concerns were understood than higher-income parents.

We also asked parents and guardians whether, when they have contacted the school in the past, they have usually gotten answers that they understood, and that seemed complete. Overall, 73% said they usually have received such answers, while 20% said sometimes they did (Fig. 8). Again, parents and guardians

whose primary language is other than English were much *more* likely to say they got answers they understood than other parents and guardians. Of all interviewees, families who are free/reduced lunch-eligible were the least satisfied—44% of parents and guardians were dissatisfied to at least some extent, compared to 28% of other primarily English-speaking parents and guardians.

Fig. 7. When You Contact the School, Do You Feel the Person You Speak to Understands Your Questions and Concerns?
(of 137 parents/guardians)

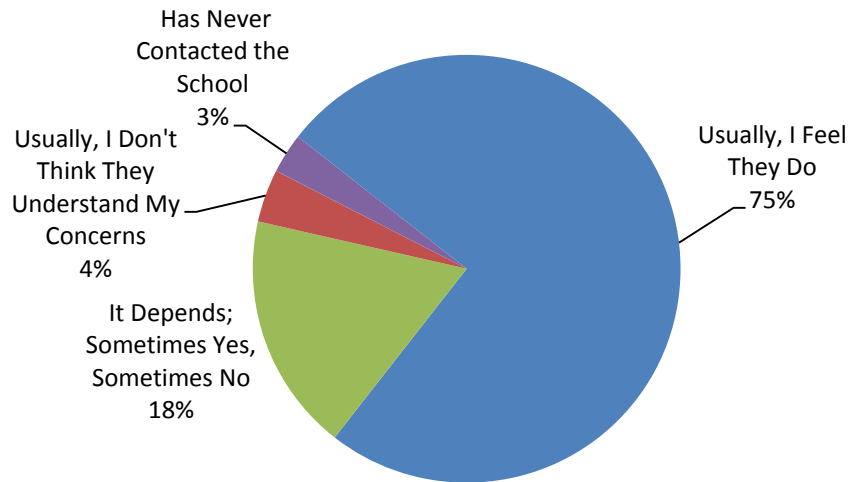
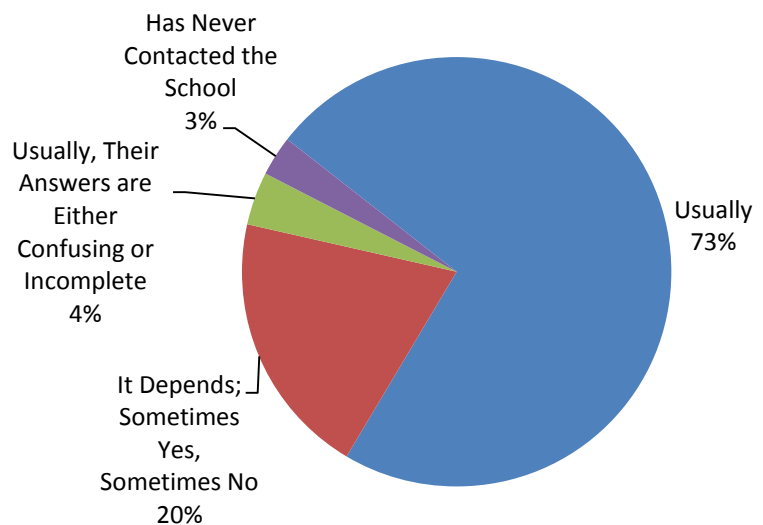
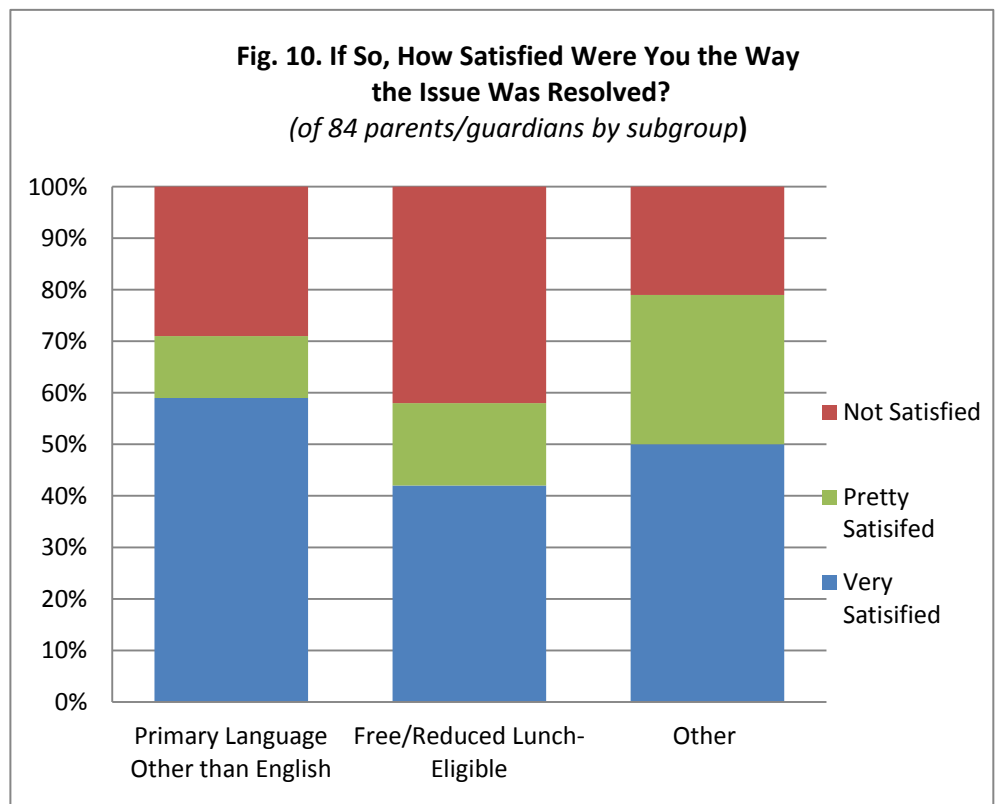
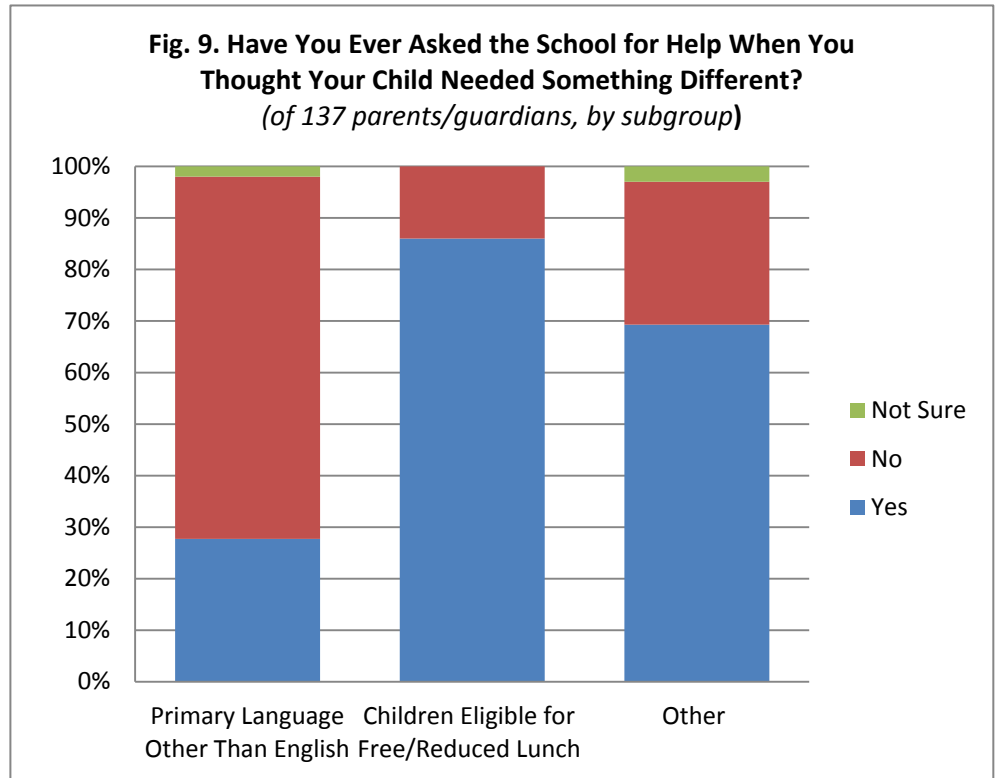


Fig. 8. When You Contact the School, Do Get an Answer that You Understand, and that Seems Complete?
(of 137 parents/guardians)



When Problems Come Up

Parents and guardians were asked if they had ever made a particular request of the school—that their child get extra help in a certain area, for instance, or receive additional support or consideration for any reason. Among parents and guardians who speak English as a primary language, most had made a request of the school for one reason or another, with free/reduced lunch-eligible families more likely than higher-income families to have asked for some sort of change or extra support. Remarkably, parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English were far less likely to have made a special request. Several factors might account for this difference. These parents/guardians are less familiar with the US education system, and thus may not know that parents are expected to play the role of advocate. Findings of this study suggest they know less about what their children are studying and whether they are truly on track, given their goals, than other parents do. The obvious language differences make communication difficult, and multilingual liaisons say that cultural differences are so great that even they are sometimes not sure how much any given parent/guardian understands.



Section I: Families' Experiences Communicating with the Schools

When parents and guardians have made a particular request of the school on behalf of their child, how often are they satisfied with the outcome? In a pattern that repeats itself often throughout this report, parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English report being very satisfied most often, while those with free/reduced lunch-eligible children report being very satisfied least often (Fig. 10).

Communication that Goes Well

A primary finding of this study is that *most* parents and guardians are satisfied with the way the school communicates with them, and *most* are happy with the schools' response to their concerns. In interviews and focus groups, parents and guardians made hundreds of comments about communication issues, describing times when things went right and times when they went wrong. The most common stories are those in which school staff responded quickly and appropriately to issues, sometimes even noticing problems before the families themselves did. In these stories, the teachers and guidance counselors are presented as education experts who know children well and can step in quickly when things are going awry. The comments below help highlight the factors that create these good communication experiences.

- Every time I've contacted the teachers, I've always been satisfied. When I call, I just state to them what I think the problem is and then let them offer a solution. They are really good; they know kids. They've always come up with a solution that I'm happy with.
- At the high school, I asked the supportive study counselor to help [my daughter] complete her homework and monitor that she's getting it done and turned in. The counselors are really helpful. That went well.
- We talked with the guidance department because we have some learning issues and we had a private assessment and gave that to the school. We asked for extra time on tests and reduced homework. They took the report and communicated with the teachers and came up with a good plan that I was very happy with.
- My child still has his baby speech. I asked for a speech pathologist to work with him. They were more than helpful.
- My older son went from home school into public high school this past year. He isn't that comfortable around groups, so his adjustment was rockyThe school was great from the very first day. They kept him in the loop ... and let us know what they could do to support him. They did more than a good enough job of integrating him into school.
- My daughter didn't want to do the healthy living class and wanted to stay in art. I wrote a letter asking, and the school said 'no,' and I think they were correct. My daughter had a good argument, but she left out some details, so the school was right.

A few points about these stories stand out, and they serve as an abbreviated list of what parents and guardians want in terms of communication with the school.

- Parents and guardians knew whom to contact.
- School staff responded quickly to requests for help.
- School staff listened to the family's concerns and ideas, and to the extent possible, incorporated them into the plan they ultimately put in place.

Section I: Families' Experiences Communicating with the Schools

- Though parents were involved, teachers, guidance counselors, and other school staff acted as the experts and took the lead in creating plans crafted for that particular child. If the plan didn't work, they proposed adjustments on their own without being prompted by parents/guardians to do so.
- School teams worked together well, with guidance counselors sharing information with teachers and vice versa, so solutions could be implemented quickly.
- Teachers and other school staff not only worked for a solution to the immediate issue, but helped empower students to advocate for themselves in the future.

Communication that Doesn't Go Well

While the majority of parents and guardians in this study were satisfied with the way the school communicates with them about their children, not all communication goes well. Several themes emerged in interviews that shed light on typical trouble spots. Sample comments under each theme are available in the [Appendix](#).

1. I contact somebody, but my calls and emails aren't returned. If they are, we decide on a course of action but then I never hear back about it. Issues just get dropped.

Teachers, guidance counselors and others either don't return calls or emails, or they don't follow up on discussions as they said they would. Issues go unresolved, or take weeks or months to resolve. This is the number one complaint of parents/guardians.

2. People at the school don't seem interested in talking to me. The atmosphere isn't very welcoming.

Some school personnel are responsive, but others aren't. Sometimes, particularly in middle school, parents and guardians feel that the whole system is trying to exclude them.

3. My child wasn't doing well academically, and no one at the school let me know. I eventually found out, but by then it was too late.

This is another major area of communication breakdown for parents and guardians. It is especially a complaint of parents/guardians who cannot use, or choose not to use, Jupiter Grades.

4. The school is dismissing our concerns about our child. Our child is the kind of student who gets overlooked.

Parents and guardians sometimes say they cannot get the school to act on their concerns. They are told that their children are doing fine, but they don't agree. They feel middle-of-the-road and high-achieving students don't get the same kind of attention as students with more obvious needs. Some families also wonder if schools lower the bar for struggling students, instead of holding them to the same standards as others. Families often feel like there just aren't enough resources to go around.

5. My English is very limited. I want to know everything that is happening with my child, but it's very difficult to get all the details. I don't really feel connected to what's going on in the school.

When parents/guardians speak a primary language other than English, communication between them and the school staff can be challenging for a number of reasons. Most parents/guardians who need multilingual liaisons have them, but not all do. But even when liaisons are involved, they

cannot completely explain everything individual parents/guardians would like to know about their children's progress, or about the way the American education system works.

6. There are some basic things I don't know. Nobody gave me the information.

Where to go, whom to talk to, how to get a child registered for an event, how to find out about driver's ed, community service, college planning—these critical bits of information either weren't communicated to parents and guardians, or were communicated in a way that wasn't effective. Now families have to dig for the information, and sometimes they just can't find it.

7. I have to initiate requests, even when teachers should have already noticed my child was having a problem. Then I have to be "a squeaky wheel" to make anything happen.

Parents and guardians repeatedly said they had to approach the school with problems, though the school staff themselves should have been the first to notice. Then they have to push the school to act on a suggestion, request or plan.

8. People at the school don't seem to coordinate among themselves, so I get different answers from different people and issues take a long time to resolve.

Many interviewees complained about balls that had been dropped—between teachers who should be setting similar standards for classwork, between guidance counselors and teachers, even between the middle school and the high school, where there doesn't seem to be an official "hand-off" of students that includes information about students' academic and social histories.

9. My child had some scheduling problems that took a long time to resolve, or never got resolved.

Parents and guardians say that they know the school is busy, but still, they want quick fixes to class schedule problems. They don't want their children to waste their time or miss the opportunity to take a class that is important to them just because of a scheduling glitch.

10. My child was targeted by bullies, and the school didn't do enough about it.

Bullying is especially worrisome to families, and several parents and guardians told stories about trying to resolve bullying incidents but feeling that staff either did not take their complaints very seriously, or treated the bullying as an ordinary dispute between students, where both sides were equally to blame. Any written school policies on bullying that may exist are not enough to explain why a particular case is handled the way it is. Parents and guardians want swift action and a thorough explanation of why a particular action was taken in their child's case.

What's Ideal for Parents and Guardians?

Finally, to learn a bit more about what parents and guardians really want from the school, we asked interviewees to consider an ideal world, one where the school was doing a perfect job of sharing information with them about their child. In such a world, what sort of issues concerning their child would parents/guardians want to hear about? Who at the school would contact them, and how would these contacts be made?

Section I: Families' Experiences Communicating with the Schools

Answers to these questions were remarkably consistent. Most parents and guardians said they want to hear from their child's teacher if the issue is academic; from a guidance counselor if the issue is social; and perhaps from a guidance counselor or vice principal if the issue is behavioral. They were also clear about the types of situations they want to hear about: a child's slipping grades, change in attitude or motivation, trouble with peers, or anything at all that is interfering with his or her academic progress. They want to know how they as parents/guardians can be part of a teacher's or guidance counselor's larger strategy for helping a struggling child. They want to be notified right away if an agreed-upon strategy doesn't seem to be working, so something else can be put in place. Finally, they want to hear when something goes well for their child, not just when there is a problem. A few quotes will stand in for many:

Sample Comments

- The most valuable communication between school and home is between teachers and parents, so the teacher would email or call me, for example, when the teacher wants me to support my son's learning in a different way at home, like asking me to help my son follow through with school work. It's also nice when teachers contact parents when something great happens, but that's less common. So in a perfect scenario, it would be great to hear from a teacher when something good happens. Mostly, it's [just] nice to hear about an issue before it becomes seriously wrong, so that's also ideal.
- The multilingual liaison would contact me when there's behavior issues, being disrespectful and not following directions.
- First I would want a teacher to contact me, and then if the issue went beyond that, the guidance counselor. If it were a discipline issue, the principal. I would want to hear about academic issues or discipline issues. And I'd want to hear good things, praise, success cards. Do they do that? We had one teacher who sent a 'success card.' It was nice.

Parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English expressed the same concerns about academics and behavior as other parents, but they also mentioned some things that other parents did not. For instance, several said they wanted to be informed if their children missed school or were late to school, or if they were potentially being led astray by their peers. One parent/guardian said, "Sometimes they teach each other about drugs," and said he wanted teachers to find out what students were talking about if two or three seemed to be spending a lot of time together. Many of these parents/guardians were also more focused on discipline, saying in interviews and focus groups that they want schools to be less permissive and more authoritarian. Some parents/guardians said they wanted to be notified when there are field trips or other special events in which their children might be involved. Asking for special notification about events like field trips indicates just how one-dimensional communication with non-English-speaking parents and guardians can be. If their multilingual liaison hasn't told them, they may not know, and as a result, information that all parents take for granted, such as where their children are at any given moment, might simply be unavailable to them.

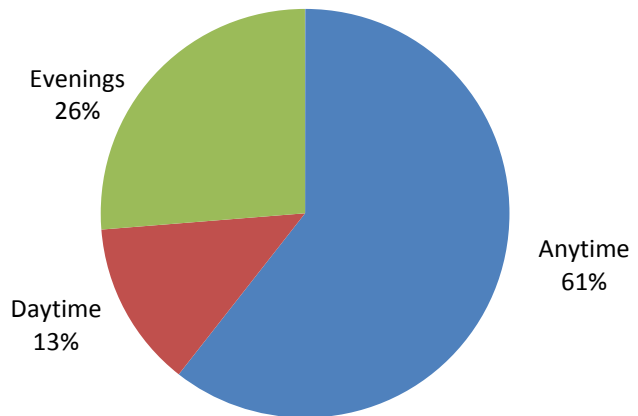
How Do Parents/Guardians Want to be Contacted?

How do parents and guardians want to be contacted? Some interviewees preferred the phone over email or vice versa; parents whose primary language is other than English strongly preferred a phone call that could lead to a personal meeting if the issue were serious. For other issues, they often mentioned the value of letters that come in the regular mail that can be translated for them. But generally speaking, the way school staff contacts them was relatively unimportant. What's important is that someone at the school, speaking in a language they can understand, contacts parents and guardians when issues with students are first noticed, not later on when they are harder to solve. Parents and guardians were nearly unanimous in saying they want to be contacted by phone for serious issues. Email, for those who have it, is convenient for issues that can wait a day or two.

When Can Parents/Guardians Talk?

The majority (61%) of all parents and guardians reported they could usually talk or respond to messages from the school anytime (Fig. 11). Among primary English-speaking families, this was by far the most common answer (72%). Despite differences in families' schedules, most could name at least one time of day where they could be available to the school.

Fig. 11. When is the Best Time for You to Talk or Respond to Messages from the School?
(of 137 parents/guardians)

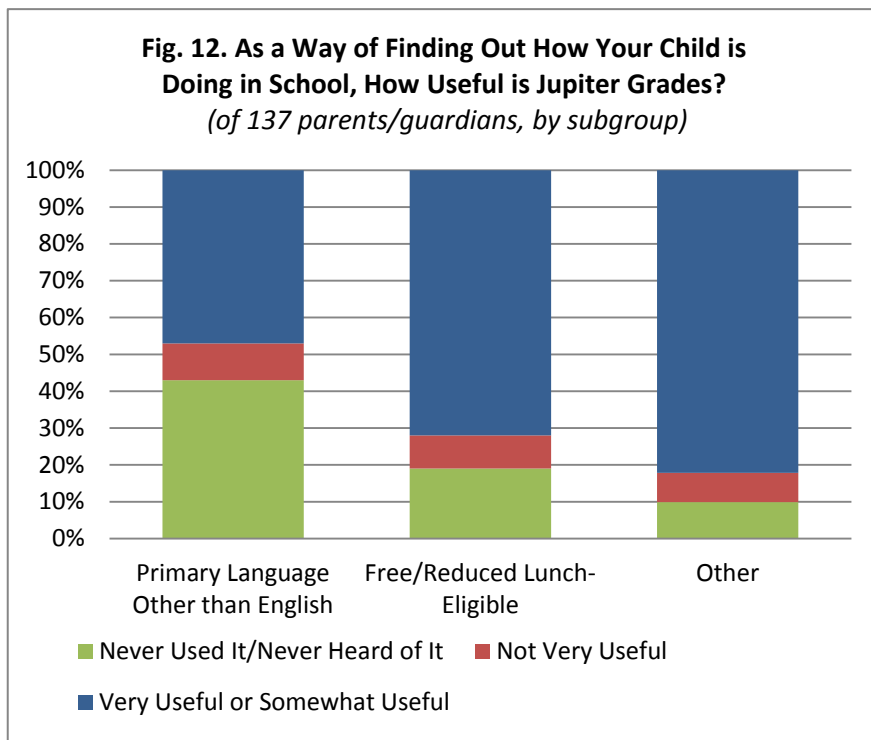


Sample Comments

- Keep trying until you reach me.
- I got some evening calls from the vice principal who would call me at home at 7 because neither of us had time during the day; huge kudos for that.
- We are two parents both working full time, so it's hard; morning and dinner are crazy busy.
- I have full respect and admiration for teachers, and I believe we should be at their beck and call.
- Urgent messages anytime, otherwise email, and I will contact them when I can. If there was some way for an urgent call to show up on my phone as an urgent call, it would help.
- I can talk first thing in the morning or in the evening. I work during the day and I can't take calls.

Jupiter Grades

Most parents and guardians use Jupiter Grades to learn about their children’s academic progress. Parents and guardians whose children are eligible for free/reduced lunch are a little less likely to use the portal—and find it valuable—than higher-income parents (Fig. 12). Parents and guardians whose primary language is other than English are far more likely to say they either don’t use the portal or have never heard of it. In their comments, interviewees said that Jupiter Grades is helpful as a way to monitor students’ progress in real time, but is not updated regularly enough or used consistently enough by teachers to make it reliable.



Sample Comments

- My kids are motivated by it, and it's a conduit to reach the teacher; if they're missing assignments I can see it. It's a tool for me to talk to my kids and them to talk to me.
- I think it's excellent and it should be mandatory for all schools and teachers. It's a great way for parents to keep their finger on the pulse. At the middle school level not everyone is participating and I think it's a huge injustice, especially during 6th grade.
- I know some parents overreact, see things missing, and ground kids.
- I don't know how to use the computer. Most or all information in Jupiter Grades is [in] English.

Takeaways

- Jupiter Grades should be regularly updated, and parents and guardians should be told when those updates will occur. They should also be told if particular teachers do *not* use the portal.
- Parents/guardians are confused about how and even whether the middle schools use Jupiter Grades. School policy on teachers’ use of this portal should be clearly communicated to parents.
- All parents/guardians need information directly from the school about how to access and use Jupiter Grades. This information should be delivered directly to parents, not be sent home through students.
- More than half of parents/guardians whose primary language is not English say they cannot use the portal effectively. One-on-one or small-group training for parents/guardians who want to use this technology would allow them to keep track of their children’s progress in real time.

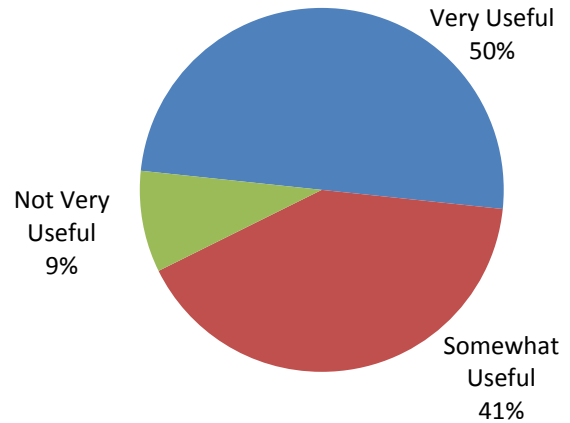
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Report Cards

Overall, half of Burlington parent/guardians in this study said they consider report cards “very useful” as a tool for finding out how their children are doing in school. Of all interviewees, parents and guardians whose primary language is other than English were the most enthusiastic about report cards. While all parents/guardians like the ritual and the finality of report cards, many already know what the cards will say because they follow their children’s progress on Jupiter Grades. The “news” is in the comments, which many interviewees said aren’t detailed or tailored enough to the individual student to

be worthwhile. Furthermore, the cards don’t explain to them why their child got a poor grade, or offer any insight into how to help children who are struggling. Parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English said that they liked having a record of their children’s progress on paper, but about 20% mentioned some aspect of report cards that was confusing to them—the letters and numbers, the actual meaning of certain grades, or the relative importance of the report cards themselves.

Fig. 13. As a Way of Finding Out How Your Child is Doing in School, How Useful are Report Cards? (of 137 parents/guardians)



Sample comments

- It’s nice to have something to put on the refrigerator, but we already know the grades. And the comments on the reports cards seem like a template.
- The best thing for me is the teacher comments, but the letter or number grading system doesn't work that well. It doesn't tell me a whole lot about what's going on.
- They give updates of [my child’s] school performance. It is also easy to read through. However, it is confusing somehow when I do not understand the meaning of the classes that my son takes, and also the way grades are designed confuses me.
- [There should be a] simple note on the report card saying that they got the credits that they need for that [term]. [Focus group participant]

Takeaways

- Parents far prefer personalized and detailed comments to generic comments.
- Parents don’t want to be surprised by grades or comments on a report card. They want to be informed about academic or behavioral problems when they first occur.
- Parents whose primary language is other than English need to be coached in how to understand report cards. Any help they get now, through multilingual liaisons or family members, isn’t enough.

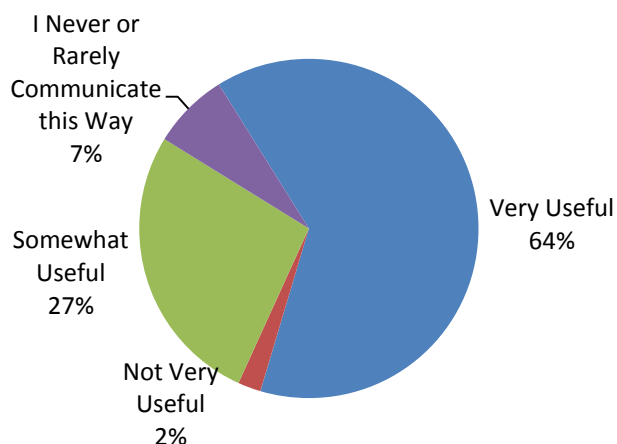
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Conversations with School Staff

The vast majority of parents and guardians find conversations with people at the school very useful or somewhat useful (Fig. 14).

There were no significant differences among subgroups, although people whose primary language is other than English seem to feel slightly more positive than others. Nearly 1 in 10 interviewees said that the quality of communication depends entirely on whom they speak with at the school, stressing that some staff will go the extra mile, while others will not. Several interviewees said they appreciate informal communication because it is direct, quick and provides immediate feedback.

Fig. 14. As a Way of Finding Out How Your Child is Doing in School, How Useful are Conversations with School Staff?
(of 137 parents/guardians)



Sample Comments

- When I receive a message from the school regarding my kids ... I don't like to just be notified that there was a problem. I would prefer to have a meeting with the teacher or counselor very soon to discuss the issues in detail and work with the school to solve the problem before it gets bigger.
- [My son's] teachers seem to welcome my communication, they seemed to appreciate it rather than be bugged by it. They seem to want to work together and I appreciate their openness and warmth.
- It flushes out what's actually going on; I know both my kids pretty well, but they have a completely different world at school, and talking to a person who sees them there gives me a different lens into what's going on that I don't get through Jupiter Grades and report cards.

