Family-School Communication

A Study of the Winooski 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 communication and, by extension, educational outcomes for all students.

In Winooski, this study was based on personal interviews with 59 parents/guardians of children entering 7th through 12th grades in fall 2013. Interviewers conducted lengthy, semi-structured interviews with 23 parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English; with 22 parents/guardians whose students qualify for free/reduced-price lunch; and with 14 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 Web2School; and how familiar they were with Partnership for Change and the 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 show that most parents/guardians are relatively satisfied with how the school communicates with them, both about their own children's academic progress and about 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; keep Web2School updated; greatly improve the school website; and be in more frequent, regular communication with them about their children. A sizable number of parents/guardians either don't have computers or don't use them to track their children's school progress, suggesting that the school needs to either ramp up its phone communication with families or invest in technology for families and train them in how to use it.

Families also pointed to more complex issues. For instance, they say they want the school be more forthcoming about services and supports available to struggling children, and more transparent about policies on bullying and consequences for poor student behavior. Parents and guardians say they want to hear more about what is going well for their children, but they also want the school to be honest with them about whether their children 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. All families ask that their children be held to high standards, and that teachers be direct with them about how they can support their children's achievement at home.

With regard to Partnership for Change, 52% of interviewees had heard of the collaboration and about half of these knew details about its work or proposed changes coming to the district. Despite having many questions, most were excited about two upcoming innovations—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 the new programming, and whether the changes would be a good fit for all students.

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 Winooski School District.

The study collected information in three different ways:

- Phone and personal interviews with 59 randomly selected parents and guardians
- Four focus groups attended by a total of 25 parents/guardians and two students[1]
- 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 (that is, primary English-speaking, higher-income parents and guardians). Families were subdivided in this way because

[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 brought by parent participants.

students from these groups tend to have different academic outcomes, and the districts want to understand how communication can be better tailored to the varying needs of families. For this study, we randomly selected 25% of the parents/guardians in each subgroup to interview. This sampling technique assures that the number of parents interviewed from each group is proportional to the group's actual size in the community.

Table 1. Engaging Parents/Guardians in Interviews	
Free/Reduced Lunch-Eligible	
Non-working Phone #s in Sample	30
Individual Contacts Attempted	80
Individuals Who Declined	9
Appointments Made	33
Appointments Not Kept	16
Number Interviews Completed	**22**
Non-Free/Reduced Lunch-Eligible ('Other')	
Non-working Phone #s in Sample	0
Individual Contacts Attempted	23
Individuals Who Declined	1
Appointments Made	15
Appointments Not Kept	1
Number Interviews Completed	**14**
Primary Language Other than English	
Number of Interviews Assigned	28
Number Interviews Completed[2]	**23**
Total Interviews	**59**

Scheduling and conducting interviews was a multi-step process that lasted throughout the summer. All parents/guardians of incoming 7th through 12th 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 and 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 Winooski, we contacted or attempted to contact 136 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, above.)

[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.

Demographics of Selected Parents and Guardians

In the end, we interviewed 59 parents/guardians of students entering grades 7-12 in September 2013. Interviewees included biological parents, stepparents, grandparents and foster parents. Together, those parents/guardians represented a total of 86 students. Their class distribution is shown in Fig. 1. The racial/ethnic breakdown and primary languages of parents/guardians who participated are shown in Figs. 2 and 3. 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, it is indicated.

Fig. 1. Number of Students per Grade of Interviewed Parents/Guardians
(of 59 parents/guardians)

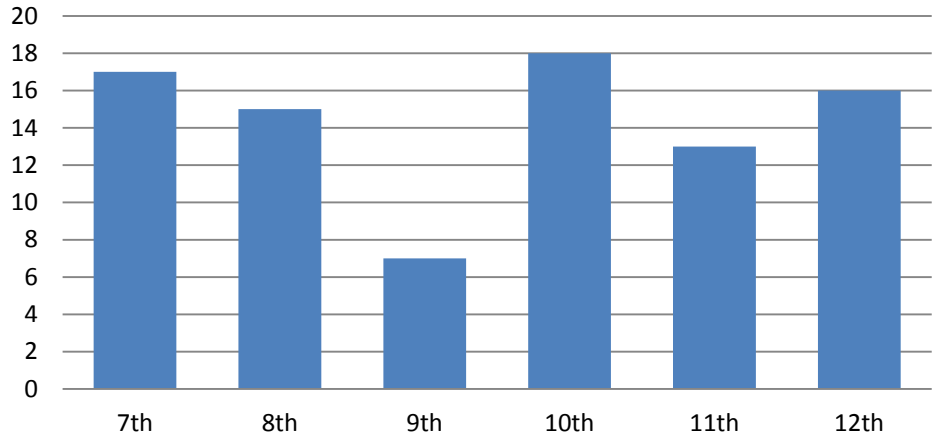