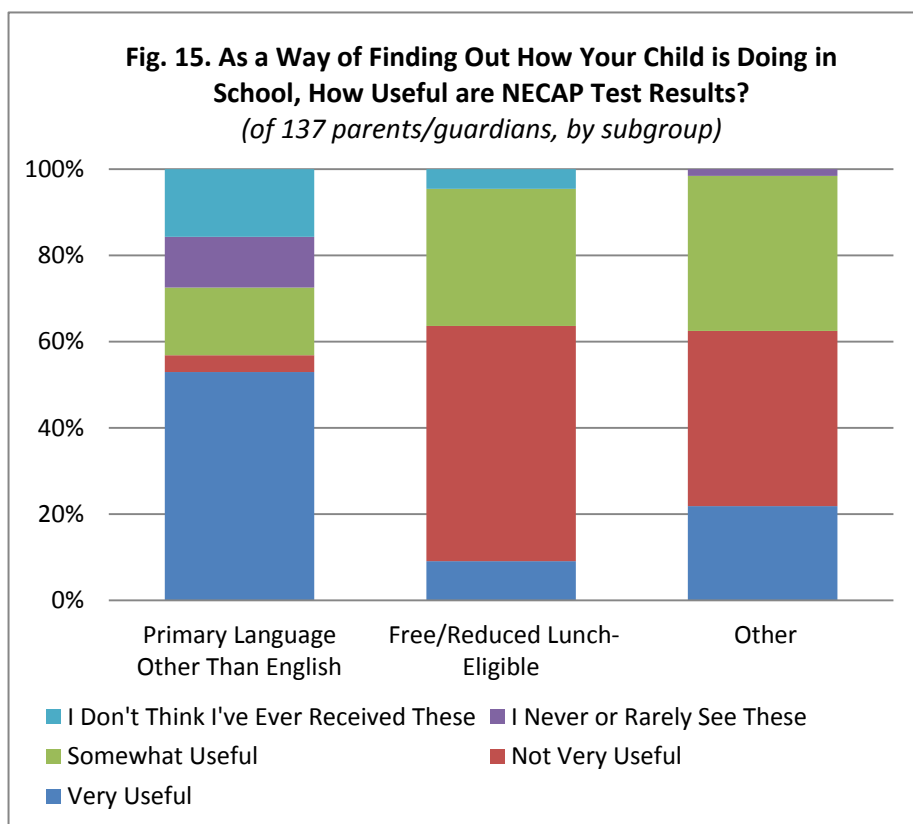
Takeaways

- Responsiveness is the most important factor to parents and guardians. When they have a question or concern, they want to communicate with the “right” person, on the same or the next day.
- Flexibility in how and when they can contact the school is appreciated by busy working parents and guardians. For some, it determines whether there can be any family involvement at all.
- Parents and guardians prefer to talk to someone who knows their child personally, views the student as an individual, and is directly involved in the situation. When they communicate directly with someone at the school, that person will follow through until there is resolution.
- Communication should not be reserved just for problem situations. Parents and guardians also want to hear what's going well. For kids who struggle, this fosters a more positive relationship with the school. For kids who excel, it tells parents/guardians that their students are getting the same attention as everyone else.

[Click for more information, comments and recommendations](#)

NECAP Test Results

Parents and guardians were mixed about the value of New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) standardized test results (Fig. 15). Those whose primary language is other than English were more likely to find NECAP useful than others—53% called them “very useful,” compared to only 19% of other families. On the other hand, almost a third of these parents/guardians weren’t sure they had ever received the results. The most commonly mentioned benefits were that results highlight student strengths and weaknesses and make broad comparisons possible. People whose primary language is other than English said the tests told them how well their children were learning English.



Sample Comments

- I'm sure they have a place, but they aren't helpful for my child.
- It seems so disconnected from the reality of what I expect him to be learning in the classroom—I don't see any connection. It's easy to teach to the test, but it doesn't mean he's getting a good education.
- This test is helping me recognize the strengths and weaknesses of my children.

Takeaways

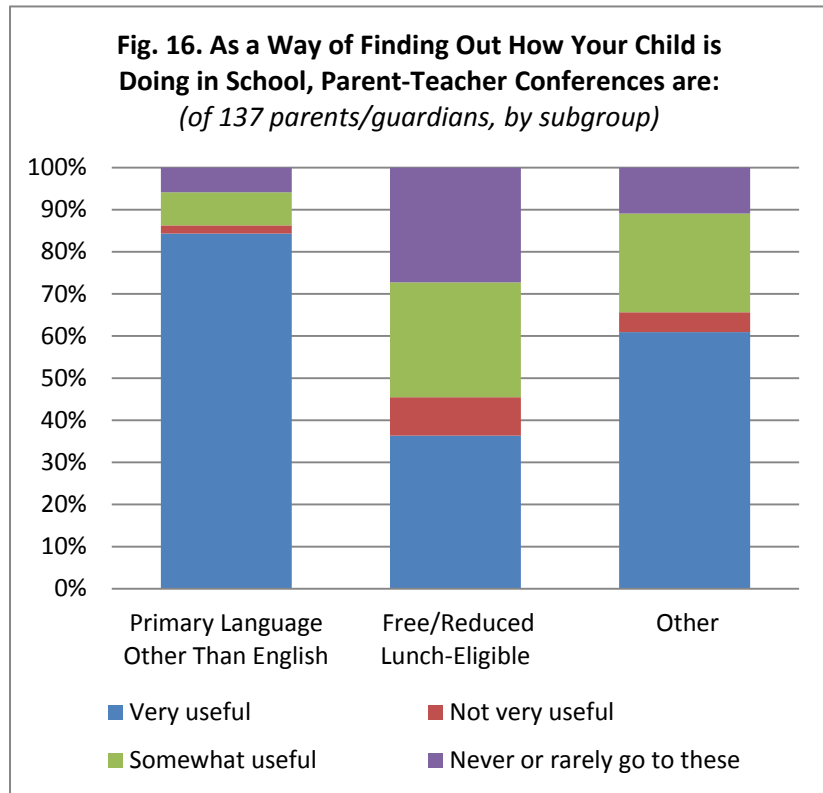
- Parents/guardians want more help understanding NECAP test results. They don't fully understand what the tests are measuring or how they connect to the school curricula.
- Parents and guardians are worried about the impact of standardized testing on students' emotional well-being and academic confidence. They would prefer that schools focus on reducing test-anxiety and reassuring students rather than making a big deal out of “test week.”
- Many people expressed concerns about the impact of low scores on the school as a whole. Parents/guardians would benefit from a better understanding of how various student populations are accommodated, as well as how performance affects policy and school funding decisions.

[Click for more information, comments and recommendations](#)

Parent-Teacher Conferences

Overall, 84% of parents and guardians said conferences are very or somewhat useful as a way of monitoring their children’s progress in school (Fig. 16). Families whose primary language is other than English were more likely to be satisfied, perhaps because conferences reduce language barriers (when multilingual liaisons participate). By contrast, families with free/reduced lunch-eligible children were the least satisfied and also the group least likely to attend. Comments indicated that some people like group meetings for their efficiency and convenience, while others

complain the meetings lack privacy and don’t give them enough time to have a meaningful discussion with teachers. Many interviewees said it is frustrating when teachers themselves are not in attendance. On the other hand, the majority of parents and guardians were enthusiastic about the chance to meet teachers face-to-face and placed a high value on building relationships with teachers.



Sample Comments

- I like it because it's the one time that, even if you don't have any problems, it's your time to hear how your child is doing. Otherwise, if there are no issues, you don't have a lot of contact.
- It is an opportunity to help teachers understand my child's different characteristics, and to see your child as an individual. When issues are raised during these meetings, there is a follow-up.
- There is a lack of transportation where I have to find someone to give me a ride. There are scheduling issues where the time that works for liaisons and for me differs.

Takeaways

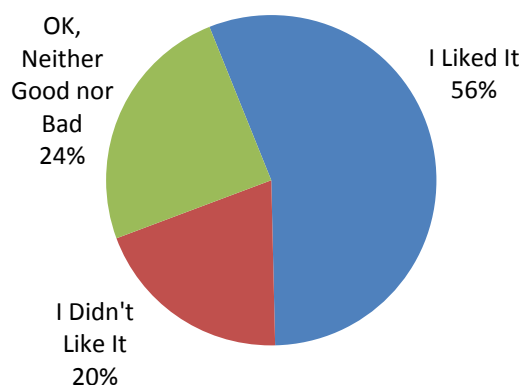
- If meetings are short or rushed, or the content is superficial, people feel let down. They want to get to know teachers and hear personally about their children.
- Several interviewees said they appreciate the conferences, but wish more were offered.
- Consistent participation by all teachers is critical to a positive experience for parents/guardians. Many parents/guardians view the conference as their one chance to learn all they want to know.

[Click for more information, comments and recommendations](#)

Parent-Teacher Conferences: Arena-style

About two-thirds of parents/guardians said they had attended arena-style conferences, where teachers are in the gym and families wait in line to see who they want (Fig. 17). Among subgroups, families with free/reduced lunch-eligible children were the least likely to have attended. Of all those who had attended, most (56%) said they liked the format; one-quarter were neutral and one in five did not like it. People who liked the arena-style conferences said that although they had to get used to the format, it was a reasonable system; they appreciated the convenience, and liked being able to choose who they wanted to see. Those who don't like the system compared it to "speed-dating" or said it was like a "cattle call"—the pace was too fast and furious for them. Parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English expressed excitement about being able to interact with other families, but also voiced concerns about the lack of privacy.

Fig. 17. Do You Like the Format of "Arena-style" Conferences?
(of 61 parents/guardians)



Sample Comments

- You wait and wait and wait for teachers. I don't know what the alternative is, but this is hard. I sometimes just leave. When you can get in front of them, they're useful.
- It worked well; it just moves along. And since you're not pinpointed to a specific meeting time, it's more flexible for the parents.
- I could decide who to meet. I liked that aspect, but it was very busy and confusing at the same time. Too many teachers busy meeting too many parents felt rushed and impersonal.

Takeaways

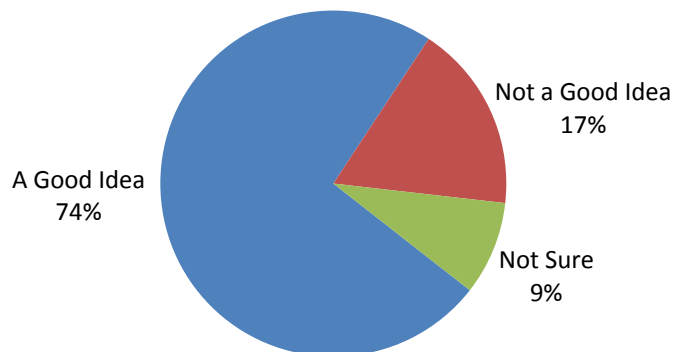
- Most people appreciate the flexibility of the arena-style conference—that they can drop in at their convenience and bounce from teacher to teacher. However, it seems like a subset of people simply can't tolerate the noise, crowds, waiting and unpredictability. Efforts to minimize the "controlled chaos" would help more people participate. There should be a private alternative, if requested.
- Although people generally agree it's an efficient system for a large high school like BHS, many still find the atmosphere noisy, impersonal, a bit rushed and not private enough.
- Parents and guardians expect to have access to all of their children's teachers during conference days. They want reassurance that attendance is mandatory for teachers and that teachers will stay until the conference is over.
- Parents/guardians feel they "waste time" standing in lines and some have difficulty standing. Giving parents/guardians something to do while they wait and offering seating would help.

[Click for more information, comments and recommendations](#)

Student Participation in Parent-Teacher Conferences

The majority of parents and guardians were in favor of including students in parent-teacher conferences (Fig. 18). Among those who liked the idea, most said that joining conferences encourages students to take an active role and be responsible for their education, provides an opportunity to directly observe student-teacher relationships, and fosters genuine collaboration. Many interviewees also said that including students in conferences feels more respectful of young people. Those who were not sure or disliked the idea were concerned that students might be intimidated or discouraged by teacher comments, or might feel outnumbered. Some interviewees feared that parents and teachers would feel unable to speak candidly if students were present.

Fig. 18. What Do You Think about the Idea of Having Students Themselves Participate in the Parent-Teacher Conference?
(of 137 parents/guardians)



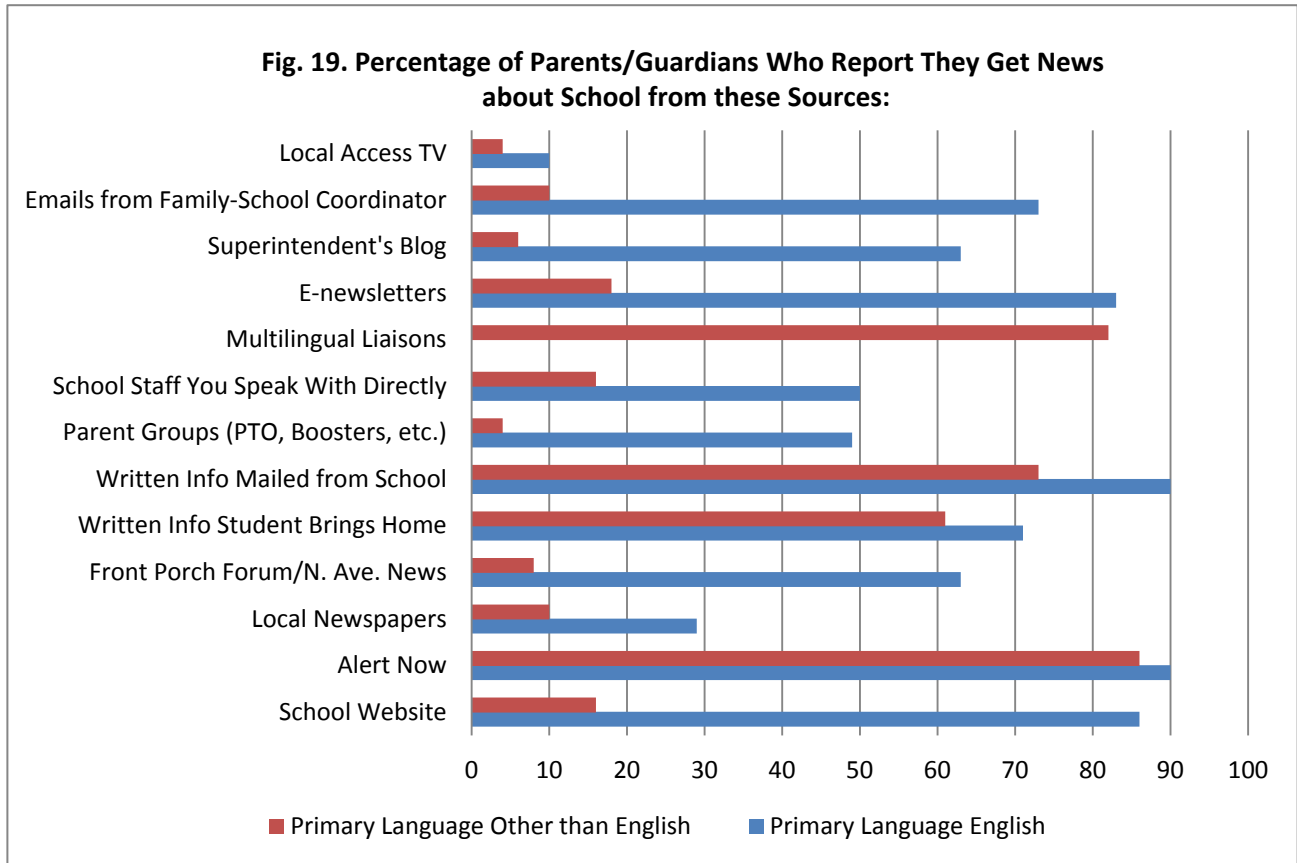
Sample Comments

- That's good because that way they can be right there to hear what's going on. We can all be there to come to an agreement. You can all be talking together about what you should do. It's a good thing to have all of us there so we aren't talking behind each others' backs.
- It's a great venue where parents can be parents with the teacher, and not have the input of the child. You can just be a parent and ask questions that you might not ask if the student was there.
- With our daughter being present, at least she could help us communicate with a teacher a bit. But her English is not that good either. Also on some subjects, we would like to talk to a teacher without her presence.

Takeaways

- Parents and guardians want the opportunity to speak with teachers privately. If students join conferences, people want a built-in time that is still just for the adults to talk.
- If students are involved, teachers should help children prepare and find meaningful ways for them to contribute, as well as ways to let them know their input is valued.
- There is concern about effects on students who are less confident or who struggle academically or socially. Parents and guardians need reassurance that sensitive topics will be handled with care.
- Parents and guardians whose primary language is other than English want teachers and parents to present a united front so that everyone, including the student, is on the same page. They liked the idea of students being present so that information comes directly from the teacher.

[Click for more information, comments and recommendations](#)



School News: Sources of Information and Who Uses Them

There are numerous ways of getting general news about things happening at school. Fig. 19, above, shows where the 137 parents in this study say they get general information about school. Interviewees are divided into two groups: parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English, and all other parents/guardians. Parents/guardians who do not speak English well rely heavily on calls and visits from multilingual liaisons and on written information from the school, rather than on any form of electronic communication or local media. Almost 90% of interviewees get information through Alert Now phone calls; in their comments, some complain that the calls come too frequently. Parents and guardians say that written material sent home from the school with their children doesn't necessarily reach them. Emails from the Family-School Coordinator were particularly popular among parents and guardians.

Sample Comments

- Alert Now is overused. It's supposed to be for emergencies, not harvest dinners. It's gotten to the point that you don't want to pick up the phone when you know it's the school.
- They don't send things home anymore; they expect to some degree that kids bring information to their parents on their own. But important information that you really want parents to know, it's got to be in print, even if you think it's wasting paper. That's how I would get it best, even though I do have a computer.

Section II: Getting General School News

- If through a multilingual liaison, we could learn what is going on in the school. Otherwise due to our language barrier, we felt that we were left out and [had] no connection with the school, for we could not understand any other sources mentioned above.
- The district Facebook page is quite nice. You hear about successes and pictures of what the students are doing.
- The billboard out front is a good reminder because I drive by there a lot.
- Because of my language barrier I don't have much connection with local community or get news from TV or newspaper. I pretty much depend on my daughter to help me understand some news on [the] school website or material they brought or school sent home.
- I don't have any internet right now.

Takeaways

- Parents and guardians of ELL students vary a great deal in their ability to understand news from or about the school. Many are completely reliant on multilingual liaisons and family members to translate for them. However, our interviews suggest that not every parent who needs an MLL actually has or uses one, so school staff should not assume that important information is getting through.
- While several parents said they appreciated Alert Now just as it is, a vocal minority called it a pet peeve, saying calls are made far too often and for relatively unimportant reasons. The district should reconsider the way it uses Alert Now, perhaps allowing parents/guardians to sign up for either minimal or expanded service.
- Sizable numbers of parents and guardians lack email. This is especially true for parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English. Therefore some parents and guardians miss information that could both benefit their children and help them as family members be part of the greater school community. Some provision needs to be made for these families. For instance, perhaps they could call in and listen to announcements and news in their own language.
- If you really want parents/guardians to know something, put it in print. Email isn't enough, even for the parents and guardians who have email.

[Click for more information, comments and recommendations](#)

Section II: The One Thing Parents and Guardians Would Change

One Thing Parents and Guardians Would Change about Family-School Communication

What one thing would parents and guardians change about the way the school communicates with them? We asked. About two dozen people, primarily parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English, said they would change nothing. But there were close to 100 substantive comments. We've arranged them by category; see them by clicking on the link below. Some comments follow up on topics covered elsewhere in this report, such as report cards or parent-teacher conferences; others address specific concerns of particular interviewees. A great many comments concern middle school, and almost invariably focused on how suddenly the flow of communication dwindles after elementary school. Parents/guardians always felt included and "in the loop" in elementary school. In middle school, they say it all changes, and some of them don't like it. A sample of comments is below; click the link at the bottom to see all comments.

Sample Comments

- Find a way to make it easier to get ongoing, accurate and timely updates. Keep the website up to date for all kinds of information about school schedules, closings, events, etc.
- I had a student graduate recently and I think they do a horrendous job of prepping kids to graduate. There are fewer kids from BHS getting into college now and that's moving in the wrong direction. If they had information just for those families whose kids were graduating, that would help. You can't assume that families can do this on their own.
- Be a little bit softer. Be a little more open-minded to a student's emotional state.
- I would like to know what is going in the school, what events are happening, so I can choose what to go to or not go to. I don't want to be going to every single thing, I'm a busy person. If I could get a monthly calendar and put it on the refrigerator, that would be hugely helpful.
- I would like there to be more opportunities to give feedback to the school. Even if the school more or less communicates, it does not provide many opportunities [for parents] to give your own feedback. There's no follow-up, which is frustrating.
- We hope that the school could provide a language interpreter at a parent meeting so that we would be able to learn about how our kid is doing in the school; to learn about the school and programs, and the subjects she is learning at the school so that we could be part of it and continue to provide parenting and guidance to our kid.
- Guidance needs to be putting themselves out there and what their role is in your child's education and furthering their education. [Focus group participant]
- When our kids do something wrong at school, they call us to take care of it. So it feels like they are punishing us, when they should punish our student right then and there. If something happens at the school, the school should do the discipline—we want to know, too, so we can reinforce this, but we don't want to be the only one to try and hold them accountable. [Bhutanese focus group participant]

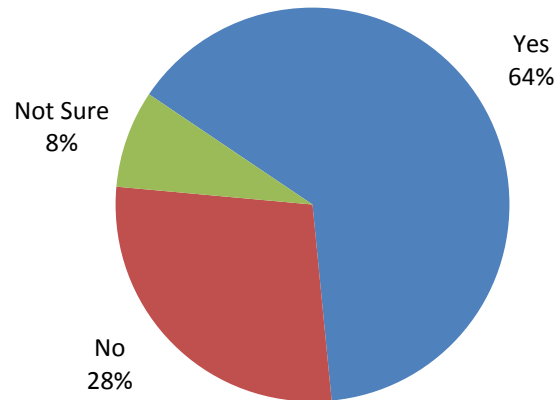
[Click to see all comments and takeaways](#)

The Partnership for Change

Overall, 64% of interviewees had heard of the Partnership for Change, the Burlington-Winooski educational collaborative (Fig. 20) whose work is funded by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation. Of parents and guardians whose primary language is other than English, only 26% had heard of it. Among interviewees who said they knew about Partnership for Change, only about half had any details.

Perhaps understandably, parents and guardians tended to connect the collaboration with something tangible in their children’s lives, such as the iPads that some students received last year, and the Year-End Studies (YES) program, both of which were in fact developed by the Partnership. Higher-income parents/guardians were more likely to mention finding out about Partnership for Change through emails, e-newsletters and websites than other families. Frequent sources of information for all families were friends and children.

Fig. 20. Have You Heard of the Partnership for Change (or the Nellie Mae Grant)?
(of 137 parents/guardians)



Comment Themes

About half the interviewees who reported they had heard of Partnership for Change knew something substantive about it; the rest said they had heard the words but had no details. Those parent and guardians had attended meetings, had friends or relatives involved in the planning process, or had students who were involved at school. Several interviewees felt the Partnership was developed primarily to address the educational needs of the English Language Learner students, or in general to create equity among groups of students.

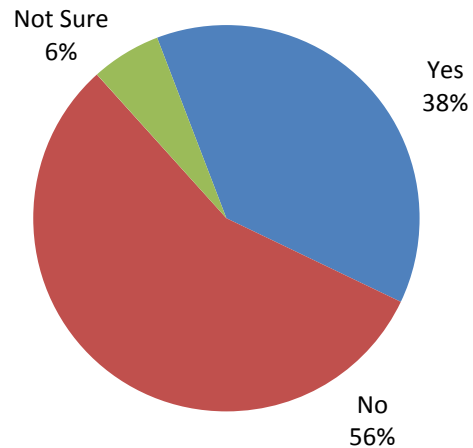
Sample Comments

- They're trying to make sure everyone feels it's a safe and integrated school.
- I've heard that we won a big grant for Burlington and Winooski School Districts and there are lots of subcommittees working on different areas. There's one on equity and diversity, one on curriculum improvement. I am on their email list for updates; it's a big initiative.
- It's for Burlington and Winooski and it's a grant for technology and thinking outside the box of trying to change what the standards will be for graduating. It's amazing.
- It's about bringing best practices to our district. It's a 3-5 year grant, right? We got it because of our unique population and the issues we have. There have been many meetings in the community to get input.

Student Learning in the Community

Fewer than half of parents and guardians in this study had heard of students learning in the community as it is being discussed locally by the school districts and Partnership for Change (Fig. 21). Among primary English-speaking parents and guardians, about half had heard of the concept. Only 25% of parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English had heard of it. All interviewees were told that learning in the community would be part of students' regular school day, would count toward graduation requirements and that students would get credit for it. They were told that internships would be one way to introduce community-learning to students.

Fig. 21. Have You Heard about the Idea of Students Learning in the Community?
(of 137 parents/guardians)



Most interviewees were enthusiastic about the idea of hands-on learning for their children, seeing it as a practical, real-world experience that might even help them decide what they wanted to do for a living. Others liked the idea of seeing young people engaged in the community; a few also commented the community itself could benefit from being more closely tied to the school. On the other hand, some students might struggle to find a good match, businesses may be ill-equipped to support teens, and managing placements for a large number of students would be an administrative challenge. Mostly, parents simply had lots of questions: How would such a complicated program be implemented with so many students? How much guidance would students have, and how would their work be monitored and evaluated? How would it work logistically? Would parents have to transport children? How does learning in the community mesh with college requirements and expectations? How much choice will students have about whether to participate or where they are placed? Parents and guardians weigh in below with their reactions to the idea of their children learning in the community through internships.

Sample Comments

- I think it would be fantastic because it's a big step to go from school to the working world. It would be a nice stepping stone for them and they also might have a good reference from the internship. They would also have mentors and role models that are gainfully employed.
- I think it makes school a lot more relevant. We retain what we're interested in and it's reality based. It's that sense of, 'Oh, I want to do this.' Like working construction, that requires a strong math foundation. So either you will find your place that doesn't rely on formal schooling or you will recognize the need and value for formal schooling... Knowing why they are having to do something grounds them in an important way.

Section III: Partnership for Change—Student Learning in the Community

- More communication with people and real-life experiences. My kid would realize how hard it is to make money.
- [I have a concern for] their safety. You would expose them to adults that haven't been screened by the schools, and you have to trust that they're going to be safe for four hours or eight hours of that day in an environment that we're not 100 percent sure about. I wouldn't want them to do it alone. I'd want there to be another student or multiple students. Safety is in groups. I think that would help parents allow their children to do this.
- It's a lot of work to create a successful internship experience, you need staff people there all the time, so the organization needs to take time away from everything they're doing to create that experience, and I doubt there's going to [be] a lot of organizations prepared to do that. It's fine for my kid to be licking stamps at King Street or the Y, but as a volunteer, not for an internship.
- This would be one more way to disrupt the school day and distract from the academic class time. Class time is getting more limited in the BSD. Are we throwing them out in the community and making it someone else's responsibility?
- It might not be appropriate for every student. If it is, where do they go? If it isn't, what do they do? To make it a mandatory thing would be problematic if it didn't include a mechanism for students where it doesn't really fit for them.
- Civic responsibility and jobs are different things, so I would want to make sure that both things are going on. 'I'm a high flyer in math and I got an internship at IBM, and am on my way to making a lot of money'—that has promise, but schools need to increase their commitment to civic responsibility and educating citizens of a democracy.
- I am afraid that my child would be overworked.

What Parents and Guardians Say They Need to Know

Since most interviewees knew relatively little about the idea, it's understandable that they want to know everything—the “who, what, when, where, why,” the “whole plan.” Their questions can be broken into four general categories: safety, the worksites, educational impacts on students; and the school's capacity to run the program well.

Sample Comments

- What are they doing? Who will they be with? I'd want to know from my kids why they want to do the internship, and I'd want to know from the teachers how it will affect the kids and their learning. I'm all for it, I think it would be a great thing to do.
- I would hope I could get help and guide him in what his options are. I would hope that he wouldn't get thrown into something inappropriate, that the options were diverse enough that he could choose something. It would be in the direction of his future. It would be meaningful, not like a youth program sort of thing where kids clean up the interstate.
- I would need to know more details before my child had this experience. Like have a workshop to make me sense the environment, for example.

Section III: Partnership for Change—Student Learning in the Community

- I want to know which schedule, what time he's going to be there, and what time finished. I'm afraid because he has bad friends. I don't want this to be after school, but during school.
- I'd need to see it proven out. I wouldn't want to experiment; I'd want to see results from another district, hear about their experiences, etc. I'm open, because we need to make changes for sure, but skeptical at the same time.
- How much interest would the community member have in the students? Would they be able to work well with younger kids? What kind of program would they be—would the children of color wind up in labor jobs?
- How they will get there and back? Who is supervising them? What is the academic correlation? Teachers are trained and have to have background checks, but when you put [students] out there at 12 or 13, how do they know who is safe if there is an issue? The school is constantly trying to make them grow up too fast.

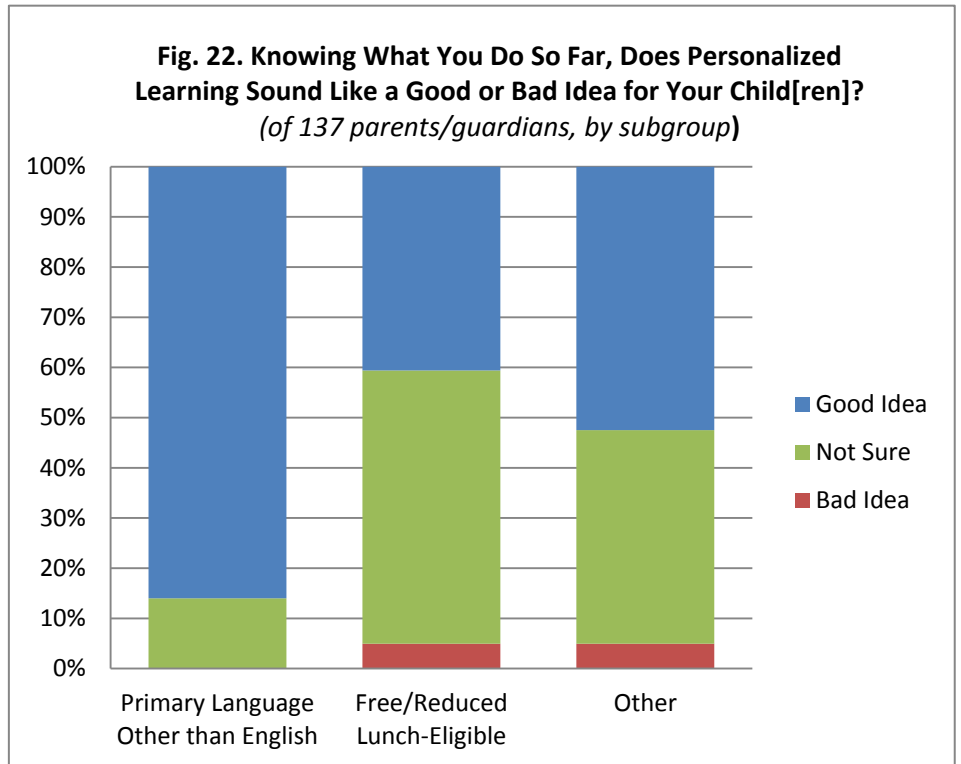
Takeaways

- Parents/guardians need all the details, delivered to them in a way that allows them to ask questions and get answers on the spot. This is particularly important for parents and guardians whose primary language is other than English, who are less likely to read newsletters, websites and other written materials from the school.
- Many interviewees, particularly those whose primary language is other than English, hope that learning opportunities in the community will help students decide what they want to do after school or college.
- Ensuring student safety off school grounds is a primary, almost universal concern. Parents and guardians need to see clear, written policies about how sites will be screened, whether there are background checks, and what standards businesses must meet to qualify as work sites.
- Parents and guardians worry about whether the school can really manage all the work that setting up learning opportunities in the community would take. Each student would need an advisor who troubleshoots issues at sites, monitors attendance, and guides them in handling interpersonal or skill-related challenges.
- Parents/guardians emphasized that they don't want their children wasting time with busywork; they will only buy into this concept if the work is meaningful.
- Parents/guardians wonder what classwork their children will be missing, and what implications missing that work might have.
- Many interviewees were concerned that learning in the community might not mesh well with college requirements. How would college-bound students know for sure that their high school transcripts would be accepted, and that they had met all academic requirements?

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Personalized Learning Plans

More than two-thirds of the parents/guardians we interviewed said they knew little or nothing about “personalized learning” as it is being discussed locally. All interviewees were read a short description of personalized learning and told that Vermont had recently passed a law requiring all schools to create some form of personalized learning for students. They were told that the central idea behind the law is that each student should have a role in deciding how he or she will learn the skills necessary to graduate. Parents and guardians were then asked whether the concept sounded like a good idea for their children.



As Fig. 22 shows, parents and guardians had mixed feelings about personalized learning. On one hand, they said that giving students the chance to create their own plans and pursue their personal interests seemed like a great idea—students would be more excited about school if they could take a more active role in choosing what and how they learn. On the other hand, making wise choices might require more maturity and self-knowledge than students have at this age. But mostly, parents/guardians had questions: How could such a fundamental change be implemented with so many students? How much guidance would students be given, and how would their work be monitored and evaluated? What role would parents play? How does personalized learning mesh with college requirements and expectations? Is our current educational system really in need of such large-scale change? Will students still get the basics they need?

Sample Comments

- When kids are the ones who have control, they're going to work harder. Of course there need to be guidelines for math and reading and writing, and those core skills shouldn't be completely lost. Kids need a baseline for learning the core education, but in a way that can be fun and exciting.
- It's one of those ideas that sounds good in theory, but I still think there's a benefit to all the students learning the same kinds of things. So having them all have different plans, it doesn't seem to me like they would all achieve the same kind of educational level. That worries me a little bit.

Section III: Partnership for Change—Personalized Learning Plans

- It would be empowering for the kid. But if they only chose easy things or tried to opt out of things they need to learn, that would be a problem. I would want to know more about how the plan would be implemented, what the kids have to do for it.
- How are we going to ensure that all criteria for credits and skills are going to be met? Will this result in satisfying what colleges are looking for in graduates?
- It's good to be reflective about your own path, what you want to be, to do, and how you're going to get there. This process could model for students how to become lifelong learners.
- I think kids being involved is a good thing—having a vested interest in their own education is good. But they need to explain to the kids how to go about it. I could see some kids just wanting to take an easy way out. It's a good idea, but these kids are young.
- I guess I'd love to see some background on the places it's been used and some examples of what the Burlington school system might be considering. I'd like to know how much it deviates from more traditional education; is it a complementary thing or are some students going to be fully independent from a more traditional school setting?
- If the kids have a great deal of say, it's not a good idea. It sounds condescending, but I don't think kids know what they want yet. They think they do, of course; they're very opinionated about it. If they were to fully design their programs, they'd find themselves in 10 years saying, 'Why didn't I pay more attention to math,' for instance?
- I don't really buy into the whole idea that traditional learning doesn't work anymore. My kids do go into the community a lot with their teacher, they have all kinds of things during their day that aren't sitting and learning in the traditional way. I'm lukewarm about the idea of revamping everything.
- I would want to know that my child is still learning all the important subjects, even if he is choosing his own plan.
- This idea is new to me. Please send—and translate—information.

Takeaways

- Parents/guardians need all the details, delivered to them in a way that allows them to ask questions and get answers on the spot. This is particularly important for parents and guardians whose primary language is other than English, because they are less likely to read newsletters, websites and other written materials from the school.
- Many parents/guardians worry that personalized learning plans would allow students to “take the easy way out” and avoid the basics like math and science.
- Parents and guardians worry about whether the school can really manage all the work this kind of individual planning would involve. Each student would need an advisor who follows him or her more closely than most students are followed right now. The advisor would have to know the student very well and be active in guiding and monitoring them over time. Is there enough staff?
- Plans have to be flexible so that students can self-correct as time goes by.
- Many parents/guardians were concerned that personalized plans might not mesh well with college requirements. How would college-bound students know for sure that their high school transcripts would be accepted, and that they had met all academic requirements?

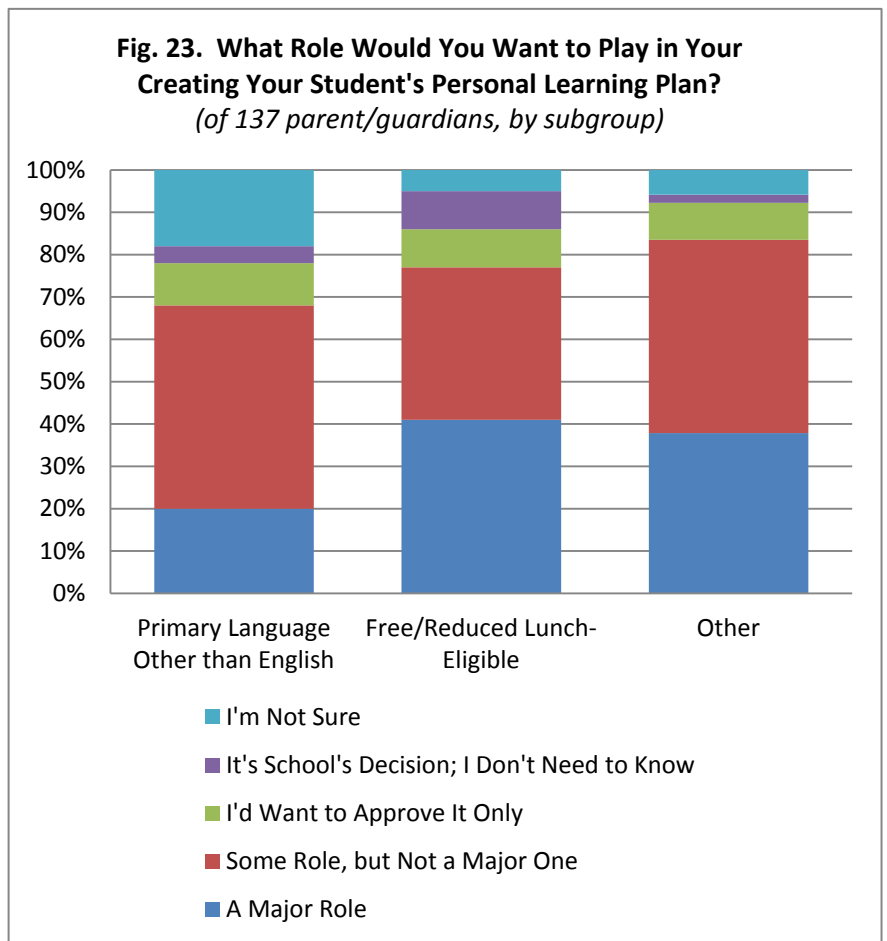
- Parents and guardians of ELL students were unclear on how personalized learning differs from what the district already does. They want to understand the practical differences for their children, including how personalized learning would affect their schedules and where they would be learning at any given time. Some were also concerned that the plan might make school too easy for their students.
- Parents and guardians would like to see examples of personalized learning in action elsewhere. How has it worked in practical terms? Have students actually learned more or learned better?
- Several interviewees said that the concept of personalized learning sounds like the individual learning plans (IEPs) already available for students with special learning needs. They need to understand how personalized learning plans would be different, and what the implications of personalized learning would be for students who currently have IEPs.

What Role Do Parents/Guardians Want to Play in Developing Personalized Learning Plans?

As Fig. 23 shows, most parents and guardians would like to play some role in crafting their child’s personalized learning plan, but not necessarily a major one. In their comments, many interviewees indicated that they would need more information before deciding. Decisions might depend on the child in question, the academic subjects being considered, or whether their children wanted them to be involved.

Sample Comments

- I'd want to hear about the overall goals, and I'd want to know who the contact person is in the school and how knowledgeable they are. I'd sit back a little, and then step in when I needed to.
- I'd like to review it and have a chance to give feedback before it's put into action. But I would want more than a letter home, maybe a meeting. It's important enough that it would need attention. I wouldn't want it to get overlooked.



Section III: Partnership for Change—Personalized Learning Plans

- I'd want to be involved just enough so that I can talk to my daughter to make sure she understood everything before making a final decision.

Takeaway

- Parents and guardians don't have many details about how personalized learning plans will be developed and carried out. They see many possible benefits for their children, but also some potential drawbacks. The majority assumes that students and school counselors can do a good job of creating a plan that challenges the student, but they want to be kept firmly in the loop, especially at the beginning.

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Conclusion

Partnership for Change commissioned this study in order to assess the types and quality of communication between schools and parents/guardians in the Winooski and Burlington school districts. The ultimate goal of the project was to identify ways of improving communication and, by extension, educational outcomes for all students. Although a primary finding was that many parents and guardians are satisfied with how their children’s schools communicate with them, many potential areas of improvement were uncovered.

In talks with 137 parents/guardians, 25 parents/guardians in four focus groups, and eight multilingual liaisons, certain experiences, complaints and recommendations were voiced over and over—so often that a clear template of what families want and need emerged. To promote consistently positive communication, schools should:

- **Welcome families.** Teachers, guidance counselors and administrators should universally value family input. The most important ways of doing this are simple—school staff show they care about families’ concerns by responding promptly to their requests for information or assistance and following up until issues are resolved.
- **Be the experts.** School staff should act as the experts and take the lead on creating plans for students who need help. If the first plan doesn’t work, they should propose adjustments on their own without being prompted by parents/guardians to do so.
- **Coordinate internally.** School teams should work together, sharing information internally so solutions can be put in place and adjusted quickly.
- **Empower students.** Teachers and other school staff should not only work for solutions to immediate problems, but also empower students to advocate for themselves in the future.
- **Explain policies.** Parents/guardians should have a full understanding of individual teachers’ policies as they relate to homework and grades, and school policies as they relate to bullying, student eligibility for certain types of assistance, disciplinary matters, and the many other issues that families routinely face. The reasons behind these policies must be made clear, and school personnel should explain to families why they are applying these policies to their children in each case.
- **Make connection easy.** Parents/guardians should know whom to contact about various types of issues, and must be able to reach those people relatively quickly.
- **Go beyond translation.** Multilingual liaisons should do more than simply translate for parents/guardians who don’t speak or read English well. They should also provide an orientation to the US education system and training about how to use and understand the standard communication tools that other families take for granted. All parents and guardians who need a liaison should have one, and liaisons should actively reach out to even those families who are reluctant to use their services.
- **Regularly update websites.** Websites must be frequently updated. Families want one-stop-shopping venues for all information they could possibly need. Website content should also be organized in some logical way that makes it easy for families to find. Examples might be: “Everything about College Prep,” and “Everything about Driver’s Ed.” The emphasis should be on *everything*.
- **Consistently update web portals.** Jupiter Grades must be reliable and accurate.

Conclusion

- **Clarify school philosophy.** Overarching philosophies of education must be explained to families. For example, if the middle schools feel it is developmentally appropriate for parents and guardians to scale back on their heavy involvement in their children's school life, they need to tell families why. Similarly, as changes related to Partnership for Change are rolled out, schools will need to continually remind families of the reasons the changes are being made, and of the research and real-life experience that supports those changes.

Practical First Steps

Implementing the changes outlined above should not be overwhelmingly difficult. In many cases, beneficial change can be achieved by improving processes and products that already work well most of the time, for most families. In other cases, improvements will require revisiting written and unwritten policies, and making them more responsive to families' needs.

In any case, as potential first steps, a number of relatively easy fixes suggest themselves:

- **Put contact information up front.** Make sure parents/guardians know whom to contact for what, and have phone numbers and emails readily available and easy to find. It might help to have a FAQs section on school websites.
- **Return messages promptly, as a matter of policy.** All staff should return calls and emails from families without fail, and within a reasonable timeframe (two days at most). They should respond to all the questions asked, not just the first one. Even if the staff person originally contacted cannot help the family, or needs to look into the issue further, families should at least be told that the message has been received and that a fuller response is coming. This response protocol should also be district policy.
- **Flag struggling students early and reach out to families.** Reach out to parents/guardians right away if students are struggling academically, socially or behaviorally. Waiting for the next report card or scheduled conference is not acceptable to families, and no teacher should assume that families are checking the web portal for updates. Prompt outreach to families should be a matter of district policy, and teachers should be held accountable for doing it.
- **Show families you've heard them.** Listen to concerns and ideas raised by parents/guardians, and to the extent possible, incorporate them into plans that are put in place for students. If this can't be done, explain why clearly.
- **Remember paper and phones.** Electronic communication works well for many parents/guardians, but it does not work for everyone. For now, if information is very important, it needs to be delivered by phone, mail or in person. If the district wants all families to have equal access to technology, it should consider buying devices for parents/guardians who need them and training them in their use.
- **Continually update Jupiter Grades.** Ensure that all teachers who use Jupiter Grades post information on a frequent and regular basis. Otherwise, parents/guardians will not consider it a reliable tool. Families should also be informed before the year starts if particular teachers will *not* be using the portal.
- **Talk about the individual student.** Give all families the gift of individualized feedback about their children's progress. Remember that parents and guardians want to hear what's going well, not just

Conclusion

what's going poorly. Generic comments (as in "He's a great kid"), delivered either in person or on report cards, are off-putting to parents/guardians; they make them wonder if teachers even really know their children.

- **Go the extra mile for students who *aren't* struggling.** Parents/guardians of average and high-achieving students want to know that their children are getting equal attention. Fairly or not, there is a perception that school resources are reserved for only the most high-need pupils.
- **Break it down on monthly calendars.** Provide paper copies and printer-friendly calendars of events instead of just posting information electronically. Not all families can access it that way, and even if they can, they may have to search for it harder than they want to. If schools already make monthly calendars available in this way, many families aren't aware of it.

This report includes dozens of recommendations. They appear at the end of each unit in Sections II and III. Again, many are simple and even obvious. Implementing them quickly will show families that the district is serious about improving communication, a particularly important step given the many Partnership for Change innovations that are underway in the district.

Overarching Principles to Guide Change

As we have noted, not all the findings from this study point to clear and concrete solutions. But whether the issues uncovered are simple or complex, a few principles underlie them.

There is no substitute for personal contact.

Parents and guardians want schools to maintain and support opportunities for direct conversation. While not everyone needs such support on a regular basis, some parents/guardians do. Without staff who have time to conduct individual outreach, explain policies and procedures one-on-one, and follow up regularly, some families will not engage with the school at all—and students will suffer. A broader use of family-school liaisons—for all families, not just for ones who don't speak English well—is one possible solution. Many families won't need extra help, but many others will; if the schools don't ask families what they need, they won't know how deep and diverse those needs may be. Outreach could be as simple as: "How's everything going? I wanted to give you a heads-up about a few events coming up that you might want to attend. Do you have anything I can help you with right now?" When it comes to talking with teachers, many parents and guardians understand how busy they are and sympathize. But even those who felt they had experienced good communication still wanted more of it.

Communication is not about making information available to families. It is about making sure families know where it is, actually understand it, and can access it when they need it.

Although it may be easy to dismiss some of the recommendations in this report by saying, "But we already *do* that," it's important to consider the subtle ways communication and relationships between families and schools can break down. It is possible, and even likely, that many school policies are already provided to families in the form of handbooks or documents sent home at the beginning of school. Many are probably available somewhere on the district's or schools' websites. But just because information is technically available doesn't mean that parents/guardians have read it or know where it is when they need it. No matter how many times the school may send information home on, say, college

Conclusion

planning, many families will not see it. Individualized outreach, inefficient though it may seem, will be required, especially in the challenging areas highlighted by families in this report.

Transparency, transparency, transparency.

Bullying, graduation requirements, college prep, middle schools' attitude toward parental involvement, and "how's my kid *really* doing?" were recurring trouble spots raised by parents and guardians. Many of the unhappy communication experiences families recounted actually had issues of transparency at their root. Despite what many parents and guardians believe, schools *do* in fact try to let families know about important policies and academic requirements. Yet the frequency with which interviewees said "nobody told me..." indicates a problem. The reasoning behind bullying policies and how they're carried out, the philosophy behind parents' level of involvement in middle schools, the rubric by which teachers measure student performance—these are issues too important to be left to a handbook or blog post. Teachers, guidance counselors and principals need to continually explain, reinforce and repeat this information for parents and guardians in straightforward and personal terms.

Talk early and often about college.

All parents and guardians want the best possible future for their children, but many are overwhelmed trying to navigate post-secondary options during the last two years of high school. Whether students are headed for college or straight to the workforce, caregivers want to know which path they're on, whether there is a need (and time) for correction, and what they can do to support students. Annual meetings with families, one-on-one, starting in 8th grade to discuss the direction students are heading (and how to know when they're off-track) would greatly reduce concerns about whether children are being adequately prepared. Parents/guardians want complete honesty from teachers; they don't want to hear that things are fine and then be surprised when their child graduates with no prospect of going to college and without adequate skills for the workforce.

Families have diverse needs and expectations of schools

Among all subgroups of data we examined, the most significant differences were for families whose primary language is other than English. Newer Americans with strong cultural ties to their countries of origin had distinct requests for schools, including being more formal and strict with students, presenting a "united front" to children during parent-teacher meetings, monitoring student's behavior with peers and not allowing children to progress without mastering the same material as other students. According to multilingual liaisons, language barriers and generational conflicts unique to New American families may explain why parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English rely more heavily on schools to direct student behavior and hold students accountable.

Subgroups of Parents and Guardians

As mentioned above, patterns emerged from the data that hint at differences between parent/guardian subgroups. For instance, parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English repeatedly expressed higher levels of satisfaction than others, while those with children eligible for free/reduced-price lunch tended to be the least satisfied with school communication. While this may at first seem surprising, at least some explanations for these differences seem evident. Parents and guardians who have worked closely with multilingual liaisons receive a good deal of personal attention, including home

Conclusion

visits and after-hours support; they also know precisely who to ask for help because liaisons are their sole contact. Moreover, their experience with schools in their home countries may lead them to believe that their involvement in school is not expected or desired. They are far less aware of what is going on at school, either for their children or in general, than other families, yet the single contact they have with their liaison is deeply reassuring to them.

Parents and guardians of free/reduced lunch-eligible students obviously do not have the same language and cultural challenges, but many do face serious economic stresses that create deficits of time and energy. Compared to other English-speaking parents/guardians, they are less likely to have technological tools at home to monitor their children's progress, and thus rely more heavily on the schools to let them know when things are going wrong. It is also likely, given the abundant literature on the poorer educational outcomes experienced by lower-income students, that at least some of these families feel that school simply doesn't work well for their children. The attitudes and experiences of free/reduced lunch-eligible families require investigation beyond the scope of this study. But if the school seeks to engage them because engagement improves student outcomes, a logical starting point would be simply to tell parents and guardians what specific types of parental engagement are proven to help children succeed, and then providing targeted support to help them engage in those ways. Being clear and direct can only help. The district should not expect parents/guardians to know what they need to do day to day to support their children in their academic work; this expert advice can only come from teachers and guidance counselors.

The Partnership for Change

Finally, this study sought to explore what parents/guardians know and think about two proposed educational reforms being discussed locally by Partnership for Change, the school districts, families and stakeholders—personalized learning and learning in the community. Although findings indicated that most people still know few details about the Partnership's work or the proposed changes coming to the district, the majority of interviewees were excited about at least some aspects of these new approaches. When parents/guardians were concerned, it was usually about how reforms would affect students' preparation for college, how schools would manage and sustain new programs, and what practical impacts approaches would have on students and families themselves. Parents/guardians would benefit from straightforward communication about Partnership for Change's work, free of jargon and boiled down to who, what, when and where. It will be difficult for them to respond to abstractions; they need some idea of how changes will look in order to give meaningful feedback.

The School Side

This report has highlighted important gaps in family-school communication. But most of these gaps have been identified by families. It is critical to treat the issue of communication as a two-way street. Teachers, guidance counselors and administrators have their perspectives and frustrations as well; solving communication problems will involve gathering ideas from school staff. Teachers themselves are probably better positioned than anyone to know what policy and practice changes are needed to improve family-school communication, and how those changes could be implemented efficiently and for the greatest effect. Their feedback should be vigorously sought.

APPENDIX

Communication that Goes Well

A primary finding of this study is that *most* parents and guardians are satisfied with the way the school communicates with them, and *most* are happy with the schools' response to their concerns. In interviews and focus groups, parents and guardians made hundreds of comments about communication issues, describing times when things went right and times when they went wrong. The most common stories are those in which school staff responded quickly and appropriately to issues, sometimes even noticing problems before the families themselves did. In these stories, the teachers and guidance counselors are presented as education experts who know children well and can step in quickly when things are going awry. The comments below help highlight the factors that create these good communication experiences.

- Every time I've contacted the teachers, I've always been satisfied. When I call, I just state to them what I think the problem is and then let them offer a solution. They are really good; they know kids. They've always come up with a solution that I'm happy with.
- At the high school, I asked the supportive study counselor to help [my daughter] complete her homework and monitor that she's getting it done and turned in. The counselors are really helpful. That went well.
- We talked with the guidance department because we have some learning issues and we had a private assessment and gave that to the school. We asked for extra time on tests and reduced homework. They took the report and communicated with the teachers and came up with a good plan that I was very happy with.
- My child still has his baby speech. I asked for a speech pathologist to work with him. They were more than helpful.
- My older son went from home school into public high school this past year. He isn't that comfortable around groups, so his adjustment was rocky. I've talked with the school about thinking about where he sits in class, where he eats in the lunchroom; we needed to think about these social settings, because they can be hard for him. One class was really setting him off, so we tried to see if he could take it another time. The school was great from the very first day. They kept him in the loop ... and let us know what they could do to support him. They did more than a good enough job of integrating him into school.
- This parent asked to create a plan to help her daughter improve in math. The teacher responded with options for improvement, and the whole team agreed upon how the teacher would support the student and how the student herself would be held responsible for improvements. "The teacher was well aware of the developmental changes that middle-schoolers go through as part of the equation," the parent said.
- My daughter didn't want to do the 'healthy living' class and wanted to stay in art. I wrote a letter asking, and the school said 'no,' and I think they were correct. My daughter had a good argument, but she left out some details, so the school was right.

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Communication that Doesn't Go Well

Obviously, not all communication between parents/guardians and school staff goes well. Several themes emerged in interviews that shed light on typical trouble spots. We organized interviewees' comments into categories. Below, we provide a few sample comments under each heading. The comments do not identify the root causes of communication breakdowns, but they do indicate the sorts of issues that parents/guardians themselves see as particularly problematic. Note that these categories overlap to some extent; we have placed complaints according to the central issue they raise.

1. I contact somebody, but my calls and emails aren't returned. If they are, we decide on a course of action but then I never hear back about it. Issues just get dropped.

Teachers, guidance counselors and others either don't return calls or emails, or they don't follow up on discussions. Issues go un-resolved, or take weeks or months to resolve. This is the number one complaint of parents/guardians.

Sample Comments

- I think the high school is really good about communication, but the middle school is a lot tougher to communicate with. They don't necessarily call you back; I feel like I'm really out of the loop there.
- Due to my poor English I did not know how to contact [my child's teacher], so I asked my daughter to tell the teacher that I would like to have a meeting with her. I waited quite long. But the teacher never contacted me. I don't know why. Maybe she thought that my English was poor and I could not understand her even if we had a meeting.
- I wanted my child to take more advanced French classes. I approached the teacher many times about it. There was no follow-up. Much later I was told there was a conflict with the schedule and this was why it would not happen.
- We asked for an English tutoring class for our daughter because we believed that it was too hard for her to study in the same class with American students. [A staff person] who worked in the school told us that she arranged a meeting for us to meet teachers in administration office in school to discuss this issue. On that day my husband took time off from his work for this meeting. But when we got there, there was no meeting and the teachers there did not understand what our issue was and what was going on. So we left without a meeting and our concern left unsolved.
- The school doesn't respond or follow up. It is challenging for everyone because of scheduling; things are decided at meetings but then teachers are too busy to actually follow up and do anything different.
- I would just love to have results followed through so that the students can have confidence in their teachers and the parents can also support the teachers, because right now, I really don't support a lot of the school system because I have to fight with it in order to get the results that my kids need.

2. People at the school don't seem interested in talking to me. The atmosphere isn't very welcoming.

Parents and guardians say that some school staff are responsive and interested in their concerns, while others aren't. Sometimes, particularly in middle school, they feel that the whole system is trying to exclude them.

Sample Comments

- Instead of good feedback from the teacher, I was getting what felt like sarcasm. I talked with my son and encouraged him to talk with the teacher to ask more questions. Eventually it worked out OK because I worked with my son, but it seemed like the teacher didn't really want to hear what I had to say.
- One time my child told me that she felt one teacher didn't like a student, and it created tension in the classroom. When I spoke to the teacher, the teacher was defensive rather than trying to find a solution.
- In middle school, unless it's a really big problem and the principal gets involved, you don't hear about [things going on with your child]. Developmentally they might feel it's none of your business—your kids should be more autonomous now; they're in middle school and should handle it on their own. If that's the philosophy, that needs to be communicated to the parent, and it's not.
- I felt like I had to drag the information out of his teacher.... What I really wanted to find out was how to push [my son] a little more and get more out of him. Everyone has something that could be developed; don't just tell me he's a great kid. Tell me what motivates him and what needs to be worked on. But his teacher wouldn't give me those kinds of answers.
- Sometimes I don't understand why they only give basic information. If you ask for more detail, they don't really give it to you. [Ontop]
- A couple of teachers on [our daughter's] team were better on following through than others. One teacher seemed really clueless about what our daughter needs and hasn't made any changes; he can be pretty condescending with his communication style.
- I was very frustrated I couldn't get a social worker for [my child] this year. ...The guidance counselor never really had time for me. The principal never had time for me. The secretary was amazing, remembered my name, was always fantastic.

3. My child wasn't doing well academically, and no one at the school let me know. I eventually found out, but by then, it was too late.

This is another major area of communication breakdown for parents and guardians. It is especially a complaint of parents/guardians who cannot use, or choose not to use, Jupiter Grades.

Sample Comments

- I could get information, but after the fact. Like I would get a letter sent home if my daughter's grades were borderline failing. But I would rather get a letter earlier. And she was an A/B student, so I was surprised—extremely so. She had never failed anything. This was in two courses in [middle school]. Those two teachers should have made an effort to call me.

- I was under the impression [my child] was doing well, and toward the end of the year, her grades were going down. Shouldn't I have been informed before, to get her help after school or before school? But the school year was almost over then, I didn't know that she could have gotten help before school. There was a program in the morning to help that she never knew about, and I didn't either.
- When [students] were on teams and I would call for a specific class or situation, someone on the team would call me back, not the teacher I wanted to talk to. I was specific—if [our daughter's] grades dropped below a C or she wasn't working where she should be, I'd like to know before it was too late. [But] by the time I found out, it was over. They didn't let me know. And at the end of the year [our child] failed a class.... My husband contacted the teacher twice by email and did not get a response either time.

4. The school is dismissing my concerns about my child. My child is the kind of student who gets overlooked.

Parents and guardians sometimes say they cannot get the school to act on their concerns.

Sometimes the school says their children don't need extra attention, but parents/guardians often feel like there just aren't enough resources to go around for students like theirs.

Sample Comments

- I have felt like whenever I ask for more challenging work for my kids, I get blown off. They say, 'Oh, they're doing fine!' As long as your kid is doing fine, they don't want to hear from you.
- We've been concerned about [our daughter's] math; she really scores far below where she should on the NECAP, really far below, and the teacher says she's fine, and the next year, it's 'Oh no, she's not.' It's just a lot of inconsistency. It seems like with a score like that on a standardized test, they'd do something about it. We've requested follow-up but not received it. They say she's doing fine in the class, but yet those scores are really low. It's confusing.
- I wanted to have different, more challenging work for my children and there was no room for enrichment. It's been this way through the years, since elementary. There are very few teachers who will go out of their way to create different work. They'll typically just give [our son] an extra worksheet—more work—to complete, which isn't fair to him. I know they have a lot of students but we should be addressing the top students as well. Myself and the other parents I talk to, we generally feel like the school is just trying to bring everyone to the middle.
- It's hard to communicate with the school. They only do conferences for the kids who are the worst off, so if your kid is doing OK, but you still want to have a conference, you're out of luck.
- I think that special ed is so overloaded that there was a resistance to possibly test [our daughter], because she's a well-behaved, popular kid, well-rounded, and not a behavioral problem, and doesn't have parents that complain very much. The specialist [eventually] did see her and we got some answers, but I'm still not sure everything is as it should be.
- This parent's son was in the tech program. She remembers several comments along the lines of, 'Well, you aren't planning on going to college, are you?' instead of, 'Oh, are you planning to go to college?' Basic planning—you're talking to an honor roll student. I don't know if I didn't have

the right address, my address wasn't Apple Tree Bay. I don't know what the issue was. But obviously they didn't have any good standard set for my child. [Focus group participant]

5. My English is very limited. I want to know everything that is happening with my child, but it's very difficult to get all the details. I don't really feel connected to what's going on in the school.

When parents/guardians speak a primary language other than English, communication between them and the school staff can be challenging for a number of reasons. Most parents/guardians who need multilingual liaisons have them, but not all do. But whether they do or not, liaisons cannot completely explain everything an individual parent/guardian needs to know about their own children's progress, or about the US education system as a whole.

Sample Comments

- Report cards showed that our kid got mainly A and B in the subjects she was taking. But she told us that she could only understand 30% in her social study class. We wondered 1) what her true level was; 2) if she was in the same class with American kids; 3) why she got A and B without understanding most of it in social studies class.
- When my concerns went through a multilingual liaison, I understand everything, but when I contact the school by phone myself, they don't understand what I say.
- They tell me that American system of education does not accept that the student retain the same class due to a number of reasons. I wasn't satisfied, because the teacher said, 'We cannot do that mistake.' I wish that my students [would be] placed according to their grades [i.e., academic performance, not age].
- So many times I wanted to talk to a school counselor for help. But due to my language barrier, I gave it up feeling frustrated.
- I hope Burlington High School could improve its communication with my children and us. [This parent said she didn't know that the high school had parent-teacher conferences.]

6. There are some basic things I don't know. Nobody gave me the information.

Where to go, who to talk to, how to get a child registered for an event, how to find out if students got into driver's ed—these critical bits of information either weren't communicated to parents and guardians, or were communicated in a way that they didn't notice and save. When they try to find the information, they have to dig and dig.

Sample Comments

- I don't know who to go to. If it's subject-specific, I do, but if it's something socially, I don't have any clarity about who to talk to.
- We had no idea about whom we should contact. Besides, both of us parents have language barriers. So even if we got through the phone to her school, we could not express ourselves clearly.
- This family has moved from another country a year ago, and the parent expected that the school would contact her to tell her everything she needed to know. But that didn't happen, and now

she has no idea if or how her son is supposed to fulfill his community service requirement, or if he is on track to graduate.

- It's not that I didn't want to [use the web portal], but I didn't get any information from the school on this, just from my daughter. Maybe my daughter didn't give me the information that the school gave her?
- This parent never received information about how [her son] chose electives for middle school and wasn't informed about the (white day/blue day or A/B day) schedule. She also was unaware that he would have to leave class for a music elective he chose. As a result, he missed labs and important class lessons that impacted his grade.
- I found out two weeks before my son was to graduate that he did not have some of his credits that he needed to walk with his class, and come to find out, they were freshman core credits and they neglected to make sure that he received them. So two days before graduation they did finally hand him his credits, which [didn't give him the learning he missed, only the credits]. But there was no communication prior to that. I had met with that same guidance counselor multiple times throughout the year. And I would go and talk to her about other opportunities and she would just absolutely lack any knowledge about anything in any other programs of any kind in the area. [Focus group participant]
- What if there's a kid who has no idea what they want to do and maybe there's a skill that they want to [develop]? If it's not presented to them or us as parents, I don't even know how you would even go about [finding out how to pursue it]. It must be from another student, or from another parent of a person who's completed that program, or at a college fair.

7. We have to initiate requests, even when teachers should have already noticed the problem. Then we sometimes have to be "a squeaky wheel" to make anything happen.

Parents and guardians repeatedly said they had to approach the school with problems, though the school staff themselves should have been the first to notice. Parents/guardians say they have to push school staff to get them to act on a suggestion, request or plan.

Sample Comments

- I always have to take the initiative and there's no follow-up from them. I work in the school system; I get how busy they are. But I don't really know how my son's doing, if he needs a math tutor—no one has talked to me.
- I did my steps [by contacting the school administration], but it wasn't until I wrote the superintendent that I got results. I'm not an aggressive person and that I have to fight to get some results or threaten someone is frustrating.
- We ended up doing a special education evaluation for my daughter this past school year. In the middle of her 7th grade year we ended up making a shift in her class; she was moved to a special ed class. How did it go? My experience has been that you have to be vocal, you have to continue to assert what we need. Like 'Hey, we talked about doing that evaluation, that was two weeks ago, what's happening?' And people are like, 'Oh yeah, yeah.' It was on the radar but ... they were just dealing with too much.

- Mother says middle-school personnel are happy to tell her anything, but she has to specifically ask. “The information flow is not good; there are no lines of communication.”
- If I want something to drastically change, I have to be loud about it. If I sit at a meeting and ask somebody to look into something, nobody will get back to me. It’s because the case manager has a load of 70 students.

8. There’s a lack of coordination among school staff.

Many interviewees complained about balls that had been dropped—between teachers who should be setting similar standards for classwork, between guidance counselors and teachers, even between the middle school and the high school, where there doesn’t seem to be an official “hand-off” of a student that includes information about his or her academic and social history, strengths and challenges.

Sample Comments

- [Our child] needs extra help in language arts. Vocabulary sheets are a pretty standard accommodation and some of the teachers have done that; others continue to ignore that.
- I would contact the high school guidance and they had to get to the teachers, compile the information and get back to me. This took a long time and it wasn't always clear who had the information. Usually I was able to get it, but it took a long time or was complex and I would have to follow up several times. If I hadn't followed up, I think that most of the time I wouldn't have gotten the information I needed.
- This parent requested help for her son to get caught up. She asked to be given his homework assignments for each day, so she knew what he owed and what his current assignments were. Some of the teachers didn't want to give both old and current assignments because they thought the student would be overwhelmed; other teachers felt he could handle the extra work. His mother assumed any missing work would be excused. Some teachers did excuse it, but others gave zeros. Her son was confused by the different approaches, and so was she. “Everyone had a different style.”
- This parent’s child was out of school eight days due to illness. She tried to pick up schoolwork for him to do at home. She called guidance, as per protocol. Some teachers brought the work and some didn't. When her son returned, teachers asked why he hadn’t had someone pick up the assignments. His mother had to prove that she tried. Then her son was overloaded with work.
- This parent’s son is easily distracted while taking tests, and in sixth grade the teacher made an unofficial accommodation for him by providing privacy during tests. His mother hoped this accommodation would follow him to the next grade, but subsequent teachers never found out about it and her son has struggled a great deal.

9. My child had some scheduling problems that took a long time to resolve, or never got resolved.

Parents and guardians say that they know the school is busy, but still, they want quick fixes to class schedule problems. They don’t want their children to waste their time or miss the opportunity to take a class that is important to them just because of a bureaucratic error.

Sample Comments

- This parent's son wanted out of one of his electives and she was told on the phone that it would be effective the following Monday, so she told her son to go to his new class starting that day. Her son forgot and went back to his old class, and the school never corrected him. Two weeks later his mother got involved again. She said the school was rude to her while she was trying to sort out the issue. "It was as if they didn't want to deal with his schedule."
- When a class is full and there are no other options, sometimes students end up taking classes that are a waste of time. This parent's son took guitar I and II in school when the class he really wanted was full. "He already played guitar, though."
- There was one time when my child was put in band by error. It took a while to get him into a different class, maybe a week or two. He didn't play any instrument at all.
- My daughter was put in a science class, basically because of scheduling issues, and she was getting really bored. They were re-doing the curriculum so it ended up being a repeat of what she'd had the year before. It was like she ended up having a remedial science class all year. Right away, we contacted the teacher, and so did a few other people, and they got back to us right away and we met. We all felt heard and they said they'd work on it. We met a few times. Communication was great but still nothing changed. That class was a waste of time for her.

10. Our child was targeted by bullies, and the school didn't do enough about it.

Bullying is especially worrisome to families, and several parents/guardians told stories about trying to resolve bullying incidents but feeling that school staff either did not take them seriously, or treated the bullying as an ordinary dispute between students, where both sides were equally to blame.

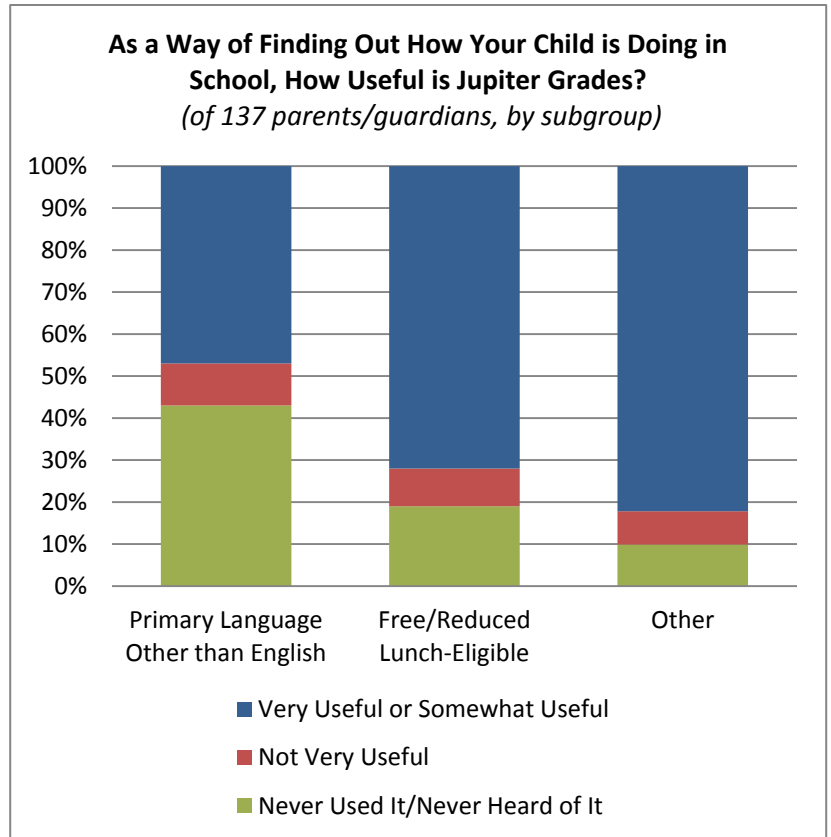
Sample Comments

- My child was complaining of being bullied (at the high school level), and the guidance counselor I spoke with was very receptive and quick to respond. However, the ensuing investigation was very unsatisfactory. The person conducting the investigation never responded to me, and they reached the conclusion that everything was fine and there was no problem, but there was.
- This parent's daughter was being harassed by some other students. "I had to go in because the other forms of communication didn't turn out to be enough. I wanted to share all the information I had and my concerns, to get something done about it, which is hard because I'm super busy with my work." She said the staff she talked to "had the mentality that, 'Oh, I know those kids, they wouldn't do anything like that.' I went in and talked to the vice principal, who realized I was serious and it didn't matter if he knew the kids or if they were nice boys.... He took whatever steps the school does, file a report or whatever. I don't know if the kids' parents were ever notified."

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Jupiter Grades

Chart: Most parents and guardians use Jupiter Grades, the district’s assignments and grades web portal, to learn about their children’s academic progress. Parents and guardians whose children are eligible for free/reduced lunch are a little less likely to use the portal—and find it valuable—than higher-income parents. Parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English are far more likely to say they either don’t use the portal or have never heard of it. In their comments, interviewees said that Jupiter Grades is helpful as a way to monitor students’ progress in real time, but is not updated regularly enough or used consistently enough by teachers to make it reliable.



Comment Themes

Jupiter Grades is helpful to parents and guardians, but is not updated regularly enough or used consistently enough by teachers to make it completely reliable. Almost half of parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English said they do not use Jupiter Grades; most said they don’t have the computer skills, English language skills, or enough knowledge of the American grading system to make it worthwhile.

Sample Comments (of 135)⁴

1. I think it's excellent and it should be mandatory for all schools and teachers. It’s a great way for parents to keep their finger on the pulse. At the middle school level not everyone is participating and I think it's a huge injustice, especially during 6th grade. I think there has been reluctance from teachers, but I think it's a really important tool for communication. Kids are so used to fast information, so it’s really important for them.
2. Both kids look every day to get their homework assignments off it, and to check that their teachers have recorded that they've turned things in. If the teacher hasn't recorded it, then they know they have to talk to him.
3. I get an email from Jupiter Grades once a week. It gives me real-time data, which is super. Although not all teachers are required to use it; I wish everyone were required to use it. Teachers can also

⁴ Comments from interviewees sometimes number fewer than the total number of parents/guardians interviewed. Occasionally parents/guardians made no response, and not all questions required comments.

send out a group email to the whole class, which is fabulous. It's a great way to communicate—for example, they can send out a reminder to everyone to remember to bring their sneakers for a field trip the next day.

4. Love it. Last year the teachers didn't do it and we didn't know what we were missing out on. This year, they did, and it's fabulous. You can help the kids stay on top of their work. [Middle School]
5. What I don't like is if the teacher doesn't put in all the assignments. It's very literal about the grade for the class, which isn't really what the grade is going to be. We actually had this happen. My daughter got a low score in Jupiter Grades, and emailed the teacher; he said not to worry because he hadn't put in a couple of assignments. Also he takes into account other aspects, like class participation, that aren't reflected there. So it's not always accurate. One teacher actually said, 'Don't even look at the grades in there.'
6. It's useful in the sense that with us transitioning from home school to public school, it's a way for me to keep track of things. [But] it's also in some ways driving a model of education that's based on test scores and not necessarily mastery, which is a problem for me. Jupiter Grades could reflect mastery if it was set up a little differently.
7. I like it, but it has caused contention sometimes between me and my daughter. The system they use at other schools tells you when was the last time the teacher went in to change something and that's better because, let's say my daughter tells me she handed something in but I go into Jupiter Grades to see, and if her teacher hasn't updated the system yet, I can't tell if my daughter really handed in her work. I can't tell if it's totally current, so then my daughter feels like I don't trust her.
8. My kids are motivated by it, and it's a conduit to reach the teacher; if they're missing assignments I can see it. It's a tool for me to talk to my kids and them to talk to me.
9. It could be really useful but it's worthless because teachers don't put the grades up there. All grades should be there [for the previous week] by Saturday or at least Monday, but they're not. I've seen the same grades for a whole semester! ... Who do I believe? The machine or my student who says they handed in the work? It puts terrible stress on the parent-child relationship. They should either pull it out or use it. Last quarter, I was watching Jupiter Grades. My son is telling me he's done the work and I'm trying to believe him. And then he gets two F's in two classes, and no one contacted me! The system doesn't work.
10. I know several parents who overreact, see things are missing, and ground their kids.
11. It's been a big relief for me and for both of my children because of the fact that they can email their teachers directly if they're having an issue, and a lot of times some of the more active teachers will respond that evening. If not, both children will go directly the next day and explain the situation. Jupiter Grades is fantastic. It helps me monitor them and them monitor themselves. My oldest has ADD, so when the teacher writes everything on the board at the end of class, she doesn't always catch it. She can go online and see that's what she missed. Of course that only works if teachers update their assignments.
12. It's not that I didn't want to [use it], but I didn't get any information from the school on this, just from my daughter. Maybe my daughter didn't give me the information that the school gave her? I don't know. I have a feeling that I wasn't getting a lot of information from the school because it was going through my daughter. [Middle School]

13. I haven't really used it. I wait for the progress report. That comes in enough time. If we see anything that needs attention, then we'll call for a meeting.
14. Maybe even add more qualitative information to Jupiter Grades so there is a chance for give and take. Like, 'This week she's seemed to have motivational problems,' or some comments like that.
15. My children showed it to me. I have the opportunity to learn and constantly update myself about my children.
16. I sometimes check my students' progress online, but it happens where I don't understand some of the online details.
17. I don't understand what the numbers mean.
18. I don't know how to use the computer. Most or all information in Jupiter Grades is [in] English. My English is very limited.
19. I can follow my children's academics so I can motivate my children.

Takeaways

- Jupiter Grades should be regularly updated, and parents and guardians should be told when those updates will occur—twice a week, at the end of every school week, etc.
- Parent and guardians should be advised at the beginning of the term which teachers use Jupiter Grades and which don't.
- All parents/guardians need information directly from the school about Jupiter Grades and how to use it. Throughout our interviews, families stressed that information sent home with their children doesn't always get to them. Critical information about how to access and use a primary communication tool should be delivered directly to parents.
- Some parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English use Jupiter Grades, but more than half say they don't have the computer skills, language skills or enough knowledge of the American grading system to benefit from it. One-on-one or small-group training for parents/guardians who want to use this technology would allow them to keep track of their children's progress day to day, rather than rely on report cards or calls from the school.
- Parents are confused about how and even whether all classes in the middle schools use Jupiter Grades. A clear school policy on teachers' use of this portal should be communicated to parents.

Other Recommendations from Parents and Guardians

- Assignments should be uploaded consistently, and in the same places.
- Jupiter Grades should be mandatory for all teachers.
- Jupiter Grades should more clearly indicate when a particular grade is "locked in" for the semester.
- Report cards could be posted on Jupiter Grades; the school could notify parents and they could look at report cards there.
- It would be nice if qualitative comments, about changes in a student's attitude or work habits, were included in Jupiter Grades.
- Teachers should not regard Jupiter Grades as a substitute for actual conversations about class work and grades. If the parent/guardian wants a personal discussion, they shouldn't be referred to the portal instead.

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Report Cards

Charts: Overall, half of Burlington parents in this study said they consider report cards very useful as a tool for finding out how their children are doing in school.

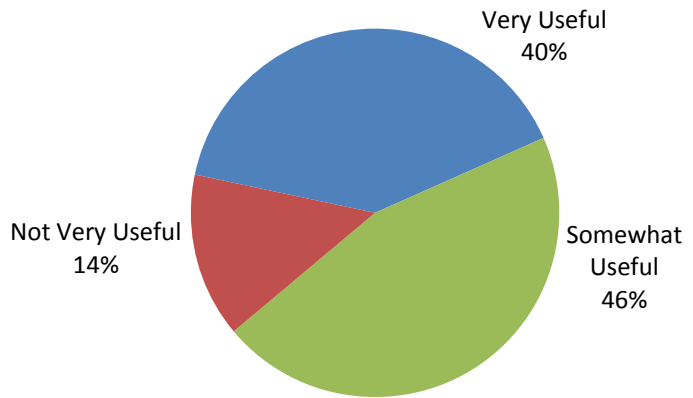
However, this statistic is skewed somewhat because parents and guardians whose primary language is other than English are markedly *more* enthusiastic about them than other families. Other parents/guardians were more likely to find report cards only somewhat useful, with parents whose children qualify for free/reduced lunch being especially lukewarm.

Why? A total of 28 parents (20% of those interviewed) mentioned the skimpy comments that accompany letter grades. Families often consider teachers’ remarks almost as important as the grades themselves, and complain that most remarks are too brief and generic to be of any real value.

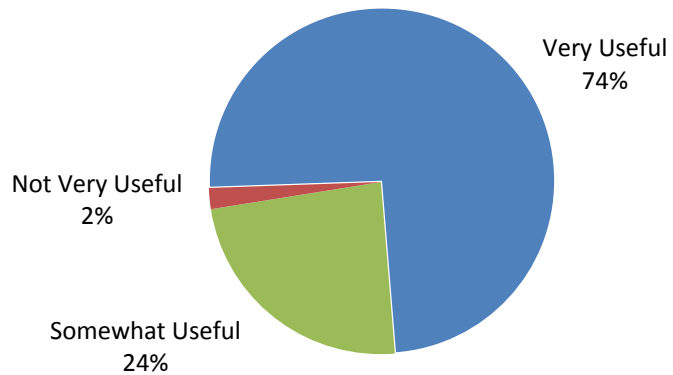
Throughout this study, parents and guardians continually said that they want the adults working their children, and particularly teachers, to share important insights about their children’s learning styles and progress,

and to advise them on how to support their children’s learning at home; report card comments as they are usually provided don’t do that. Parents/guardians whose primary language is not English said that they liked having a record of their children’s progress on paper, but about 20% mentioned some aspect of report cards that was confusing to them—the letters and numbers, the actual meaning of certain

As a Way of Finding Out How Your Child is Doing in School, How Useful are Report Cards?
(of 86 parents/guardians whose primary language is English)



As a Way of Finding Out How Your Child is Doing in School, How Useful are Report Cards?
(of 51 parents/guardians whose primary language is not English)



grades, the relative importance of the report cards themselves. Many needed help interpreting them, or must rely on their children for interpretation.

Comment Themes

Parents like the ritual and the finality of report cards, and use the term-end grades as springboards for discussions with their children. However, many parents already know what the cards will say because they use Jupiter Grades. The “news” is the comments, which interviewees repeatedly said aren’t detailed or tailored enough to the individual student to make them useful. Furthermore, the cards don’t explain to them why their child got a poor grade, or offer any insight into how to help children who are struggling.

Sample Comments (of 132)

1. It’s nice to have something to put on the refrigerator, but we already know the grades. And the comments on the reports cards seem like a template. When there’s a really relevant comment to the child that the child doesn’t hear often, that’s useful and can be a motivation.
2. There is not enough [on the card] to know how much my son has learned. It’s a reflection on the standardized grades, but not what my kid is really learning. So, my kid got good grades, but I didn’t find out until the end of the year from his teachers that he wasn’t doing as well as he could have been doing, and that wasn’t reflected in the report cards.
3. Not a lot of detail, but it is helpful. It might be good if there was more narrative, maybe once a year, to provide more detail about what’s working and what isn’t. Report cards are somewhat redundant to Jupiter Grades, and only a letter grade. There isn’t any information about social experience or behavior.
4. I think report cards are a little obsolete. There’s no personal comments from the teachers, so it’s just like ‘She’s pleasant to have in class.’ You look at it and go, ‘Do they even know you?’
5. The best part about report cards is that teachers can add comments about my kids. I keep ours around, in a closet in the kitchen, as a motivator for my kids. One teacher wrote, ‘Great improvement from midterm grades’ and that made my son feel really good. He showed his grandparents, saying ‘Did you see that?’ He was over the moon.
6. Grades should be a number rather a letter—it’s more precise. It would also be good if grades were weighted by class difficulty in terms of class rank. This is an important issue. The way it is now, it waters down the system and perpetuates a myth about performance and is unfair.
7. For freshmen and sophomores and maybe half the junior year, you don’t need a grade point average. But by the middle of junior year, I’d like to see a GPA. At least you know where your kid is going to fall [on the spectrum of students who are applying to college], how and where to improve, how to take the kid into the future. If you fall into [a place on the GPA scale] where a lot of kids are, you know to tell them, ‘You’d better bone up on your essay, or volunteer in the community, or unpierce your lip.’
8. I like that they mail the report cards because we’re sure to get them that way. The information on it, though, we laugh, because with the elementary school it takes an hour to go over those report

cards. The middle school is like 'A, A, B, A.' There's zero information about what the class did in general, or how our child did—was he respectful, inquisitive, or what? There's nothing.

9. Sometimes it's hard to understand what they're really saying, or her grades might seem good and then the card comes out and she's got a D when you thought she was getting a B. They only come out so many times a year. More times a year would be useful.
10. It's kind of like it means nothing to me. It's just saying, is this kid well-behaved or not? I'd rather kids be rebellious and do superior work. [This parent doesn't believe that grades are an accurate indication of where her child is compared to other children nationally.]
11. It's a barometer for children and parents to use in goal-setting. Obviously to me, with what they bring home for homework, you already know what they're going to get. But in a divorced situation, these report cards might be the ultimate statement, because [other indicators of progress may end up at the other parent's house].
12. I like to get them, but it's old news. Thanks to Jupiter Grades you kind of know what's coming. [But] the students like them, especially since they get to start over.
13. I can only compare to my son's 6th grade and grammar school experience where I got comments that explained the grades; it was a fuller picture. In middle school, it seems like a sink-or-swim attitude. I don't think they are mature enough and ready for this, especially boys.
14. You get an idea of where they think my daughter is at; I just never have a good feeling that it's accurate. It's a grade, but is that based on what she's actually learned, on her tests, on her homework? And there are comments on there about things that I think they should have called me about.
15. At least report cards have given us some idea of how our daughter was doing academically at school. But we don't know which level she was on or if she was on the level in the same class with American students. So there was not much detail, just A and B.
16. They give my students' updates of their school performances. It is also easy to read through. However, it is confusing somehow when I do not understand the meaning of the classes that my son takes, and also the way grades are designed confuses me.
17. Personal meeting or one-to-one meetings are really [better] to me than report cards, but these report cards show me clearly the grades that my daughter gets. For the ELL student like [my daughter, it] is very essential that she is getting to me the report card that shows what level she is writing, reading and speaking as well as listening.
18. I love them; I love having it all written on the paper.
19. There were too many report cards. I am not sure which ones were the most important ones.
20. The comments are always the same; I'm not interested in reading 20 times the same comment. They just mark a box. It's not personalized.
21. This way it's easy for me to know how my children are doing at school rather than coming in for parent-teacher conference.
22. [They're not very useful] because I felt that I do not really understand what those grades are.

Takeaways

- Parents/guardians far prefer personalized and detailed comments to generic comments.

- Parents/guardians don't want to be surprised by grades or comments on a report card. They want to be informed about academic or behavioral problems when they first occur. In this study, when parents have been seriously upset about school communication, it's often because they feel they were not informed about a problem in time to do anything to improve their child's performance. Parents want calls or emails if their children are struggling academically; routine reports cards or even web portal postings are not enough.
- Parents whose primary language is other than English need to be coached in how to understand report cards. Any help they get now, through multilingual liaisons or family members, is inadequate. Since these parents are far less likely to use Jupiter Grades, they also say reports come too late for them to help reverse a poor grade; they want phone calls from teachers, through MLLs, long before report cards come out.

Other Recommendations from Parents and Guardians

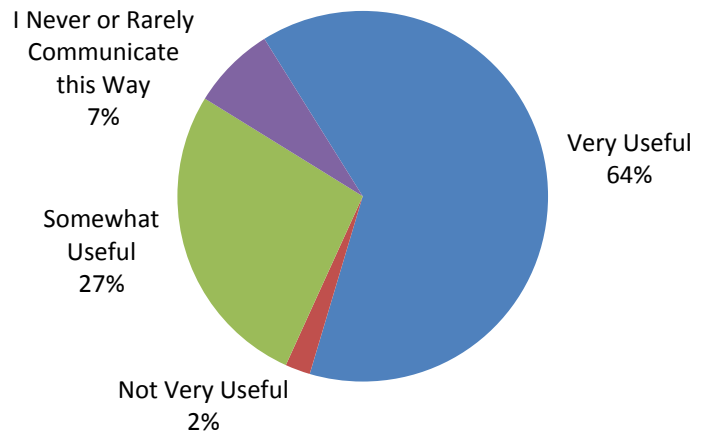
- Report cards should include details about special learning events during the semester, so that parents could engage with their students about the current learning topics.
- Report cards should be posted online.
- By the middle of junior year, students' cumulative GPA should be on the cards.
- Grades should be a number rather a letter, and should be weighted by class difficulty in terms of class rank.
- Report cards are an old system of reporting on students' progress that doesn't reflect new ways children are learning. The whole system needs to be revisited.
- Report cards are okay, but they're not a substantial, comprehensive review of the child for the year.

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Conversations with the School Staff

Chart: The vast majority of parents and guardians interviewed in Burlington said they find informal conversations with people at the school very useful or somewhat useful. There were no significant differences between subgroups of interviewees, although parents and guardians whose primary language is other than English seem to feel slightly more positive than others—perhaps because face-to-face conversations minimize language and literacy barriers by providing nonverbal cues and more opportunity to ask clarifying questions.

As a Way of Finding Out How Your Child is Doing in School, How Useful are Direct Conversations [via Email, Phone, or In Person] with School Staff?
(of 137 parents/guardians)



Comment Themes

Nearly 1 in 10 interviewees said that the quality of communication is inconsistent and that it depends entirely on with whom they speak. Several people said they like being able to have direct, quick conversations because they can get immediate feedback. Numerous comments also suggested that speaking with teachers, guidance counselors and other staff helps parents and guardians know and build stronger connections with their own children. Among parents and guardians whose primary language is other than English, in-person or phone conversations—with a multilingual liaison—are often the only way they can communicate with the school.

Sample Comments (of 134)

1. One-to-one is so important because you can pick up tone of voice; there is more open communication in person and it's easier to build a rapport.
2. Some teachers will happily meet with you, some won't. Some will respond to your emails, some won't. You shouldn't be able only to contact the teachers who will get back to you. It sets up both [kinds of] teacher—maybe the ones who don't get back to you have the most students and are busier. We get to meet with them only once [at conferences], and on their terms, when they say.
3. People have their own opinions and everyone goes about things different[ly]. Some people cut you off when you're expressing your opinion. Let's remove the side you're on and have a little heart. Don't look at things from a statistical point of view. Some of these kids grow up with different issues and things they're dealing with and when you voice your opinion you should be more understanding. You have to make sure you get the right person.

4. [Teachers] have a lower standard for their students than us parents.... We want our kids to prosper and we don't want to wait until it's too late to be told that they need the help. [Focus group participant]
5. In her conversations with staff, this parent has found them defensive and not willing to follow through. "It automatically isn't part of their culture to engage with parents, and I don't know if it's because they only engage when there's a problem, so the staff are already on the defensive [when any parent comes to them]." [Middle School]
6. I don't get a timely response to issues that are important. Sometimes it is days between and after multiple calls.
7. I'm not able to have these more informal conversations. I can only get access to teachers if I set up an appointment with the whole team. It's frustrating that it has to be so formal. [Middle School]
8. I feel that the message from school is that they are really busy and overwhelmed. So if you have a concern that's not, 'My kid is failing,' then you're kind of made to feel like a jerk, because it's not as big of an issue. They have a lot of kids with a lot of needs, and if your kid isn't terrible, then they don't have time for you. The overall message is that the school is overwhelmed. [Middle School]
9. The guidance counselor... has great insight. She really listens to you and she's also good to listen to. She's honest. I want honesty. It's good, I appreciate that. I've had good conversations with teachers, too—there were a few classes my daughter had trouble with—and it's very helpful because it's specific to her.
10. Well, I usually talk to them through email because it cuts down on time. But when I do actually talk to them, it's good because it makes it easier to explain what the situation is and what result I'm hoping for. But email is way easier and more private than a phone call for me—I work in an office that's open and so if I can send an email, no one else is listening in.
11. [My son's] teachers seem to welcome my communication, they seemed to appreciate it rather than be bugged by it. They seem to want to work together and I appreciate their openness and warmth. Talking with them increases my ability to give my son feedback so I know what they are thinking. We were doing check-ins every other week by email and that was great.
12. At the middle school, guidance has been very hands off. It seems like it's lacking, it's a weak link—calls don't get returned quickly and I think people [other parents] are dissatisfied. At the high school I think they [guidance] are just overwhelmed.
13. Teachers look at it like, 'If it's not broken, don't fix it.' But I'm just a fine-tuned person, and I like to know all the details. Most of the time I don't even do anything with the information I have, but I still like to know. I don't get all the small details that I would like.
14. It flushes out what's actually going on; I know both my kids pretty well, but they have a completely different world at school, and talking to a person who sees them there gives me a different lens into what's going on that I don't get through Jupiter Grades and report cards. Any time I can have a human being talk to me about my child, I'm thrilled. And if it's somebody who actually understands them, it's such a gift.
15. I tend not to contact them. I am reluctant to contact the school because I am concerned about how the student may be treated afterwards.

16. We have [a] language barrier. Also, we are not familiar with American public education school system. We were not familiar with my kid's teachers. We did not know whom to contact at school if we had concerns and how to contact.
17. When I receive a message from the school regarding my kids, either academic or behavior, I don't like to just be notified that there was a problem. I would prefer to have a meeting with the teacher or counselor very soon to discuss the issues in detail and work with the school to solve the problem before it gets bigger. In order to do so, I prefer to have an interpreter help communication with the school at [the] meeting so that we could exchange information at home and at school, understand the nature of the problem and find a solution.
18. I can be more in touch with what I need to do at home after speaking with a good teacher who knows my child.
19. I don't have email and I can't text, so the only time I understand what is going on is when I come in person or when I get calls from the liaison.
20. Please email/phone me immediately when my sons have a problem. Don't wait.
21. I would like to emphasize that important issues regarding my kids at school, I strongly prefer to have a meeting at school with a language interpreter to help communication, to help me understand what school [people] say and help me express what I want to say. I want to work with the school to solve any problems. Otherwise facing important issues regarding your kids at home or at school, but unable to communicate with the school, it makes parents feel quite frustrated and helpless.

Takeaways

- Parents and guardians want school staff to respond to their concerns. Even if they don't get the outcome they hoped for, they want to communicate with the right person, on the same or the next day, about issues specific to their children, and get prompt answers to any questions.
- Parents and guardians want to feel involved in decisions that affect their children and personally get to know the people who see their students every day. Direct conversations—and an open door to this kind of informal contact—help parents and guardians feel welcomed by the school and valued as collaborators.
- Flexibility in how and when communication is greatly appreciated by parents and guardians, many of whom have busy work schedules. Some need to use email for privacy; some can only communicate by phone. Daytime meetings are impossible for some working parents. The more accommodating the school can be about when and how to talk with families, the more conversations will take place.
- Efforts to understand multiple points of view and contributing factors are important to parents/guardians. Families want school staff to be helpful and sympathetic.
- Not all interviewees in this study who need interpreters or multilingual liaisons have them, or even seem to know that they are available. Furthermore, according to interviews with multilingual liaisons, some parents/guardians who have declined MLL services in the past cannot communicate effectively on their own, and in the end both they and their children suffer. Identifying parents/guardians who need services—both those who have never had them but need them, and those who think they don't need them but actually do—is an obvious step in improving communication with these families.

Appendix More on Conversations with School Staff

- Parents and guardians prefer to talk to someone who knows their child personally, views the student as an individual, and is directly involved in the situation.
- Families expect that when they communicate directly with someone at the school, that person will follow through until there is resolution.
- Communication should not be reserved for problem situations. Parents and guardians also want to hear what's going well. For kids who struggle, this fosters a more positive relationship with the school. For kids who excel, it tells parents/guardians that their students are getting the same attention as everyone else.
- Parents and guardians rely on direct contact with people at the school to get the “real story,” and to learn things they wouldn't hear otherwise. They depend on the school to give them an honest, open appraisal of what is happening with their children.

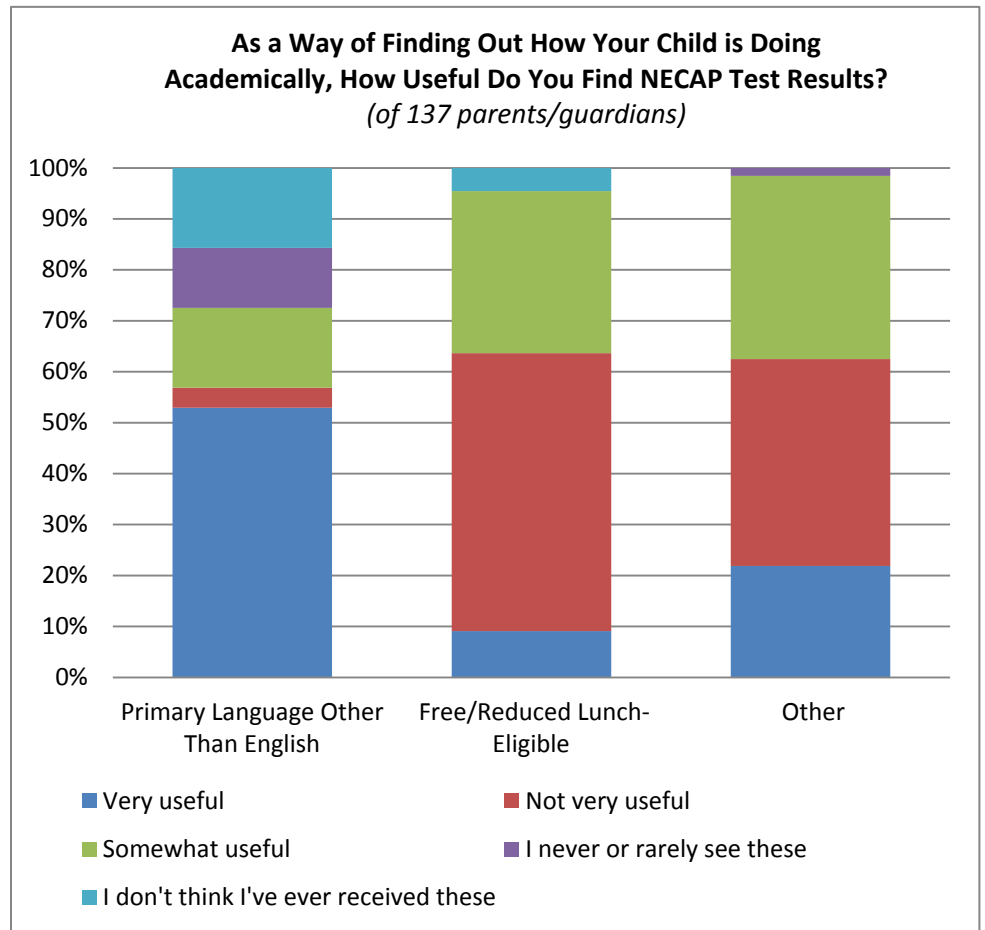
Other Recommendations from Parents and Guardians

- At the middle school level, parents and guardians don't always want to meet with the whole team; in some cases, they prefer one-on-one conversations.
- If communicating via email, it's important to answer *all* the questions asked by the other party, not just one.

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NECAP Standardized Test Results

Chart: Parents/guardians interviewed in Burlington had mixed opinions about the usefulness of NECAP test results. Parents and guardians whose primary language is other than English seemed to find NECAP test results more useful than other groups— 53% called them very useful, compared to only 9% of families with free/reduced lunch-eligible children and 22% of other families. Among primary English-speaking parents and guardians, 44% considered test results not very useful. Overall, 33% of interviewees, almost all from non-English-speaking households, said they don’t recall receiving or see these results. Some assumed they had thrown them away, thinking they were advertisements.



Comment Themes

The most common benefits of standardized test results mentioned by parents and guardians were that they highlight student strengths and weaknesses, and make it possible to compare performance (of both their children and the school) to others around the state and country. Comments also indicated that people struggle to really understand what results mean for their child. Parents and guardians wonder: What does the test really measure? Is this material covered in class? Is it part of the regular curriculum? If my child is well above average, how do I trust that the school is really challenging him/her? In addition, parents/guardians seem unclear about the implications of student scores—many don't know if teachers use test results to inform their future lesson plans or approaches to instruction.

Most parents and guardians who said that NECAP test results are only somewhat useful or not very useful, said that the tests are not an accurate representation of what students know, are not fair to all students, cause students anxiety, and are more geared for the school district than for families. People also expressed concerns about how much class time is spent preparing for standardized tests. However,

some of these same parents and guardians felt the tests might prepare students for the SATs or uncover hidden learning difficulties. Parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English repeatedly said they did not recognize results when they came in the mail and may have thrown them away. Those who had seen the results, though, tended to feel they were very important indicators of their children's progress, especially in learning English.

Sample Comments *(of 129)*

1. I don't think parents know too much about them. They get generally about how the kid did, but there aren't any details.
2. They're not a good indicator of what students know or are able to do. The test just reinforces things he already knows about himself [both his weaknesses and his strengths]. The whole tone around the test is a challenge for the community. The idea that there are special phone calls that go out saying 'make sure your kids eat breakfast' on those days and not on other days is problematic. That's to the benefit of the school, not my son.
3. I'm sure they have a place but they aren't helpful for my child.
4. I do look out for those, and it's something that will tell me more, I think, about where my students will be compared to other students. The end goal is we're trying to get kids into college, and they're going to use standardized tests [to make admissions decisions].
5. It's useful to see how my kids are doing and keeping on track in regards to how everyone else in the state is doing, and making sure their school is doing a good job of teaching up to standards.
6. Standardized tests are a problem for my daughter, because we didn't know that she had problems with time management when taking tests. There was a disconnect between the standardized test scores and her grades and that's how we realized she had time management learning issues with taking tests. So it was helpful for us to understand her learning issues via the standardized tests.
7. They're only somewhat useful because they aren't counted for anything, so many of the students blow them off. Maybe if they were worked into transcripts or something, that would help them take it more seriously. On the other hand, it's good because they give you a state comparison.
8. It helps to know where our child stands in relation to peers. My understanding is that this is more for the school district than for the parent.
9. I'm not really sure. My son doesn't do very well on standardized tests and part of his 504 plan is that he gets unlimited time. But there's a special process to get that unlimited time and no one ever told me that, all the years he's been on a 504. And so, last time, he missed requesting it and didn't get any extra time. I still don't know what that process is.
10. My girls are always way above the school standard, so it's not really useful. They don't explain them to kids very well and when I compare my kids' numbers to the school numbers, it's frustrating, because the average is way below her average, so I wonder whether or not she's getting what she needs for an education.
11. They're useful for our family because the kids can see that they've done well. We have some good test takers and some not-so-good test takers. But I've also heard my kids say that when they're taking NECAP, the kids know it doesn't count for their grades so some of them don't really try.
12. I have no idea what the heck they are talking about. I read it, but I don't generally understand it.

13. It seems so disconnected from the reality of what I expect him to be learning in the classroom—I don't see any connection. I think it's easy to teach to the test, but it doesn't mean he's getting a good education.
14. It's good, I guess, to see how your child stands with everyone else and to see how the overall school is doing. You see your child's scores, then the state and the school. Sometimes we'll see something like only 45% of the school is proficient in one area and we think, 'Oh, that's not good.'
15. They are not difficult to read, but the parents don't know what they are testing on, they don't see the material. Is it essay, bubble sheets, what is the content? Is it something they studied in class or not even related?
16. The NECAPs are almost entirely based on [my daughter's] weakest subject so they really aren't a good measure for her. You don't get the results for six months, so she's moved on a lot. My main issue is that the exams are used for placement for things and I don't think that's very fair.
17. It assesses intelligence in a different way than a grade does. It lets me know the potential for my child a little more.
18. Not very useful—this parent's student is "afraid about it, says, 'Sorry, I'll try to be good.'"
19. It's useful because I get to see where my child is in school, of course with the help of the liaisons.
20. I am unclear what they are testing. The child says she's been tested on something she has never studied before. Confusing!
21. I liked it a lot. It was giving a lot of score information about state, district and my child.
22. It shows the strengths and weaknesses of my child and is helpful to guide.
23. I became better understanding of my children's English level.
24. [I have] difficulty understanding the results and because of my language barrier, when the mail comes I mistakenly throw them away.
25. It was very short. The test and the scores [are] very easy to read and understand.

Takeaways

- Parents/guardians want more help understanding NECAP test results. They don't fully understand what the tests are measuring, how they connect to the school curricula, or what the low or high scores may mean for individual students.
- Many parents and guardians want reassurance that the school is not trying to reduce students to a number or to fit them all in one box. They prefer that NECAPs be described as "one piece but not the be-all and end-all" when it comes to assessing children.
- Parents and guardians are worried about the impact of standardized testing on students' emotional well-being and academic confidence. They would prefer that schools take measures to reduce test anxiety and reassure students, rather than making a big deal out of "test week."
- Many people expressed concerns about the impact of low scores on the school as a whole, particularly if they are a result of the test being biased against certain learners (for example, English language learners or those on IEPs). Parents/guardians would benefit from a better understanding of how various student populations are accommodated, as well as how performance affects policy and school funding decisions.

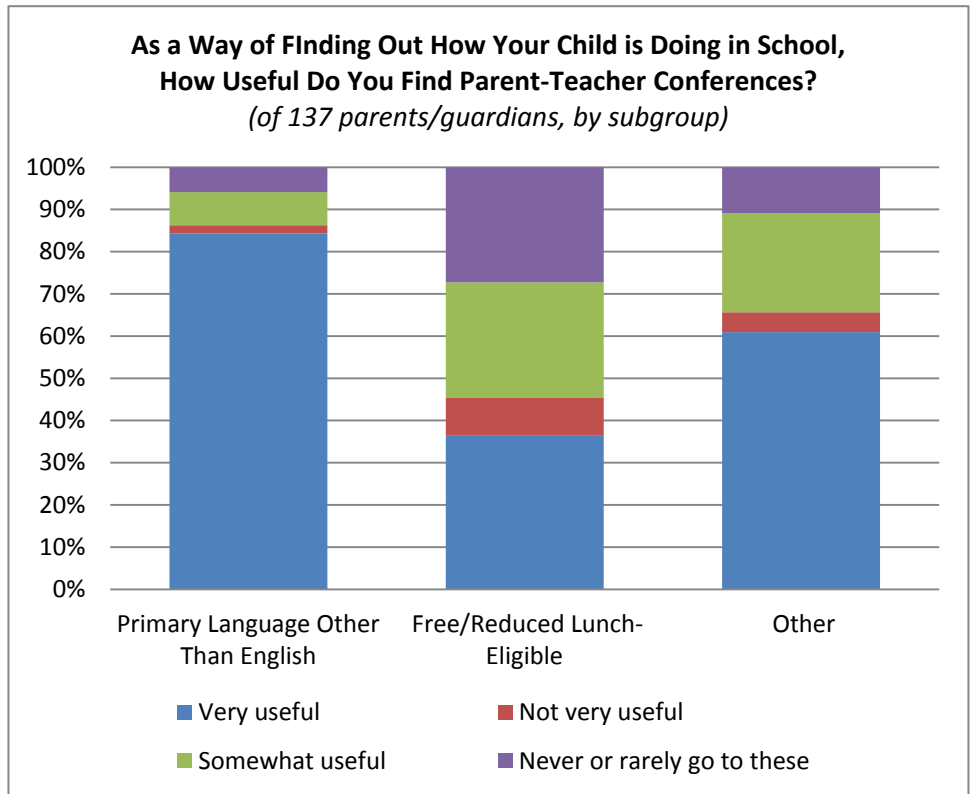
Other Recommendations from Parents and Guardians

- Framing NECAPs as practice for college- or job-entry exams might put a positive spin on the experience for students. Teachers could introduce it as a learning tool and do a debrief exercise afterwards with students.
- To even the odds, several English-speaking parents said the school should provide test materials in a student's primary language.
- Let parents/guardians know what material was covered in their children's NECAP test, and whether their children studied that material in class.
- Parents and guardians need to know if their children are eligible for special accommodations on these tests.

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Parent-Teacher Conferences

Chart: Overall, 66% of parents and guardians considered parent-teacher conferences very useful and 18% somewhat useful. There were some differences among subgroups. For example, 84% of parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English said these meetings are very useful, compared to only 36% of those with free/reduced lunch-eligible students and 61% of other families. This form of communication seems particularly effective for families with language and literacy barriers, especially when multilingual liaisons are available to interpret.



Comment Themes

Most parents and guardians were enthusiastic about the chance to meet teachers face-to-face, and placed a high value on building relationships with teachers. Indeed, several interviewees said that conferences should be offered more frequently. Opinions varied on other aspects of the conferences. Some like middle school team meetings for their efficiency and convenience, while others complained that they are overwhelming. Many commented that the high school conferences are too short and lack privacy. For families whose primary language is other than English, the conferences (when they are interpreted) present an almost singular opportunity to learn how their children are doing in school.

Sample Comments (of 125)

1. I like them as long as ALL the teachers show up. If only one or two show up, they might as well just email me. I want to meet with the whole team of people who are teaching my child so we are all on the same page.
2. I consider them a real disrespectful use of school power. If you're a parent and you can't get there during those 18 hours, you're seen as bad and they hunt you down 'til you make an appointment, but that's the only time they expose themselves to parents the entire year. We get to meet with them only once, and on their terms, when they say. And it's really for very little content. It's a marathon race around there, from the basement, to fourth floor, to third floor.

3. When they actually take place! The parent has to be notified. I was not notified for a single one. It's the parent's responsibility to set up the time, but they didn't even tell us they were happening. Winooski calls you to set the time. Burlington should do that, too.
4. The weird thing was I didn't get notification about the parent-teacher conference until the day it was held. How do I go about getting notified and/or setting one up? I got no directions. I went the whole year without doing a conference.
5. Parent couldn't get to conference last year. "I really, really wanted to do it, but there wasn't enough time available. It's over two days but those conferences should be going on through the school year. They shouldn't try to cram them into this little window."
6. I've been disappointed by those. There are days taken off of school to have those, but teachers try to squeeze them in after school, or during school. And you're given this 10-minute slot to have this conference and you're prepared to have this in-depth conversation, and you're rushed. They rush you in and there are two other sets of parents waiting in the hall. I actually think they're a joke. They just recapitulate the test scores I've already seen, the homework I've already seen, and tell me what I already know because I've been in the classroom five times. But I'm an active parent, whereas some parents aren't. I want to hear the real stuff—who [my son is] getting along with, how to push him, not push him. Tell me teacher stuff. Instead, what they say is annoying, condescending.
7. I like them. They're at a good time in the school year. School has been going on for a little while, so they know your child, but it's still early enough in the year to catch something if it's going wrong. It's also nice to put a face to the teacher.
8. I would go at the beginning and try and talk with every teacher and just say 'I'm so and so, the parent of so and so' and watch their face either light up or not; it's very useful. The teachers are candid and I think they appreciate parents that come because not a lot of parents come. Sometimes I have things to say, feedback to the teachers about how my daughter is liking the classes, and I like giving them that feedback. I enjoy them thoroughly; I kind of wish the conferences were in the spring, too.
9. Depends on how well you prepare for them. There could be more coaching for parents on how to prepare for these. It needs to be open-ended questions, a framework and structure. You need to know what you want to accomplish when you go in or it isn't useful at all.
10. I like it because it's the one time that, even if you don't have any problems, it's your time to hear how your child is doing. Otherwise, if there are no issues, you don't have a lot of contact.
11. I meet with them rarely otherwise. Teachers are much more receptive because they're ready and have spreadsheets in front of them. Otherwise, they're a little reluctant to meet.
12. There's not enough time. It might be helpful to have a written report [from the teacher] because it's not really enough time; it's a just a meet-and-greet.
13. It is an opportunity to help teachers understand my child's different characteristics, and to see your child as an individual. When issues are raised during these meetings, there is a follow-up.
14. Our language barrier prevented us from understanding what teacher was saying and also prevented us from what we wanted to say to them.

15. These conferences are very important. It is the only time when the teacher really takes the time to speak about my child. It helps me know the teachers better and get to meet and know the person who is teaching my child.
16. I always had a great time at parent-teacher conferences. The teachers gave me a lot of information and advice to help my kids.
17. I get chances to interact with other parents, too.
18. There is a lack of transportation where I have to find someone to give me a ride. There are scheduling issues where the time that works for liaisons and for me differs.
19. [I never or rarely go to these] because I don't know how they work. Parents are not notified in time and are told last minute that they were supposed to call in to make an appointment. Daughter doesn't have information about how they work either. Do we see just one teacher at a time, all the teachers? The format has changed over the years. The process is very unclear.
20. My husband goes to them. At that moment, it's useful, but two weeks later, things aren't good again, and none of that matters. They're not enough for the whole year; what's lacking most is that if something goes bad the next week, you need to know about it.
21. You feel like heifers in line in BHS; you talk to people in back and front of you; it loses something totally in the translation. So again, I go to Jupiter Grades, and if it looks golden, I don't go.

Takeaways

- Some parents and guardians don't understand how the conferences work, when they happen, or what is expected of them. They would prefer to get reminders about how conferences are scheduled and, even a list of open-ended questions they could pose to teachers.
- Parents and guardians want to get to know the teachers who spend time with their children, and have enough time with them to hear about how their children are doing, not just academically, but socially and behaviorally. If meetings are rushed, or the content is superficial, families feel let down.
- Parents and guardians would prefer to have more than one or two parent-teacher conferences each year. More options mean more parents/guardians will be able to attend at least one conference.
- People see the conferences as their primary opportunity to learn all they want to know, and are concerned when some teachers don't attend or aren't available. Consistent participation by all the teachers is critical to a positive experience for parents/guardians.
- Parents and guardians whose primary language is other than English need an interpreter in order to participate meaningfully in parent-teacher conferences. Some said they don't come to conferences because they assume an interpreter will not be available.
- The more prepared teachers are, the more positive the experience for families. Some parents described teachers involving students themselves in presenting materials at conferences, or being very organized with spreadsheets so they knew what to discuss ahead of time. Parents and guardians appreciate these extras and take them as signs that teachers truly care.
- Interviewees say the ability of teachers to conduct meaningful conferences varies a great deal. Some are prepared and have a lot to say; others seem to be winging it. While personalities obviously differ, teachers should not offer radically different experiences to parents and guardians.

Other Recommendations from Parents and Guardians

- Could the schools arrange a series of teacher conferences where parents/guardians are invited in smaller groups? This would reduce the sense of chaos and being rushed that some people mentioned. In addition, a few parents/guardians said the conferences are an opportunity to meet other parents; having smaller groups might help facilitate new parent-to-parent relationships.
- Different parents and guardians have different needs. At the middle schools, some feel intimidated by meeting with the whole team at once; in high school some are concerned about privacy. Teachers could ask whether families prefer a private or individual follow-up meeting.
- Some parents/guardians feel the time pressure of these conferences. One person wanted teachers to prepare something in writing that she could take home. This might help ensure everyone ends up with same level of detail about their child.

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BHS Parent-Teacher Conferences: Arena-Style

Chart: Only two-thirds of parents/guardians said they had attended arena-style conferences (some didn't have students in high school yet, while others hadn't yet made it to a conference). Among subgroups, families with free/reduced lunch-eligible children were the least likely to have attended—50% said they hadn't attended, compared to roughly one-quarter of all other families. Of all those who had attended, just over half said they liked the format. One-quarter were neutral and one in five said they disliked the format.

Comment Themes

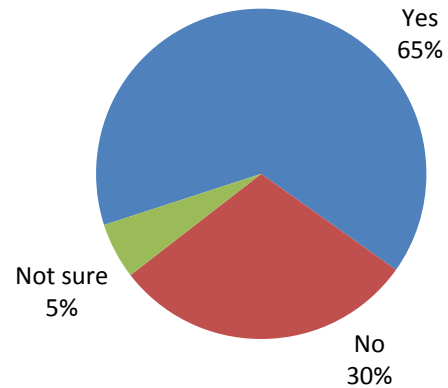
Interviewees who liked arena-style format said that although they had to get used to it, it seemed a reasonable system given the size of the school. Several people called the format convenient and flexible, appreciated that they could choose which teachers to see, and liked getting all of their children's conferences done in one day. Parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English said they enjoyed interacting with other parents; on the other hand, some were concerned about confidentiality.

Parents/guardians who disliked the format said it was too confusing or overwhelming, that they could not meet with the teachers they wanted to see, and that the experience was not private enough. Some people said they would rather meet with teachers one-on-one in a separate room, even if it meant they received less time. It is possible that confidentiality may be more of a concern for parents/guardians whose students are struggling academically or behaviorally. Some interviewees found it difficult to attend during the day because of work, or were upset that not all the teachers were there.

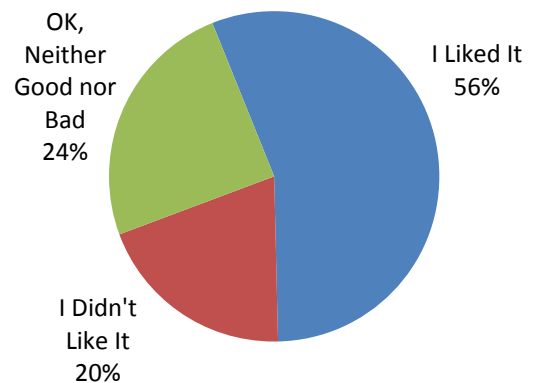
Sample Comments (of 67)

1. I'm not sure how else they would do it in a big school like that; it works fine.
2. I think it's convenient for everybody, for the teachers and the parents. It makes the teacher accessible—I have to wait but I have more than one child, so I can go to somebody else.
3. There is no confidentiality and you feel the pressure of all the other parents who want to talk to the teacher. I want to be in the actual classroom my child is in, getting the feel of the classroom. I want it to be more personal.

Have You Attended Arena-Style Conferences at BHS?
(of 91 parents/guardians)



If Yes, Did You Like How This Format Worked?
(of 61 parents/guardians)



4. I didn't initially [like it], but now that I've been to enough, I think it does flow better. It allows the parent to say 'Okay, there is no one in the French line, let me go there first.'
5. You wait and wait and wait for teachers. I don't know what the alternative is, but this is hard. I sometimes just leave. When you can get in front of them, they're useful.
6. I like it, when the teachers are there. Last year I had three students at the high school. I was able to see all of the teachers for two of my students, but only three teachers for my other child. If you're having conferences, the teachers need to be there. It should be in their contract or something. Social studies, math and English were missing! They need to be there the whole time.
7. It worked well; it just moves along. And since you're not pinpointed to a specific meeting time, it's more flexible for the parents.
8. We go every year. It's an odd format. You've got other parents waiting right behind you; there is a lack of privacy, but it's a logistical nightmare to do it other ways. Maybe it's good at the beginning of the year to just meet them, but for the middle of the year or later conferences, it would be nice to make an appointment with just one teacher so you can have privacy. But I understand how hard that would be for the school to schedule.
9. I scanned the room and did it in record time. My husband works for the school and so he told me how it works. I had the inside scoop.
10. As a working parent, it's great to have that open time. It's a drag if a teacher's not there [though]. If they could make it a priority, that would be nice. Or send an email to say, 'Just wanted to let you know I won't be there during the Tuesday morning slot' and then I'd go at a different time....
11. I don't like queuing up. I can't imagine that after an hour and a half of this kind of thing, the teachers don't get glazed.
12. It works well because even at the middle school when the conferences were scheduled in the classrooms, some people would go over and you'd end up waiting, so it's not more efficient the classroom way. In the high school conference, you can see if another parent is waiting and if not, you can go a little longer.
13. I liked it because this way I can drop in or stop by and be seen without an appointment.
14. There was too much waiting around; time was wasted.
15. We were not able to communicate with them due to our language obstacle. So we really are not sure which format is better.
16. I can't stand and wait for a long time; there should be seats for parents. Also it's hard to find teachers. I don't like the idea of having teachers' names taped to the floor.
17. I could decide who to meet. I liked that aspect, but it was very busy and confusing at the same time. Too many teachers busy meeting too many parents felt rushed and impersonal.
18. Arena-style conference is not good for my family. We need privacy and confidential [meetings].

Takeaways

- Most parents/guardians appreciate the flexibility of the arena-style conference—that they can drop in at their convenience and skip from teacher to teacher depending on the length of lines and who they want to see. However, some said they simply can't tolerate the noise, crowds, waiting and unpredictability. Efforts to minimize the “controlled chaos” would help more people navigate.

Appendix More on Parent-Teacher Conferences

- There were many comments about wasting time in long lines. Providing something for parents and guardians to do while they wait might help.
- Many parents/guardians find the atmosphere impersonal, a bit rushed and not private enough. The schools should either provide more privacy for those who want it, or anticipate those needs and contact families proactively to set up private appointments. Schools could also establish a standard maximum time limit that parents/guardians understand up front; parents/guardians who have more in-depth issues could be guided to set follow-up appointments.
- Parents and guardians expect to have access to all of their children's teachers during conference days. They want assurance that attendance is mandatory for teachers and that teachers will stay until they've seen everyone.
- Some people have difficulty standing for long periods of time. Those parents and guardians need seating.

Other Recommendations from Parents and Guardians

- One parent suggested using the arena-style format for the first conference of the year, but following up with scheduled, one-on-one conferences in subsequent months.
- Parents and guardians understand some teachers are parents themselves and have family obligations. If a teacher can't be in attendance for the whole time, they would prefer to get an email before the conference, saying when the teacher *will* be available.
- A few interviewees said they had difficulty finding teachers and didn't like having teacher's names taped to the floor. Hanging them up high in a visible space or offering parents a “map” could minimize confusion.

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Student Participation in Parent-Teacher Conferences

Chart: A clear majority of parents and guardians were in favor of including students in parent-teacher conferences. Another 17% were unsure and 9% were against it. Only slight differences existed among subgroups—families whose primary language is other than English appeared a bit more enthusiastic about the idea than others. In interviews, multilingual liaisons said that these parents are often eager to have their child sit with them so they can both hear from the teacher directly.

Comment Themes

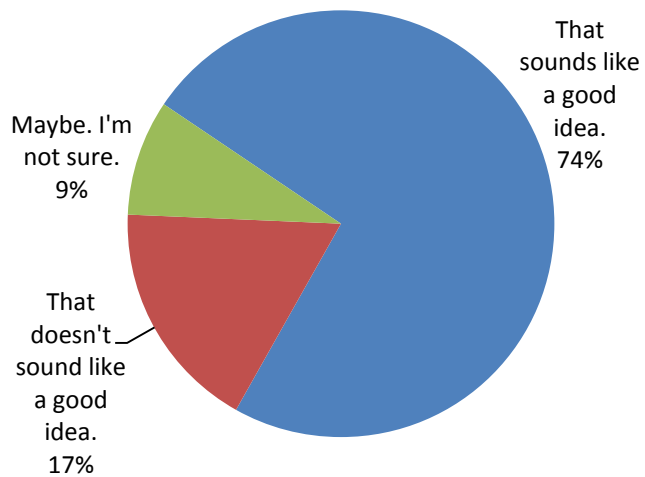
Parents and guardians who liked the idea, most often said that joining conferences encourages students to take an active role and be responsible for their education, provides an opportunity to directly observe student-teacher relationships, and fosters genuine collaboration. Many people also talked about how including students in conferences feels more respectful of young people. Those who had done this before and reported positive experiences, often described ways that teachers engaged students in preparing for conferences ahead of time, allowing them to do their own mini-presentations.

Those who were not sure or disliked the idea commonly talked about concerns the student might be intimidated or discouraged by teacher comments, might feel outnumbered, or that parents themselves may hold back questions to protect their students' feelings. Several people mentioned the importance of speaking directly to and including all parties who attend these conferences. In particular, parents and guardians whose primary language is other than English often said that they want students to see that teachers and parents are united about academic and behavior issues, and that the conferences are an opportunity for their students to learn firsthand about their strengths and weaknesses.

Sample Comments (of 119)

1. It depends on the parent and the child. In my case, there are some teachers my child doesn't like and so she doesn't want to go because she feels attacked. I let my daughter decide because I don't want her to feel like that and to have to walk out.
2. This parent would like to see how her student interacts with his teachers and observe the level of respect and knowledge between the two. She would like to see that the teacher and student understand each other and that the teacher really understands the student.

What Do You Think about the Idea of Having Students Themselves Participate in the Parent-Teacher Conference?
(of 137 parents/guardians)



3. It happened in sixth grade year, and it was one of the best 10 minutes I've spent in a public school. They worked on prepping for the conference at school, and his teacher showed him how to do a presentation of his own work, and that was meaningful for him and for us.
4. That's good because that way they can be right there to hear what's going on. We can all be there to come to an agreement. You can all be talking together about what you should do. It's a good thing to have all of us there so we aren't talking behind each other's backs.
5. This is their education so it is important to help them buy in to the process. It's good for the student to know that we support the teacher, but also to support the student if there are issues with the teacher.
6. It's a good thing to be there for part of the conference, and then they should leave. As long as kids understand you'll share with them afterwards what's been said, and they trust you.
7. It's a great venue where parents can be parents with the teacher, and not have the input of the child. You can just be a parent and ask questions that you might not ask if the student was there.
8. I think it's very effective. I brought one [child] with me who was having issues earlier in the year. I did it so she could hear what her teachers really had to say. She felt like all the teachers hated her, but that wasn't the case at all. If the student is struggling in any way, I think it's a very useful tool.
9. The child needs to be responsible for their own grades. We're preparing them for their own life. They need to be able to hear things that may be uncomfortable and learn to make adjustments to do better because they will have to do this in a job setting.
10. I have mixed feelings. I know there are lots of international students who participate to help translate, but the word is that the kids aren't translating correctly and tell their parents everything is great when it isn't what the teacher said. It is an important forum, and I think there shouldn't be secrets between parents and children, but sometimes you can communicate better and more directly if your kid isn't there.
11. If the students are there, the teacher doesn't give you the full picture; they tiptoe so they don't hurt anyone's self-esteem. If my kid's screwing around, I want to hear that. That's what I think is valuable about a conference. Students can be there for some of the teacher meetings but it's not necessary for the regular one.
12. This is good because the student will be aware that we are communicating.
13. This is a good idea because the child will be able to hear directly from the teacher why he is not doing well in some of his classes.
14. With our daughter being present, at least she could help us communicate with a teacher a bit. But her English is not that good either. Also on some subjects, we would like to talk to a teacher without her presence.
15. I love the idea of my child being involved. Hearing about your own education this way can only be helpful. Of course it may depend on the child's character; if the child is timid this may not be the best idea/approach.
16. Please implement this idea. My kid never told the truth about school. This conference will do it.
17. It might help my children to recognize their weaknesses and strengths so they can improve their grades.
18. I like it that [my student] can hear all about himself, good and not so good.

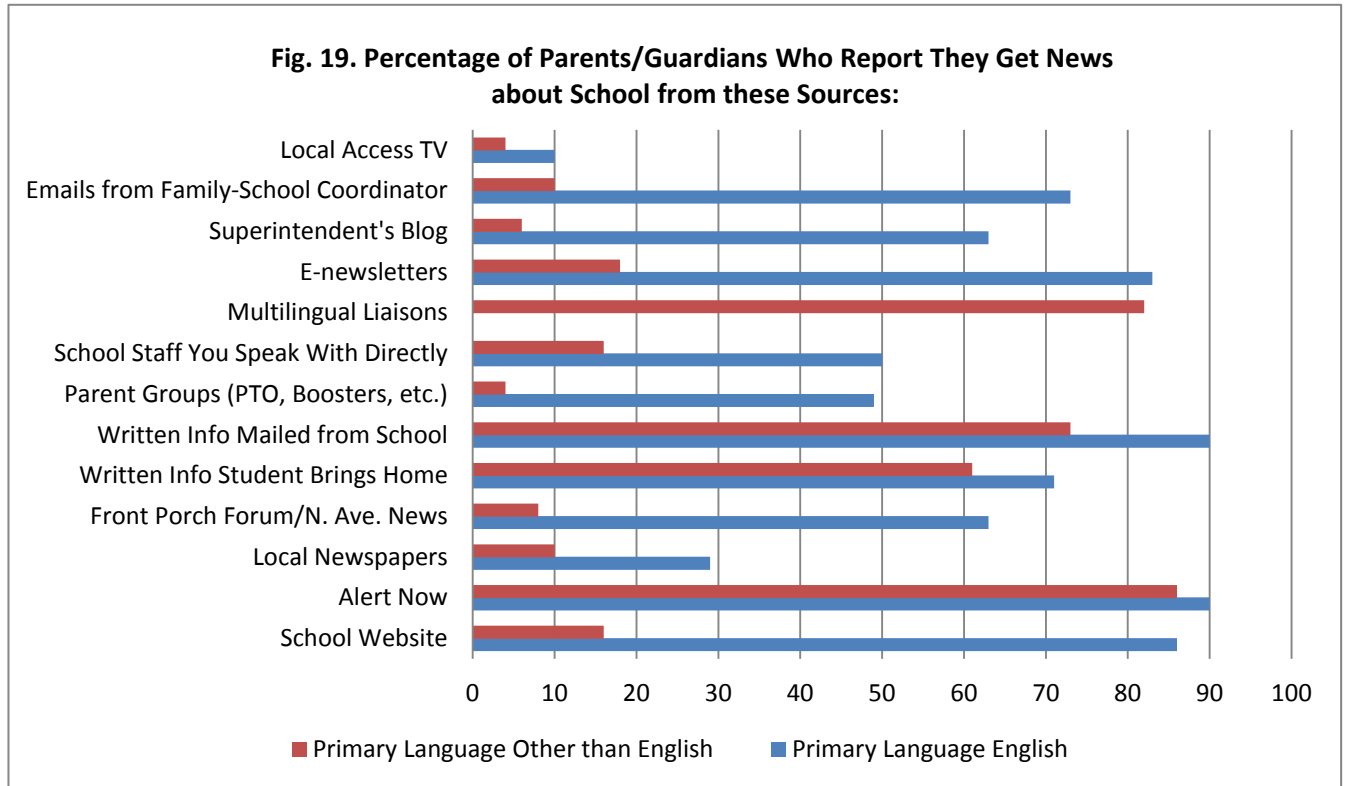
Takeaways

- Involving students directly in their own education, especially at the high school level, is an idea with almost universal appeal. If students join conferences, parents and guardians prefer that they are actively involved in either presenting information or assessing their own strengths and weaknesses so they feel engaged and that their opinions are valued.
- Parents and guardians don't want to lose the opportunity to speak with teachers privately. If students join conferences, people want a built-in time that is just for the adults.
- There's concern about how parent-teacher conferences may affect students who are less confident or who are struggling academically or socially. Parents and guardians need reassurance that teachers can handle discussing sensitive topics and giving constructive criticism without hurting student's feelings or discouraging them.
- Parents and guardians whose primary language is other than English are strongly in favor of the idea of including students in parent-teacher conferences. It's important to them that teachers and parents present a united front, and everyone hears the same thing at the same time. Multilingual liaisons are essential to ensuring this happens.

Other Recommendations from Parents and Guardians

- It would work best to have students join parents and teachers for the beginning of conference meetings, but then reserve time just for adults to talk.
- Parents and guardians want to make sure conferences are a positive experience if students participate. If students are present, their perspectives need to be taken into account.
- Some people prefer that students have the choice whether to attend. It's possible there needs to be some incentive (for example, extra credit) in order to encourage students to participate.
- Arena-style conferences may not be a good format if students are included in parent-teacher conferences. Parents and guardians think that adolescents are too self-conscious to want to have these meetings in front of their peers; they would prefer private conferences if students are invited.
- For students who are struggling, meeting with—and hearing about their weaknesses—from a number of teachers on one day could be overwhelming and disheartening. Conferences may need to be spread out over time if there are multiple areas of challenge.

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Learning about School News

Chart: We asked the 137 parents/guardians participating in this study whether they get general information about things going on at school from the sources above. This chart breaks the parents/guardians into two groups: those who speak English as a primary language, and those who do not. Interviewees who speak English as a primary language rely on many forms of communication, including electronic newsletters and email updates. Parents/guardians whose primary language is not English have a much narrower range of sources, relying heavily on multilingual liaisons and on written information from the school that someone can interpret for them. In a focus group with parents/guardians who speak Somali or Maay Maay, participants said they would rather have written materials in English—many can't read their primary language (or it has no written form), and they want a chance to improve their own English skills.

Comment Themes

Almost 90% of interviewees get information through Alert Now phone calls; some complain that the calls come too frequently. Parents and guardians say that written material sent home from the school with their children doesn't necessarily get delivered to them. Emails from the Family-School Coordinator were particularly popular among parents and guardians. Interviewees still depend on friends and their children as a major source of information.

Sample Comments *(of 87)*

1. Improve the format and updating of the school website. Some events aren't on it at all. The calendar isn't up to date or inclusive. If I knew more about what's available on local TV [regarding school], I might use it more.
2. Porch Forum is an important communication tool.
3. The PTO newsletter from middle school is great and has an awesome calendar.
4. The website is my big go-to, and if anything confuses me [such as apparent conflicts with other schedules for sports or whatever], I call the front office.
5. The district Facebook page is quite nice. You hear about successes and pictures of what the students are doing.
6. Family-School Coordinator emails are my favorite source—they're always relevant. I don't like the new school website. It's difficult to navigate and the calendar isn't up to date.
7. Alert Now is overused. It's supposed to be for emergencies, not harvest dinners. It's gotten to the point that you don't want to pick up the phone when you know it's the school.
8. They don't send things home anymore; they expect to some degree that kids bring info to their parents on their own. I would like more written information. Important information you really want parents to know, it's got to be in print even if you think it's wasting paper. That's how I would get it best, even though I do have a computer.
9. [Nancy Knox] gets a check++. She's up-to-date and organized and involved. They should send the emails to students as well, though. I forward mine to my daughter and she finds it helpful; there are things she didn't know about.
10. I don't have any internet right now.
11. They don't seem to send any written information home at all anymore.
12. Email newsletters are good, but the high school does a better job with these than the middle school. The high school website is better than the middle school as well, more up to date.
13. Alert Now comes way too much at the middle school level. Toward the end of the year, I was getting two or three calls a night about events and things like that. I'd rather they just emailed me, and not called during dinner about that type of thing.
14. Nancy Knox's emails are the most useful thing ever and they should have that at the middle school, but they don't. At the middle school there's a PTO blog that is the main way I get info, but I don't know how people with ESL or who don't have access to a computer do.
15. It can never hurt to have more communication. There were some glitches in the system that were kind of significant—one time one of my kids was inducted into the honor society and I didn't find out about it until afterwards which I was unhappy about. Also another daughter got an award but nobody notified us, which they apologized about, but it was still a mistake.
16. I would change how the teachers communicate with parents about non-academics. The emails, the newsletters, the website, are good but—well, my kids play sports and no one ever sent a schedule home, so that's frustrating. I had to fish through the whole [online] calendar. It should be more easily accessible; everything for the calendar was smooshed together. Altogether it looked lazy. There's a director and an assistant for sports, so what are they doing? It needs to be refined. And it's in 'code' so people don't know what it means.

17. The middle school doesn't let us know about events that are happening. Like they got rid of the honor roll assembly and started town hall meetings they said parents would be invited to, but they're not. I just happened to check the website and saw it. Students were given awards and parents who could have been there weren't.
18. If it is an important issue, the school needs to assume that their child will not tell the parents. The messages parents received is that if your child doesn't tell you, you will not know what is going on.
19. The MLL is more effective in communicating with me [than any of the other forms of communication].
20. Because of my language barrier, I cannot read any newsletters and it is difficult to join any parent groups.
21. If through multilingual liaison, we could learn what is going on in the school. Otherwise due to our language barrier we felt that we were left out and no connection with the school, for we could not understand any other sources you mentioned above.
22. Because of my language barrier I don't have much connection with local community or get news from TV, newspaper. I pretty much depend on my daughter to help me understand some news on school website or material they brought or school sent home.

Takeaways

- Parents and guardians whose primary language is other than English vary a great deal in their ability to communicate with the school. Many are extremely reliant on multilingual liaisons and written information that is sent home and then translated for them, by an MLL or family member. However, our interviews suggest that not every parent who needs an MLL actually uses their services, so school staff should not assume that important information is getting through.
- While several parents said they appreciated Alert Now just as it is, a vocal minority said it comes far too often, and for relatively unimportant things.
- If you really want parents/guardians to know something, put it in print. Email isn't enough, even for the parents and guardians who have email.

Other Recommendations from Parents and Guardians

- The Burlington High School principal's coffee event should be rotated so it is not always on the same day of the week. With a rotating schedule, different people would be able to attend.
- All written information from the school should be available in several languages. Parents and guardians should be able to call and have materials read to them if necessary.
- The e-newsletter should be summarized; readers could click on headlines for more information.
- The e-newsletter should include more comprehensive information about special events, such as assemblies and afterschool programs.
- The middle schools should have regular email updates like ones sent by Nancy Knox in the past.
- The schools should produce a comprehensive paper calendar of events for each month that can be put on refrigerator doors.
- Alert Now messages publicizing events should come out in enough time so that a family could actually attend.

Appendix More on Getting General School News

- The superintendent writes something every month in one of the papers; it would be nice if that were sent via email directly in case people missed it.
- Is it possible to get everything in one place, rather than having to search around for it?
- Update teacher profiles on the websites.

The One Thing Parents and Guardians Would Change

If there's one thing you could change about the way the school communicates with you about your child, what it would be? We asked all 137 interviewees this question. Many said they wouldn't change anything, but many others had substantive suggestions. Below is a comprehensive list of lightly edited comments, organized by general theme. Comments appearing under "Middle School" are not the only ones in this section that concern, or are applicable to, the middle schools; they are simply the comments that *directly mention* middle school. This list excludes comments in which parents/guardians said they would change nothing. Note that some of the comments below have been used to support other sections of this report.

Middle School

1. This is for the middle school—they don't let us know about events that are happening. Like they got rid of the honor roll assembly and started town hall meetings they said parents would be invited to, but they're not. I just happened to check the website and saw it. Students were given awards and parents who could have been there weren't.
2. I would like to know what is going in the school, what events are happening so I can choose what to go to or not go to. I don't want to be going to every single thing; I'm a busy person. If I could get a monthly calendar and put it on the refrigerator that would be hugely helpful. The other thing would be for my kids' academics. In middle school they have different teachers for different topics and that's just the nature of the beast. If there was *one* person to meet with, that would be great. The second parent-teacher conference, it was overwhelming to have five teachers there, where do you start? So maybe there should just be one person who would know how my student was doing in all the subjects. And how they're doing compared with other students across the country. Vermont students are poorly prepared in math and science, though it might get good marks on class size and things like that.
3. If it is an important issue, the school needs to assume that the child will not tell the parents. The message parents received is that if your child doesn't tell you, you will not know what is going on. ... Also, the idea that they have team teachers and they are with that teacher for two years and they communicate with each other and bring the student along. What isn't communicated at the beginning of that 7/8 grade period is the content that the students need to master and how they are progressing. The capstone at the end of 8th grade that goes back to look at where they were, what has been accomplished and what is waiting ahead in high school. Where have they struggled, what have they done well in, what are they interested, what can they do to improve? There needs to be a hand-off between middle school and high school teachers/administration. There probably is some communication, but the families need to be included.
4. The high school does a good job; there's nothing I would change. The middle school does most things really well. My kids would tell you they've had a great experience. But when it comes to giving opportunities to kids who are doing well, they could improve. I wish the school were more proactive about initiating contact with me when my kids are getting bored in class, because they need more. I wish there were more options for engaging them and that the school did a better job explaining options to parents. To get them moved into another class, I would have had to go make a case out

of it with the school and sometimes my kids don't want me to do that. They say, 'I don't want you to have to go in and meet about it' but then later in the year, they'll say, 'I wish we had done that. I think it was a mistake to do nothing.'

5. I really like the Monday Memo that Edmunds Elementary does—they should do something like that. It comes once a week, you know when to expect it and it helps you prep for the week. Then they try not to send you anything else during the week. It's great. You know when it's coming and it's all inclusive.
6. It can never hurt to have more communication. There were some glitches in the system that were kind of significant—one time one of my kids was inducted into the honor society and I didn't find out about it until afterwards, which I was unhappy about. Also another daughter got an award but nobody notified us, which they apologized about, but it was still a mistake.
7. Middle school gets out earlier for teacher training and the high school gets out later—it would be helpful if they could line them up better, or perhaps re-evaluate if the schedule changes are worthwhile.
8. I give them credit; they do try and get information out there. It would be better for that Friday memo to be emailed rather than have the kid bring it home, because we don't always get it.
9. This isn't really related, but I'd like to include it. In the building itself [EMS], there is no walkway leading to the main entrance and no parking there and it's a very unfriendly access point. There is a lack of connectedness between the main entrance and parking and signage. I think improving that would improve how people feel they can connect with people inside the building. I think with just some signage and a main walkway, they could improve things.
10. There's not as much face time with the teachers. My son is a freshman now but in 8th grade, I didn't even see his teachers at all. I didn't have a conference because they didn't feel that he needed one. I think that that really breaks down the communication. [Focus group participant]

Parent-Teacher Conferences

11. The only thing I would change is the way the parent-teacher conferences are held.
12. Formal conferences for everyone, and more advance notice of things—like when the school needs help or volunteers. They ask for it way too late for me to help out.
13. Maybe adding another parent-teacher conference in the spring. Making sure that counselors or contacts have small caseloads so more individualized attention can be given.
14. I'd like the school to communicate more often, and hold more parent conferences.
15. The parent conferences at BHS should [be] set up by classes [freshman, sophomore, junior and senior] separately.
16. I hope BHS school could improve its communication with my children and us. [This parent said she didn't know that the high school had parent-teacher conferences.]

More Consistent and Frequent Communication

17. More consistent information about things like after-school programming and other special or outside regular class opportunities. Also, what events are most appropriate for parents to attend?

18. I would just want more personal communication on a semi-regular basis. It doesn't have to be every week—I'd like that, but I know that would be hard for teachers. They have so many students.
19. "Consistency. Parents at this age are not getting information from their young people freely, so more consistency in sharing the student's day with parents." This parent also feels that local student-based nonprofits should be more connected with the school/parent information system, so that families could access more of the wrap-around services available in the community.
20. Increased communication from teachers.
21. More communications, communications and communications. Call us anytime.
22. If there is an issue, the parent would like to be made aware about it by the school and not find out through other means. She would like to have confidentiality. Her son had an issue with a teacher; he wanted his mother to do something, but she didn't know what to do.
23. I would like them to be responsive when I ask them a question. If I email them, I shouldn't have to email three times to get an answer, and to three different people.
24. Channels of communication are not consistent. I never heard of the town hall meeting this fall. Not sure if it's a timing issue or what. All channels should communicate all the same information at the same time. Minimize clutter of words—keep it simple.
25. I would love to see more of a narrative progress report once a quarter from teachers about my kids that's not a grade—that's their comments about what they see in class and how they think my child is progressing and what needs improvement.
26. I would probably get more information from the guidance counselor. We're coming in at the end of high school for [my son].... I don't know if he's going to graduate. I need to know how he can participate in other activities. Like recently I got a notice that he needs to do a community service, but I don't know how/where he should find out how to do this. I think a support group for parents and students who haven't been in school here since the beginning would be helpful. They do a good job in the pre- and elementary school—they communicate with me all the time, but not the high school. [This family moved from another country recently.]
27. This interviewee would like to be better informed than she is about certain opportunities and programs at the school that could help her granddaughter academically.
28. I wish the teachers didn't hold the parents at arm's length so much when there are things going on the parent should know before the parent-teacher conference. I do wish the teachers were more receptive to parent input.
29. We live across the street from the school so he walks there and I never go there, and feel out of the loop. I would appreciate an email update from the teachers or team just checking in, how he's doing, good or bad. Maybe a couple of times a year. The open house is at the start, it would be a better if it were a little later.
30. More phone conversations from teachers; they need to do them.
31. I'd like regular progress reports that are more inclusive, that really tell me a lot more; I would like the chance to really be able to get to parent-teacher conferences.
32. I think maybe the only thing that is lacking that requires very direct questions of my child is about the non-core classes and teachers and things that are going on—music and phys ed and language

and things of that sort. I feel like there's not a lot of talking in general about these classes. It's all about the core classes.

33. For my son, if something happened, like he didn't do homework or his behavior wasn't very good, I'd like to know, but we don't know, really. I don't expect a call every day because the teachers are busy, but maybe a report every week.
34. Call immediately [if there's a problem]. Don't wait.
35. [I would like] frequent information about [my] child's progress through mail.
36. I would just want more regular, weekly updates from teachers. As far as factual information from the school, that comes through fine, but students' academic progress isn't done at all and is the hardest to tackle. It's hardest because it's in real time and how they're doing changes week-to-week, so it's harder for teachers to keep up with.
37. I would need phone calls from the source early enough so you can help the situation or change it, as opposed to 'it's too late; it's over.'

Jupiter Grades

38. Make it more individualized to the child and update Jupiter Grades more frequently. Maybe even add more qualitative information to Jupiter Grades so there is a chance for give and take. Like, 'This week she's seemed to have motivational problems,' or some comments like that.
39. I think the website [EMS] could be better. Maybe through Jupiter Grades there could be a way to check for news. Maybe if there was a weekly events section, like what's happening this week—sports, field trips, plays—that would be really great if it was updated regularly.
40. Having Jupiter Grades be up to date and a bit more personal or specific.
41. I'm happy about it. Maybe just keeping Jupiter Grades updated and [making sure] that all the classes report through Jupiter Grades.

Earlier Notice about School Events

42. More notice about events—earlier notice would be better.
43. I would like everything to be current; you find out the weekend that something's happening, you find out that Friday. Advance warning would be great. Like signing up for driver's ed, we get the email two days before. And then we need to reorganize and figure it out.

Websites

44. Improve the format and updating of the school website. Some events aren't on it at all. The calendar isn't up to date or inclusive. If I knew more about what's available on local TV [regarding school], I might use it more.
45. Find a way to make it easier to get ongoing, accurate and timely updates. Keep the website up to date for all kinds of information about school schedules, closings, events, etc. As to events, Nancy Knox and the Front Porch Forum do a good job, which should be continued or expanded.
46. I don't know if this is possible, but if there were one place I could find out everything, that would be great. I usually go to the BSD website and it's pretty good.

47. The only thing I can think of is maybe having the website be more up-to-date with teacher profiles. Some of them do a really good job with this and others don't, which I understand. But it would be good if there were more about the teachers online.
48. Everything's gone digital and as parents they expect you to go on-line to their site and find out exactly [what's going on with your child]. You can't go and see what the classes are doing individually, you know? The flyers used to tell you. [Focus group participant]
49. The emails, the newsletters, the website, are good, but—well, my kids play sports and no one ever sent a schedule home, so that's frustrating. I had to fish through the whole [online] calendar. It should be more easily accessible; everything for the calendar was smooshed together. Altogether it looked lazy. There's a director and an assistant for sports so what are they doing? It needs to be refined. And it's in 'code' so people don't know what it means.

Newsletters, Blogs

50. In the newsletters, maybe there could be more of a list instead of so elaborate and long. If I were interested, I could click the link and get more information.
51. I would like it if I could get an audible version of the school newsletter available in every likely language. Perhaps the Alert Now system could have an option to hear the entire school newsletter or sections of it. There should be the option to choose what kind of alerts or options you want to get.
52. I think that the PTO does a great job with blogging but what I find is that I get the email that says there's a new blog post, and I'm like, 'I'll check that later,' then the next blog is out and I haven't seen the first one. If I get the email in front of me, even if it's 10 at night, then I can look at it. I'd rather see it directly in front of me on my phone, than have to click on a link or find a computer.
53. We're proactive in so many different areas. Jeannie Collins writes something every month in one of the papers; what would be nice is if that would be shot out through email directly in case people don't see it.
54. The use of [a] blog by the superintendent is not convenient for me due to my limited English.

Alert Now

55. Alert Now. It's a pet peeve of mine. It was supposed to be for emergencies only, and it's being utilized for everything now, and it's sort of like the boy who cried wolf. We're almost desensitized to it. It should be emergency-only; but if there's a real one, people may not be as apt to listen to it.
56. More communication in general—the Alert Nows are used way too sparingly. As a parent, I love them. I'm a huge fan of those, because they inform everybody in the school community at the same time. So more of them would be great, and more info written that gets sent home, too.
57. Just more substance. I appreciate the Alert Now stuff, but I probably got 20 Alert Now phone calls, and they're just about unsubstantive things. Yes, I want to know about snow days, but I *really* want to know about how my son is doing in school.

Attitude

58. Be a little bit softer. Be a little more open-minded to a student's emotional state.

59. I'd say that I'd like more understanding. In some cases, a little more understanding of the child's needs and their wants.
60. I would prefer if they were more intrusive and less 'understanding.' Sometimes I felt like they could have been more blunt about what was going on in terms of information about my child. I understand that they don't want to judge, but it would sometimes be helpful if I had more opportunity to address potential problems.
61. With any printed effort (report card, etc.) always think of the student reading it and incorporate positive messages along with the recommended improvements. For example, if a student talks a lot in class maybe say: 'You are a natural leader, the other students listen to you. So how can we use this skill to model...?'
62. [I would like it if] the school would listen to the parents from the start and believe them. [This parents' son has an IEP and she feels that the school did not follow protocol. She would like the school to handle these cases more carefully.]

Primary Language Other than English

63. We hope that the school could provide a language interpreter at a parent meeting so that we would be able to learn about how our kid is doing in the school; to learn about the school and programs, and the subjects she is learning at the school so that we could be part of it and continue to provide parenting and guidance to our kid.
64. I sincerely hope that school could improve its communication with us parents who have language difficulty. We want to work together with the school regarding any issues, such as academic work or behavior issue or teenager's challenge (physiological or psychological change). In order to do so I would prefer to have a face-to-face meeting with teacher or counselor, also with a language interpreter doing interpreting for us so that we could communicate, to understand each other, to discuss the issue and work together to solve the problems. So many times I wanted to talk to a school counselor for help. But due to my language barrier, I gave it up feeling frustrated.
65. It's good so far. They gather everybody and explain/talk about what's happening at school with students.
66. I mostly prefer my student's performance to be sent through mail[box].

Graduation and College

67. They should sometimes send out information that's just targeted to some people. I had a student graduate recently and I think they do a horrendous job of prepping kids to graduate. There are fewer kids from BHS getting into college now and that's moving in the wrong direction. If they had information just for those families whose kids were graduating, that would help. You can't assume that families can do this on their own.
68. Shouldn't there be a list of what credits you need? Shouldn't you as parents and educators be able to access that? It should be on the web. It should be accessible to everybody. [Focus group participant]
69. There are many schools in the county that have a computer software program for college decision-making—for SAT registration, for sending recommendations and transcripts to colleges, that lets

students plug in all their current data and shows them how likely they'd be to get in and succeed at any particular college. It also helps organize all the financial aid materials. It's called Naviance, and this parent thinks it or some similar software would be great for students, parents and the school. It would minimize all the communication and coordination that needs to take place between the various parties. Parent says BHS offers a great night of information regarding planning for college where they tell you where to register for certain things, and point you to free search engines, but it turns out those search engines aren't very helpful because they aren't specific to the student. "As we think about all these innovations, it's ironic that we don't have what is so basic."

70. Nepali-speaking parents assume their children are college-bound if they're doing well in school. "If our kids are not doing well, we want them to send us letters home. They need to tell all parents about this, not just the ones that ask. It would be more helpful if the letter were in Nepali." [Focus group participant]

Miscellaneous

71. If [teachers] gave us something like what [our kids are] going to be studying that month in advance, we could know as parents to maybe prep and help them. If they need a book, to go out and get that book or a video or something, or whatever will help them. Kids won't talk but it's easier... to know what's going on—you can help them. But [the way it is now] you've got to guess. [Focus group participant]
72. There are too many people this parent talks to, too many involved in getting the answer she is looking for from the school. She has to go through so many people; it is a week later before it comes together sooner.
73. I think the faculty and staff need to be more culturally aware and competent. The demographics are changing and it's important they make a major effort to keep up with that.
74. Parental involvement in the school should be mandatory; you should have to spend X hours a month in the school. It's not a real welcoming environment. Professionals in the community should be going into the schools to participate in the educational experience.
75. I'd really love a call saying 'Your daughter hasn't come to school yet' in real time. Some of the automated calls come in the afternoon, some in the morning, but they're all usually after the first block, beyond which point the problem doesn't seem 'actionable.'
76. Any notification that I get, [my daughter] should get, too. Now I forward whatever I get to her, so we can talk about it. In some cases, they've marked her absent when she's really been in class. If she doesn't know about it, she can't do anything, but if I forward her the message, she can say, 'Hey, I'm here but I'm being marked absent.'
77. If parent's email to the teacher was also cc'd to the principal or others that were appropriate, there would be a greater accountability and a team effort to address the parent's concern.
78. If you're going to send an email, you should also send a regular letter home as well.
79. I want to know that I'm the one being communicated with. That I'm the one getting all the information, number one [instead of ex-husband].

80. I would like there to be more opportunities to give feedback to the school. Even if the school more or less communicates, it does not provide many opportunities [for parents] to give your own feedback. There's no follow-up, which is frustrating.

81. Create more opportunities for dialogue.

Takeaways

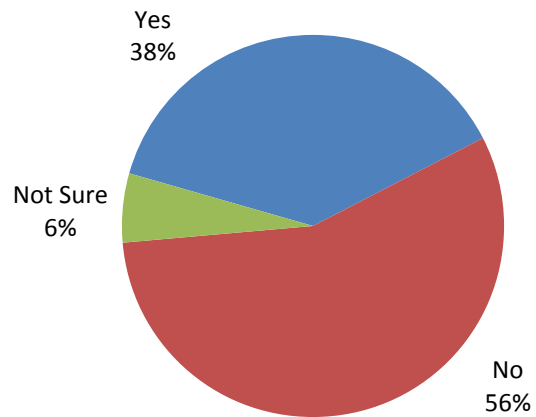
- Be proactive in contacting families. Whether students are struggling with classwork or academically beyond their current classwork, parents and guardians want to know early, so a plan can be put in place.
- Keep Jupiter Grades updated, and add comments that go beyond grades.
- Improve the schools' websites; make them comprehensive, go-to resources for all school information.
- Be sympathetic to students' emotional needs.
- Parents/guardians want the opportunity to get more frequent updates of students' progress that go beyond grades—perhaps monthly or weekly.
- The philosophy or policy of middle schools regarding parent/guardian involvement needs to be expressly stated, and justification for that policy should be based in research and stated clearly.
- Be honest with families about how their children are doing. That's the only way they can support a struggling child.
- All parents/guardians who need an interpreter should have one.
- The process of college planning needs to be spelled out clearly to the parents: when it should start, what it involves, all the steps that are required, what the school can do to help.
- Parents and guardians who are new to the school system could use some extra support, no matter their language status.
- Over and over, parents and guardians said they wanted a way to support their children's learning at home, either through recommendations from teachers tailored to their children, or through heads-up memos to families telling them what's coming up for their children and how they could help at home. Perhaps each class could send a syllabus home.

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Learning in the Community

Fewer than half of parents and guardians in this study had heard of students learning in the community as it has been discussed locally by Partnership for Change. Among primary English-speaking parents and guardians, it was roughly a 50/50 split whether people had heard of 'learning in the community' or not. Three-quarters of parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English, however, said they had never heard of it. All interviewees were told that learning in the community would be part of students' regular school day, that it would count toward graduation requirements and they would get credit for it.

Have You Heard about Students Learning in the Community?
(of 137 parents/guardians)



Most people had heard only very basic information and may have been confusing it with other high school programs. For example, several people mentioned the YES program; one thought it was tied to cultural exchange and others named community service and service-learning activities students had done. Some people said they liked the concept of hands-on learning and wanted to see young people engaged in the community; a few also commented the community itself could benefit from being more closely tied to the school. But regardless of whether interviewees knew much about the idea, the vast majority of parents and guardians thought it was a great idea—as long as it is done right.

Comment Themes

Parents and guardians had mixed feelings about learning in the community. On one hand, they said that giving students hands-on experience, a positive role in the community and more exposure to the “real world” seems like a great idea—students would be excited about their future if they could try out various options and find mentors outside the school. On the other hand, some students might struggle to find a good match, businesses may be ill-equipped to support teens and managing placements for a large number of students would be an administrative challenge. Mostly, parents simply had lots of questions: How would such a complicated program be implemented with so many students? How much guidance would students have, and how would their work be monitored and evaluated? How would it work logistically—would parents have to transport children? How does learning in the community mesh with college requirements and expectations? How much choice will students have about whether to participate or where they are placed?

Below, parents and guardians comment on how the concept might benefit their children, and express some general concerns—the most common of which were ensuring student safety, fears that outside-the-school learning would keep students from important classroom time, and questions about whether the concept could be implemented fairly for all students.

Sample Comments *(of 137)*

1. It would give her an idea of why what she's doing in school is important. It can give them some experience in their career interest and understand why the academics at school is important for this career.
2. I think it would be good for them if the internships were structured in a way that actually taught them skills for what they were interested in doing. Internships are tricky, especially at the high school age; a lot of them are not really very educational. It's a good idea in theory.
3. In my daughter's careers class there was an opportunity to spend a day at 7th Generation and she loved it and talked about it for weeks. If she did that for a whole quarter or semester it would have been great and very real-world. Children who don't spend time in their parents' workplace have no idea what real work is like. I think it's a good idea if time permits.
4. I think it would be fantastic because it's a big step to go from school to the working world. It would be a nice stepping stone for them and they also might have a good reference from the internship. They would also have mentors and role models that are gainfully employed.
5. The community has a lot of resources and their son learns best with hands-on. He will get a perspective on life choices, career opportunities, and academic decisions, what he enjoys, and that help him make better decisions.
6. I feel very strongly that teenagers are often overlooked and thought of negatively. Like any age group—it's true for the elderly as well—if you just cast them off and treat them like a burden, then they become that. I've suddenly remembered that for all my issues as a teenager, there hasn't been another time in my life where I've had that much passion and energy and belief in myself, and I think they have so much to offer society that's really unique, and that we don't tap into.
7. I think building a bridge to the community can be very powerful for kids; I think it would be good for my son when he's older. I hope it's for all kids, not just kids who are tracked a certain way— like kids who aren't going to college.
8. For my son in special ed, this is going to be very important for him. For my kids who are university-bound, that work experience comes later. I'm not sure I want this to be a compulsory part. It's more important to me to have them in class, building academic skills.
9. I think it makes school a lot more relevant. We retain what we're interested in and it's reality-based. It's that sense of, 'Oh, I want to do this.' Like working construction, that requires a strong math foundation. So either you will find your place that doesn't rely on formal schooling or you will recognize the need and value for formal schooling.... Knowing why they are having to do something grounds them in an important way.
10. I think this is very good because it's hands-on; they need to learn how the adults work, and how hard it is to work. Most things at home, I do everything for both my kids. But we are just starting to show to [my son] what he can do for himself. I want him to be able to do things for himself. He needs to know how hard we work for him, and how hard other people work.
11. I think it's amazing. There's so many things you learn in a classroom that you can learn 10 million times easier and faster when you actually do them. [Experiential learning] hits all the senses and educates them in a way that is more engaging and interactive. When you're sitting at a desk with a teacher going on and on, and just looking at books, you can only learn so much.

12. It sounds fantastic, part of what I would change about the entire school system if I could. The way school is set up now, it's such a microcosm of our world but removed from the rest of the community. Kids should learn a little more about the world outside of school. It's like you grow up in school, then [they] pop you out with no life skills at all.
13. For my own kid I wouldn't want this, probably flat out, but if it had to happen, [then] only in senior year. We have very structured projects where I work, and we have projects for interns, and even then it's tricky to make sure that they're going to be busy, engaged and learning. We don't want interns just doing busywork.
14. I think this will be a good opportunity for our kids because after high school the graduates will be ready for college.
15. It would motivate my daughter to apply her skills between learning and life.
16. We believe that besides classroom learning, learning from hands-on experience, working experience is very important. They would understand and remember what they have learned better, and they would learn practical skills to solve real problems. This would make learning not just fun and practical, but also would enable students to gain more confidence about themselves.
17. Students would learn and get credit at the same time.
18. This is a good idea. I need my son to explore the real world.
19. I think the kids will be successful after graduation with this kind of program in the district.
20. I want my child to be able to self-advocate and know how to help his parents after graduation from high school.
21. I like that idea. If a child is busy at school doing what she's interested in, she's less likely to do bad things.
22. [It means] more communication with people and real-life experiences. My kid would realize how hard it is to make money.
23. I love the idea. Anything that helps my kid be successful, I welcome.
24. This is excellent idea. This idea is very practical. Students can discover [the] real world.
25. This would be one more way to disrupt the school day and distract from the academic class time. Class time is getting more limited in the BSD. Are we throwing them out in the community and making it someone else's responsibility?
26. A big concern is the transportation getting to the businesses. Buses sort of run regularly but not really and my kids don't have cars of their own. My husband and I both work so we can't drive them.
27. [What] if they are stuck in an internship with unsavory characters and don't know how to deal with it or get out of it?
28. It must be meaningful work. For example, it isn't helpful if you are in the office but a silent observer. [Students] need the right balance of challenging work that isn't overwhelming.
29. It could be a problem to miss other classes, so it would be a concern that other academics weren't missed as a result. Youth with other activities, such as athletics, don't have a lot of extra time now.
30. If it were a situation that wasn't very organized, that wouldn't work for [my son] at all. Last year he volunteered ... and there was no one there to mentor him, to tell him where to go and what to do. So he hated it.
31. [It would] expose them to careers of their interest.

32. You would expose them to adults that haven't been screened by the schools, and you have to trust that they're going to be safe for four hours or eight hours of that day in an environment that we're not 100 percent sure about. I wouldn't want them to do it alone. I'd want there to be another student or multiple students. Safety is in groups. I think that would help parents allow their children to do this.
33. I think it needs someone who has a good grasp on how to organize it. How would it be supported in the school? How will they schedule it all, make sure kids complete academic requirements? Who would monitor it; how would the data be collected? If it's implemented well, it could be great, but it needs real oversight and check-ins throughout. And it needs to be for all kids, not just kids who aren't going to college.
34. I want my kids to be in school, not working. They have their whole lives to work. I'd rather they be ensconced at the school campus, in a real learning environment.
35. It might not be appropriate for every student. If it is, where do they go? If it isn't, what do they do? To make it a mandatory thing would be problematic if it didn't include a mechanism for students where it doesn't really fit for them.
36. If kids are going out, I'd be worried that they're really supervised and wonder how they'd get transportation. Parents can't be going all over to pick up and drop off kids during the school day.
37. I think it makes school a lot more relevant. We retain what we're interested in and it's reality-based. It's that sense of, 'Oh, I want to do this.' Like working construction, that requires a strong math foundation. So either you will find your place that doesn't rely on formal schooling or you will recognize the need and value for formal schooling. For a lot of teenagers, they are so hormonal, knowing that they have a place in the world is important. Knowing why they are having to do something grounds them in an important way.
38. Civic responsibility and jobs are different things, so I would want to make sure that both things are going on. 'I'm a high flyer in math and I got an internship at IBM, and am on my way to making a lot of money'—that has promise, but schools need to increase their commitment to civic responsibility and educating citizens of a democracy.
39. [I don't want students to] be exploited for free labor doing meaningless tasks.
40. I'm hoping there are enough community organizations that will take on so many children, because there's a lot of kids between the two high schools, and all kids should get the opportunity to do it. So it's a great idea if everybody buys into it.
41. How much interest would the community member have in the students? Would they be able to work well with younger kids? What kind of program would they be; would the children of color wind up in labor jobs?
42. It's a lot of work to create a successful internship experience. You need staff people there all the time, so the organization needs to take time away from everything they're doing to create that experience, and I doubt there's going to [be] a lot of organizations prepared to do that. It's fine for my kid to be licking stamps at King Street or the Y, but as a volunteer, not an internship.
43. By the time you're a junior or senior, you usually have at least one study hall anyway.
44. This idea is definitely wonderful.
45. I am afraid that my child would be overworked.

46. I will be happy that my children are applying the skills from school.

What Would Parents/Guardians Want to Know before Their Children had This Experience?

Most interviewees knew relatively little about the concept of students learning in the community, and their remarks were enthusiastic but tentative. Their many questions could be generally broken down into four categories: details about the worksites, the educational impacts for students, safety considerations, and scheduling issues.

Sample Comments (of 137)

1. How will [students] get there and back? Who is supervising them? What is the academic correlation? Teachers are trained and have to have background checks, but when you put [students] out there at 12 or 13, how do they know who is safe if there is an issue? The school is constantly trying to make them grow up too fast.
2. I would need to know that the places were vetted to be appropriate for a high school student, that there was some kind of structured learning component in place.
3. [I would want to know] how the credit would be applied and that the child had a choice rather than a requirement. An internship should be highly choice-based.
4. [I'd need to know] how it will all work, who is in charge. The people in the community need to know their responsibilities; there needs to be screenings for community people, and proper measurements to see if it's a successful program.
5. I'd need to see it proven out. I wouldn't want to experiment; I'd want to see results from another district, hear about their experiences, etc. I'm open, because we need to make changes for sure, but skeptical at the same time.
6. I would need to know that someone's really supervising and making sure where [my daughter] is, and that the school is going to provide the transportation.
7. I'd want to know from my kids why they want to do the internship, and I'd want to know from the teachers how it will affect the kids and their learning. I'm all for it, I think it would be a great thing to do.
8. Just that it's a reliable place where they can be comfortable and there's no discriminating. I would want to know the site where they would be and about transportation, how they'd get back home, and that it's not too far.
9. I'd want the full work-up on it. I'd like to see how it was run, and what [my daughter] would miss during the school day in order to take part.
10. I would hope I could get help and guide [my son] in what his options are. I would hope that he wouldn't get thrown into something inappropriate, that the options were diverse enough that he could choose something. It would be in the direction of his future. It would be meaningful, not like a youth program sort of thing where kids clean up the interstate.
11. I want to know which schedule, what time he's going to be there, and what time finished. I'm afraid because he has bad friends. I don't want this to be after school, but during school.
12. I want to know how will this program work to change the way the school system is operating now, and will there be transportation?

13. I want to know how this program will be different from the current programs that we have in the district.
14. I would be happy to see if they're interested, and I would support them to get into their desired jobs or career.
15. I'd want to know what the choices are, and if these [internships would] correspond to a real interest and not just be a way to escape important classes.
16. I would need to know more details before my child had this experience. Like have a workshop to make me sense the environment, for example.

Takeaways

- Parents/guardians need all the details, delivered to them in a way that allows them to ask questions and get answers on the spot. This is particularly important for parents and guardians whose primary language is other than English, who are less likely to read newsletters, websites and other written materials from the school. This needs to include how learning in the community differs from what the district already does. What practical differences will this make in their children's daily schedules?
- Ensuring student safety off school grounds is a primary, almost universal concern. Parents and guardians need to see clear, written policies about how sites will be screened, whether there are background checks, and what standards businesses must meet to qualify as work sites.
- Parents and guardians worry about whether the school can really manage all the work that learning in the community would take. Each student would need an advisor who troubleshoots issues at sites, monitors attendance, and guides them in handling interpersonal or skill-related challenges.
- Parents/guardians emphasized that they don't want their children wasting time with busywork; they will only buy into this concept if the work is meaningful.
- Parents/guardians wonder what classwork their children will be missing, and what implications missing that work might have.
- Many interviewees were concerned that learning in the community might not mesh well with college requirements. How would college-bound students know for sure that their high school transcripts would be accepted, and that they had met all academic requirements?
- Several people questioned the basic concept of learning in the community. How has it worked in other places? In terms of the students' actual learning, has it been worth all the trouble in the end? Why can't these kinds of experiences be brought into the classroom instead?
- People find the idea of implementing learning in the community on a grand scale daunting. They would prefer the school offer it only to older students or to a small group at the beginning, and they want reassurance that when grant funding runs out, learning in the community will be sustainable.
- Although the school's primary responsibility is to students, parents and guardians were also concerned about impacts on community businesses. In order to sustain relationships over time, schools may need to develop training for business owners that addresses adolescent development, how to foster supportive learning environments, and ways to tailor tasks in order to provide a meaningful experience.

Other Recommendations of Parents and Guardians

- Some parents and guardians feel strongly that learning in the community should be voluntary for students. Only students with a real desire to be involved are likely to benefit anyway, and narrowing the number of placements would ensure that each one really gets enough support.
- Perhaps this should be a senior year-only experience.
- There should be a regular schedule of meetings between students and advisors, and advisors and community sites. The advisor shouldn't be just a rubber stamp.
- Learning in the community could extend into a 'gap year' for students who are not ready to transition immediately after graduation.
- Parents and guardians whose children are less confident or have special needs want to be able to visit work sites themselves, see the environment and meet with on-site supervisors who will be in contact with their children.
- The school has to provide and coordinate transportation. Parents and guardians cannot be responsible for this during regular school hours. They're concerned about safety if students have to rely solely on public transportation.
- Learning in the community should be managed like any other course. Parents and guardians would like to receive a syllabus with clear learning objectives and a structure for assessment. They also want students to have an opportunity to reflect on their experiences with their peers. Students might benefit from monthly small-group discussions or semester-end presentations about their experiences.
- In order to make sure learning in the community is a positive experience for young people, some parents suggested the school develop a method of certifying businesses as appropriate sites. This would entail developing a list of competencies and resources that contribute to student safety and learning, and routinely inspecting sites that maintain student placements.

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Personalized Learning Plans

Only about a third of parents and guardians in this study had heard of personalized learning as it has been discussed locally by Partnership for Change, and among those who had heard about the concept, relatively few had many details. All interviewees were read a short description of personalized learning and told that Vermont had recently passed a law requiring all schools to create some form of personalized learning for their students. They were told that the central idea behind the law is that all students should have a role in deciding how he or she will learn the skills necessary to graduate. Parents and guardians were then asked how the concept sounded for their own children.

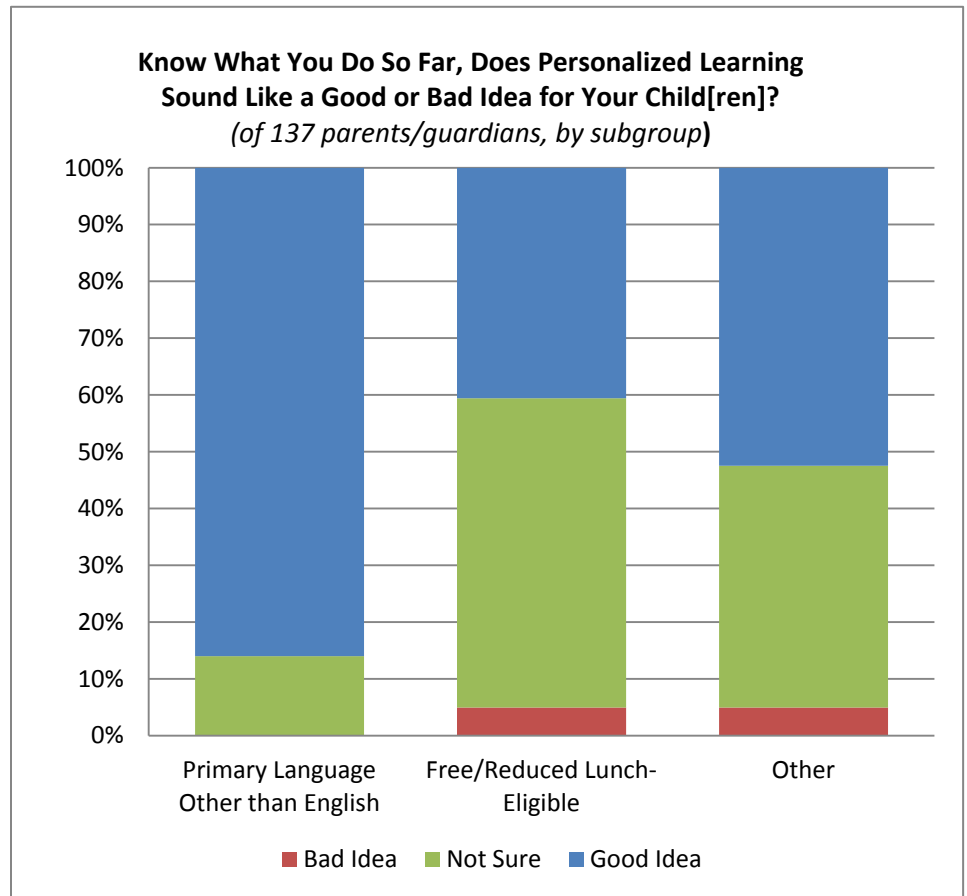


Chart: Parents and guardians whose primary language is other than English were overwhelmingly likely to feel personalized learning would benefit their children. Other parents were more mixed, with about half saying it sounded like a good idea, while others weren’t sure.

Comment Themes

Parents and guardians had mixed feelings about personalized learning. On one hand, they said that giving students the chance to create their own plans and pursue their personal interests seems like a great idea—students would be more excited about school if they could take a more active role in choosing what and how they learn. On the other hand, making wise choices might require more maturity and self-knowledge than students have at this age. But mostly, parents simply had lots of questions: How could such a fundamental change be implemented with so many students? How much guidance would students have, and how would their work be monitored and evaluated? What role would parents play? How does personalized learning mesh with college requirements and expectations? Is our current system really in need of such radical change? Will students still get the basics they need, or will they be allowed to avoid subjects they don’t like?

Sample Comments *(of 136)*

1. I don't know about personalized learning. Some kids will push themselves; some will do the minimum amount. They need guidance and need adults to help them. That's why it takes a community to raise a child. We need to stop putting so much responsibility onto kids; they are still kids. I think it's important to have expectations for kids, with input from them, but still with us having the upper hand. For one of my kids, I think personalized learning is a good idea, for the other no—she would just do the minimum to get by. With families as busy as they are, there is a huge potential for kids to fall through the cracks.
2. It's one of those ideas that sound good in theory, but I still think there's a benefit to all the students learning the same kinds of things. So having them all have different plans, it doesn't seem to me like they would all achieve the same kind of educational level. That worries me a little bit.
3. I'm more of a person who likes traditional education, and I wonder about the details about this—I don't understand how it would all work. My biggest concern is that this is something new and are the kids going to be guinea pigs? Are there studies showing that this works? It all seems like butterflies and rainbows to me.
4. It would be empowering for the kid. But if they only chose easy things or tried to opt out of things they need to learn, that would be a problem. I would want to know more about how the plan would be implemented, what the kids have to do for it.
5. I'd want to be sure that my child was fully aware of the consequences of what they might choose—that they wouldn't wind up closing the door on something they might want to do later. So I wouldn't want the process to be too limiting. Students might choose something that is easier, but not necessarily the best for them.
6. What about kids that are new and just entering the district—how would it work for them?
7. At that age, I'm not sure they would have the knowledge to choose well. They pick courses as it is.
8. It sounds great. My daughter has already got goals identified so I think she'd really like this. All I'd really need to know is the scheduling.
9. Are they going to satisfy all of the requirements for high school graduation? How are we going to ensure that all criteria for credits and skills are going to be met? Will this result in satisfying what colleges are looking for in graduates?
10. I'm not sure kids always know what's best. Even the brightest kids will take the path of least resistance. I would want reassurance that kids will challenge themselves and that they're doing things that will get them into college and into a career. Students flock to classes where they can get an easy A. You'd need to put some pressure on them to do this. Who is going to monitor the process? I don't see the school having the time to do this well. We're already trying to do so much that's new. I don't see that happening. The school doesn't have the resources. But for kids who are struggling, it sounds like a great alternative.
11. Would they have to give something else up to do this, or is it in addition to what they already do? It's good to be reflective about your own path, what you want to be, to do, and how you're going to get there. This process could model for them how to become lifelong learners.

12. I think kids being involved is a good thing—having a vested interest in their own education is good. But they need to explain to the kids how to go about it. I could see some kids just wanting to take an easy way out. It's a good idea, but these kids are young.
13. Is this going against standardized testing? If so, I'm down with that; kids learn differently and it shouldn't all be one way. I'm personally a visual person, so lectures are tough for me.
14. I fear for students on track for college. I'd want it to be challenging and not an easy-peasey thing; it should have substance. Sometimes kids don't want to put things in there that's going to challenge them. Required courses automatically challenge them, and requirements aren't bad things for kids.
15. I don't think they are at a developmental stage where it's appropriate for them to decide for themselves. There are so many students to do this with, could it be done effectively with all students?
16. I'm still of the old school mentality that wants them to have lots of academics and lots of homework. Maybe they could mix it half and half.
17. It almost sounds like they are trying to develop an anchor task by the time they have to graduate. I think having kids—older high school kids—do that sounds very empowering.
18. I have a hard time imagining what this will look like. Is there adequate staff time available to do this well, and is it reasonable to assume that the teachers are even qualified and adequately trained to assist students with this? I can't imagine that the guidance department has the resources to meet with every student and create a quality plan.
19. I would want to know who will help them with it, what the graduation requirements are to begin with, what (if any) changes there would be to the class offerings or curriculum. There are so many options now. I know kids can take classes at UVM if they outgrow BHS classes, which is great. I could see this as possibly good preparation for college course selection, though.
20. My daughter was accepted to the technical school for pre-med ... so they've created the track for her and she bought into it. The tech school where she'll go half the time is under the auspices of UVM, and UVM has said 'This is what you'll do.' She really doesn't have a choice, if she's going to take AP classes or college credit classes; that's decided for her. So what about kids who are meeting other criteria beyond the schools? How will this mesh?
21. I guess I'd love to see some background on the places it's been used and some examples of what the Burlington school system might be considering. I'd like to know how much it deviates from more traditional education; is it a complementary thing or are some students going to be fully independent from a more traditional school setting?
22. I'd want to know if there are any parameters to her choices; I'd want to know who in the community might be available to be involved, and if she'd have access to any of the institutions of higher learning [to pursue classes unavailable in the schools].
23. I need to understand more about how it's being implemented and see why the district thinks this is a good approach—I need to see some proof that it's effective, first.
24. If the kids have a great deal of say, it's not a good idea. It sounds condescending, but I don't think kids know what they want yet. They think they do, of course; they're very opinionated about it. If they were to fully design their programs, they'd find themselves in 10 years saying, 'Why didn't I pay more attention to math?' for instance. The adults and kids need to work together. Depending on

what the subject was, the teacher would give the kids enough choice so that in the balance, two-thirds of the work they did was something they were interested in doing. My kids love taking tests and would always just rather do that than anything else.

25. They are young. Do they know how they learn best? It's a huge responsibility to take on at their age. Their brains are changing. How is it done, exactly? What does it mean in reality rather than as a concept, and what does it mean for the classroom and teacher? Is it going to be a [counselor/student] ratio difference like 1:5 or 1:25? Is it possible to create this in reality?
26. I think it's a wonderful idea; as kids go through school, they don't get to make a lot of decisions. But it's important for the school to know their likes and dislikes and their strengths.
27. I don't really buy into the whole idea that traditional learning doesn't work anymore. My kids do go into the community a lot with their teacher, they have all kinds of things during their day that aren't sitting and learning in the traditional way. I'm lukewarm about the idea of revamping everything.
28. If a kid hasn't thought of college because he or she doesn't think they're smart enough or can afford it, is their plan going to help them be aspirational in their goals and increase their capacity? Or will the plans be self-limiting?
29. I think it's a good idea and my daughter would benefit from it, but I don't know how well the teachers will do with that. Most people who teach at high schools think they are a font of knowledge that students need to benefit from, so getting the teachers to sign off on letting students make their own learning plans will be a difficult task.
30. It's a great idea for kids being more empowered and responsible for their learning. But again it's the quality piece. I would worry about so many students with all individualized learning plans—[the difficulty of pulling it off] is what's probably gotten in the way of doing it up to now.
31. Isn't that what we already do? Kids already choose their own classes. We don't want to risk them not getting the basics they need to learn.
32. I have some reservations—my son doesn't have any learning issues, but for kids who do have issues, I wonder about it. Also I would hope that everyone would get to choose from the same menu. Kids are really tracked [in the schools]; not everyone is offered the same opportunities.
33. When kids are the ones who have control, they're going to work harder. Of course there need to be guidelines for math and reading and writing, and those core skills shouldn't be completely lost. Kids need a baseline for learning the core education, but in a way that can be fun and exciting.
34. It depends on the student, honestly, and what their goals are—whether or not they plan to seek higher education or not. A personalized learning plan could hinder their ability to get into a Yale, for example. For somebody who wants to be a CEO or doctor, maybe a personalized learning plan isn't a good idea. Maybe if the student's goal is to become the manager of retail shop, then a personalized plan would be suitable.
35. I want to know everything. I'd want someone to explain to me in a letter or in person. What it's for, what it's going to accomplish? What are the goals?
36. I'd have to err on the side of caution and say that, for my kids, it's not a good idea. They would need a whole lot of direction. I'd want to know more about the plans in general, how it was going to be monitored and what was needed from me and their father. I'd want to be checking in about it probably fairly routinely at first.

37. I'd like the adults to study best practices and research so *they* can make those decisions. This kind of alarms me. I'm like, why does my kid have to be in school during an experimental phase?
38. I'd want to know that my daughter has a rigorous program that challenges her, and that she is required to take courses she might not think she's good at.
39. Would that interfere with students' fundamental learning in math, science, technology in high school? How much time would be devoted to this personal plan for learning?
40. It is great! It is also an education process for me. I would like to know in what area or field it would be covered. For example, my son likes math and music; my daughter [has] set her heart to be a pediatrician doctor in future.
41. I would want to know that my child is still learning all the important subjects, even if he is choosing his own plan.
42. This idea is new to me. Please send—and translate—information.
43. [I want someone to] meet with me *before* the program starts for my children. I want to know more about it, how it will benefit my children.
44. I prefer to emphasize sciences, writing and reading effectively.

Takeaways

- Parents/guardians need all the details, delivered to them in a way that allows them to ask questions and get answers on the spot. This is particularly important for parents and guardian whose primary language is other than English, who are less likely to read newsletters, websites and other written materials from the school.
- Parent/guardians worry that personalized learning plans would allow students to “take the easy way out” and avoid the basics like math and science.
- Parents and guardians worry about whether the schools can really manage all the work this kind of individual planning would take. Each student would need an advisor who follows him or her more closely than most students are followed right now. The advisor would have to know the student very well and be active in guiding and monitoring them over time.
- Plans have to be flexible so that students can self-correct as time goes by.
- Many interviewees were concerned that personalized plans might not mesh well with college requirements. How would college-bound students know for sure that their high school transcripts would be accepted, and that they had met all academic requirements?
- Parents and guardians of ELL students were unclear on how personalized learning differs from what the district already does. They want to understand the practical differences for their children. Some were also concerned that the plan might make school too easy for their students.
- Parents and guardians would like to see examples of personalized learning in action elsewhere. How has it worked in practical terms? Has it been worth all the trouble in the end?
- Several interviewees said that the concept of personalized learning sounds like the individual learning plans (IEPs) already available for students with special learning needs. They need to understand how they are different.

Other Recommendations from Parents and Guardians

- Maybe students should be invited, rather than required, to participate in personalized planning. Only students with a real desire to be involved are likely to benefit anyway, and narrowing the number of students with personal plans would ensure that each one really gets enough support.
- There should be a regular schedule of meetings between students and advisors. The advisor shouldn't be just a rubber stamp.
- The idea of creating an individual plan needs to be presented to students in a less intimidating way than it was in middle school, where students were asked to make sense of a rubric that was actually intended for teachers.
- Would this sort of planning allow students to drop some current requirements, if in their case the requirements don't make sense? For instance, the student might already be an athlete, in which case she should be able to drop gym class in favor of a class that can build her capacities more.
- The whole idea of graduation requirements that apply universally to all students should be scrapped in favor of a system that is more individualized.
- Personalized learning should unfold slowly in the district; otherwise, it will be too logistically difficult and risky.
- Since personalized planning is long-term, all the teachers a student might have, for several years in a row, would have to understand that particular student's plan and be involved in some way.

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What Role Would Parents and Guardians Like to Play in Creating Personal Learning Plans?

Chart: Most parents and guardians would like to play some part in crafting their child’s personalized learning plan, but not necessarily a major one. Small percentages of each subgroup of interviewees said they did not want a big role at all.

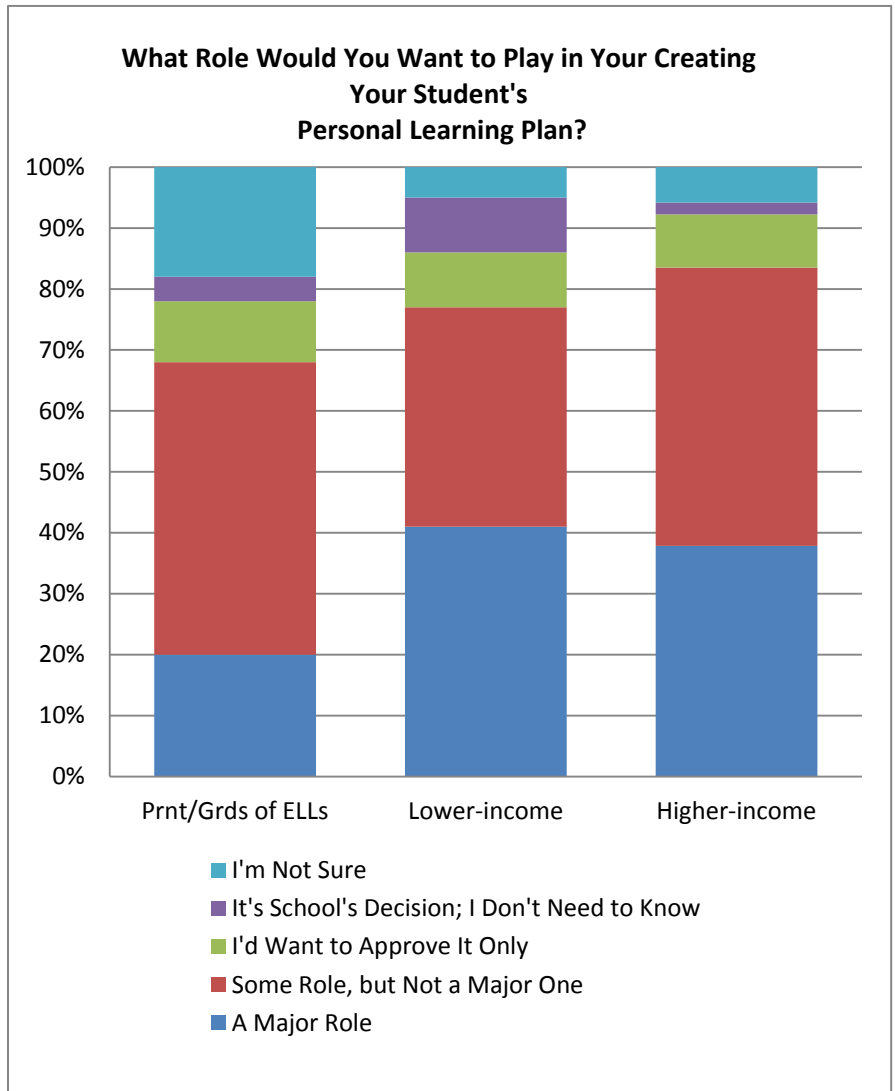
Comment Themes

The overwhelming majority of parents/guardians say they would want to have some role in creating their students’ personalizing learning plans, though most indicated that they don’t have enough information to say exactly how much—it depends on their children’s wishes; on the needs of the particular student in question; and perhaps on the academic subject. Most interviewees seemed to want an equal partnership with the school in which their children and a school advisor might take the lead, but where they themselves are important players who reserve the right to step in at any time. They stress that children still need guidance, even in high school, and personalized plans need to take that into account.

They stress that children still need guidance, even in high school, and personalized plans need to take that into account.

Sample Comments (of 62)

1. I have no problem with my child creating it, but I want to have the last word, or at least input before it's put into action.
2. That’s no different from helping [students] choose their classes today. But I do worry about the students who don't have that kind of support. It just seems resource-intensive.
3. No one knows my child better than I do, so I would know what she needs to be challenged.
4. I'd want my children to *want* me to be involved. If they say yes, I'd be involved. If they say no, I'd just want to see the final plan. I think the kids should have final say into whether parents are involved.



5. It's a team effort, and it would help to have a parent on the team. Especially when it's brand new, I'd like to be involved, to see for myself how it works.
6. The school needs to communicate with parents if there is an issue or concern. Parents should have the right to ask for a meeting to discuss the plan. This needs to be explicit.
7. I'd like to review it and have a chance to give feedback before it's put into action. But I would want more than a letter home, maybe a meeting. It's important enough that it would need attention. I wouldn't want it to get overlooked, and in some houses, it could.
8. My role might be that [my son's] plan was a quality plan that involves appropriate people with appropriate expertise.
9. Because of my experience with the school, I know my standards for an education are higher than the school's standards to graduate. One example is last year I told my daughter I wanted her to have four years of language, so when she went to sign up, her guidance counselor told her 'You don't need that, so why do it?' So sometimes the school can act against you.
10. There is a triangle: School - Student - Parents. All need to work on it.
11. It sounds fascinating! You could learn a lot about your child and kids would have to let you be involved if the school directed it. I would really like it!
12. I would want to have conversations about it and definitely sign off on it. It could be tricky for other families. If families aren't communicating, the kid could just say, 'Sign this' and that would be it.
13. I trust that the teachers know my kid's learning style and have better assessment skills than me.
14. I wouldn't be thrilled about having to make time for it, but if [my kids] had to do it, I would certainly want to be involved.
15. If my daughter wasn't on her current [accelerated] track and she was an average student who wanted to explore life, I'd love it. What's to say she wouldn't make a wonderful plumber or travel agent? You have a passion for life and have to age into it. If you know your kids a little bit, you can help them explore.
16. My daughter is definitely old enough to make decisions and I'd hope they were good responsible ones, with some guidance. But at the same time, she's still a kid and does need some guidance from teachers and adults and parents so we can make sure she's doing something that we think would be good for her.
17. I'd want to see what [my daughter] comes up with and see if there are any resources I could suggest that she hadn't thought of. I'd ask questions to see if I could encourage her to look deeper or think differently.
18. This would give parents a greater part in defining what are going to be the learning endeavors, helping the student find creative ways to meet the standards for graduation, and find ways, if they're way ahead, to go on vacation. This idea of students having to spend 177 days in school a year is ridiculous, if they're three years ahead. So my thought is that students could demonstrate where they are related to graduation, and if they're in 9th or 10th grade and have satisfied that, just say, 'You're graduated, what do you want to do?' Otherwise, the school is just a babysitter.
19. I'd want to hear about the overall goals, and I'd want to know who the contact person is in the school and how knowledgeable they are. I'd sit back a little, then step in when I needed to.

20. It depends on whether it's middle school or senior year. The middle school gives a back-off message, and it's too much because kids actually do need more support at that age. In high school, with great support, I can see them running with it without much input from me.
21. I don't really need to be involved; it's the kid's life. I'm part of the plan, but I can work with the kid and school and say, for instance, 'Well, he might say he wants to be a professional jockey but he's 6 feet tall; let's think about this carefully.'
22. I'm not trying to get into my son's business, but my role is important in that I don't want my son or the school to think I'm a rubber stamp on this plan. If it's a good plan, I'll be a stamp. If not, I'll be more involved.
23. Let's start deinstitutionalizing our education system. [Make it] smaller, more grassroots. This would present an opportunity for interested adults to bring in cottage industries and say 'This is what I do: how many students want to learn three hours a day, five days a week, motor repair? Or cupcake-baking, or accounting?' And if they weren't good at teaching, the kids would stop showing up. That's the competitive system, which we really don't have right now in the school.

Takeaways

- Parents and guardians don't have many details about how personalized learning plans will be developed and carried out. They see many possible benefits for their children, but also some potential pitfalls. The majority assume that students and school counselors can probably do a good job of creating a plan that challenges students, but they want to be kept firmly in the loop, especially at the beginning.
- Parents and guardians are intrigued by the idea of students pursuing individualized plans, but emphasize that even in high school, students still need adult guidance.

Other Recommendations from Parents and Guardians

- Parent/guardians should not be able to override the student's ideas or desires.
- Students should have the final say about whether their parents are involved in creating a plan.
- Not all students have much family support and involvement; these students could fall through the cracks if the school doesn't give them extra attention.
- Parents and guardians should explicitly have the right to request a meeting at any time to discuss the plan if things don't seem to be going well.
- If students are ambitious and finish their requirements early, they should be able to graduate early.

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Interview

Interviewer name:

Interviewer email/phone:

Date:

Conducted: by phone / in person



Thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed about what it's like to communicate with the school about your child [or children]. The information you are sharing today will be added to information from about 250 other parents, and a report will be written for the school. The idea is to give the school feedback on the way they communicate with families so they can make improvements. We've chosen names of parents at random. Your name will not be used in the final report, and no one who reads the report will know that you participated. And please understand that while we value your input, you don't have to talk to us. You can say no if you don't want to be interviewed, and that's fine. Shall we go ahead?

[Questions 1-8 for internal use]

9. How many children do you have in the school system, and what grade will they be in starting next fall? We're only asking about students who will be in grades 7-12 in fall 2013.

- a. Child 1:
- b. Child 2:
- c. Child 3:
- d. Child 4:

10. The language you usually speak at home:

11. Your ethnic/racial group:

- a. Caucasian or white [*non-Hispanic*]
- b. African-American or black
- c. Hispanic
- d. Asian
- e. American Indian or Alaska Native
- f. Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- g. Interviewee identifies as being from more than one group

12. National heritage (country of origin):

Section I: How You Find Out about How Your Child[ren] Is Doing in School

The questions I'm going to ask you are broken into three sections. The first section is about how you find out how your child is doing in school. If you have more than one child in middle or high school, think of the child you talked the most with the school about last year.

13. Think of this last school year. Name all the ways you remember getting information from the school about how your child was doing.

14. How often this past year did you contact somebody at the school to talk about how your child was doing?
- I never had to do this.
 - A couple of times over the entire year.
 - Between 4 and 10 times.
 - More than 10 times.
15. In general, this last year, was it easy to find out everything you wanted to know about how your child was doing? Think about all the individual classes he/she had.
- I'd say that overall, it was easy.
 - Sometimes it was easy, sometimes it wasn't.
 - Overall, I had quite a bit of trouble finding out everything I wanted to know.
16. *[If other than 'overall, it was easy']* Can you give me an example of a time when you wanted more information but had at least some trouble getting it?
17. This last year, when you were concerned about how your child was doing, who did you contact?
- Never did this
18. Now think about all your children in middle or high school, during all the years they have been there. In general, when you have contacted the school about any of them, have you felt the person you talk to really understands your questions and concerns?
- Usually, I feel they do.
 - It depends; sometimes yes, sometimes no.
 - Usually, I don't think they really understand what I'm saying.
19. *[If 'it depends' or 'not usually']* Can you give me an example of a time when you felt the person at the school didn't understand your questions or concerns?
20. In general, when you have contacted the school about your child[ren], do you get an answer that you understand, and that seems complete?
- Usually.
 - It depends; sometimes yes, sometimes no.
 - Their answers are usually either confusing, or don't tell me everything I wanted to know.
- Comments:
21. Have you ever asked anybody at the school for help when you thought and of your children needed something different from what he/she was getting? For instance, if you thought they needed a different class, or special help in a certain area?
- Yes
 - No
 - I don't remember.
22. If yes, what happened? Please give an example.

23. *[If answered previous question]* How satisfied were you with the way this issue was resolved?
- Very satisfied
 - Pretty satisfied, though one or two small things still bothered me.
 - Not satisfied

Comments:

24. This next question has three parts. Imagine that the school is doing a perfect job of communicating with you about how your child[ren] is doing.
- Who would contact you from the school, if there was any issue or problem?
 - What situations or events would you get contacted about?
 - How would you get contacted?
25. What's most true for you?
- I can usually only talk or respond to messages in the evening.
 - I can usually only talk or respond to messages during the daytime.
 - I can usually talk or respond to messages anytime, day or evening.
26. Imagine if there was one contact person in the school for you, and no matter what the issue was, you always started with this person. He or she would you refer you to somebody else if need be, but you'd always start with them. Do you like this idea?
- Yes, I like that idea.
 - No, I don't like that idea.
 - I'm not sure.
27. Why do you feel that way?

Section II. Communications Tools the School Uses

Now I want ask about specific tools the school uses to communicate with parents and guardians.

28. First I want to ask about **Jupiter Grades**. This is a place on the school's website where you can view your child's progress in any class, including their grades. I'm going to read five options and you tell me which is true for you. The parent/student web portal is:
- Very useful
 - Somewhat useful
 - Not very useful
 - I've never used it
 - I've never heard of it
29. Why do you feel that way (or never used it)?
30. Now I want to ask about **report cards**. Again, the options are, report cards are:
- Very useful

- b. Somewhat useful
- b. Not very useful
- c. I never or rarely see these

31. Why do you feel that way (or never or rarely see them)? What is particularly helpful? What's confusing or missing?

32. Now I want to ask about **conversations** between you and teachers, guidance counselors or other people at the school (whether they're in person, or by phone, email, text message, or written notes). Do you find them:

- a. Very useful
- b. Somewhat useful
- c. Not very useful
- d. I never or rarely communicate this way

33. Why do you feel that way (or rarely or never communicate this way)? *[Probe depending on answer]* What about these conversations is helpful or not helpful?

34. **Standardized tests results for your child.** These are sent to you in the mail. For instance, students in middle school and high school take the NECAP test. You've probably received results in the mail at some point. Here are the four options. These test results that come in the mail are:

- a. Very useful
- b. Somewhat useful
- c. Not very useful
- d. I never or rarely see these
- e. I don't think I've ever received these test results.

35. Why do you feel that way (or never or rarely see these)? *[Probe depending on answer]* What is useful about them? Why are these results not useful?

36. **One-on-one parent-teacher conferences.** *[This question is asking about the standard parent-teacher conference that all parents are invited to participate in, not in-person conversations between a parent and a teacher that can be scheduled privately at any time during the year.]* Your four options are:

- a. Very useful
- b. Somewhat useful
- c. Not very useful
- d. Never or rarely go to these

37. Why do you feel that way (or never or rarely go to these)?

38. There are different formats for parent-teacher conferences. Burlington High School uses a format called 'arena-style' conferences. In this type of conference, there are no appointments between

parents and teachers. Instead, all the teachers are in the gym and parents wait in line to talk to the teacher they want to see. Have you participated in this kind of parent-teacher conference?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Not sure

39. If yes, did you like how this format worked?

- a. I liked it.
- b. It was okay, neither good nor bad.
- c. I didn't like it.

40. Why did you feel that way?

41. What do you think of the idea of having students themselves participate in the parent-teacher conference?

- a. That sounds like a good idea.
- b. Maybe. I'm not sure.
- c. It doesn't sound like a good idea.

Comments:

42. Now I'm going to ask about ways you find out about things going on at the school, such as informational events for parents, or special activities that students can sign up for. We know you probably get information from your child[ren], but we want to know where else you get information. I'm going to read a list, and say 'yes' if you have gotten information from any of these places.

- School website
- Alert Now
- Local newspapers (paper and online) such as the Burlington Free Press and Seven Days
- Community news like the Front Porch Forum or North Ave. News
- Written material from the school that your child[ren] brings home
- Written material that is mailed to you from the school
- Parent groups, such as the Boosters in Burlington
- Through people at the school such as teachers or guidance counselors who you talk to directly
- Through multi-lingual liaisons
- E-newsletters from the school that come to your email
- The superintendent's blog, that comes to your email
- Emails from the Family-School Coordinator, who is Nancy Knox.
- Local access TV
- Other ways? Explain.

Comments about any of these news sources:

43. If there's one thing you could change about the way the school communicates with you about your child[ren], what it would be?

Section III. Partnership for Change Questions

44. OK, we're moving to the last section. I want to ask you about the Partnership for Change. Have you heard of this? You may have heard of it as 'the Nellie Mae grant.'

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Not sure

45. *[If yes, or maybe]* What have you heard?

46. *[If yes or maybe]* So far, what are some of the ways you've heard about the Partnership for Change?

47. *[As you may know then,]* Partnership for Change is helping the community and school district to explore and start using innovative practices in education. The Partnership for Change is completely funded by a private foundation—the Nellie Mae Education Foundation—and has held many community meetings in the last two years to get people's input on ways education should change. I want to ask you about a couple of ideas that are being discussed.

One of those ideas is to give students a chance to do learning in the community as part of their regular school day. They would get credit for this learning and it would go toward their graduation requirements. Have you heard about this?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Not sure

48. If so, what have you heard?

49. One way of offering this kind of learning would be for the school and businesses to create internships for students. This work would fit into the student's overall academic schedule. One of the benefits would be that students would begin applying skills they learn in the classroom to the real world. Think of your own child. What can you see being good about this idea of this kind of learning?

50. Is there anything that immediately concerns or worries you about the idea?

51. What would you need to know before your child had this experience?

52. Now I want to ask about another area the Partnership for Change is involved in. It's called 'personalized learning.' This kind of learning involves creating a clear set of learning expectations that apply to all students, and making sure each student achieves them by the time they graduate. Have you heard of personalized learning?

- a. Yes

- b. No
- c. Not sure

53. If so, what have you heard?

54. A big part of ‘personalized learning’ involves students creating their own learning plans, with the help of the school. In fact, Vermont has just passed a law requiring all schools to create some form of personalized learning for their students. The idea behind the law is that each student should have an important role in deciding how he or she will learn all the skills necessary to graduate.

Think of your own child being involved in creating his or her own personal plan for learning. What’s your reaction? Knowing what I do so far:

- a. I like it for my child.
- b. I’m not sure.
- c. I don’t like that idea for my child.

55. As I mentioned, personalized learning is definitely coming to this district at some point. What would you need to know before you would want your child to have a personal plan like this?

56. In some schools around the country that already have this type of learning, parents and guardians can actually be involved in creating the learning plan. Would you like to be involved in creating your child’s personal plan?

- a. Yes, I’d want to have an important role in creating the plan.
- b. I’d want to have some role, but not a major one.
- c. I’d want to approve the plan before my child starts it, but that’s all.
- d. I think this is entirely up to the school, and I don’t need to know anything about this.
- e. I’m not sure/it depends.

57. We’re just about finished. Is there anything we haven’t talked about yet that you’d like the school to know—and specific ideas you have about how the school should be communicating with you about your child?

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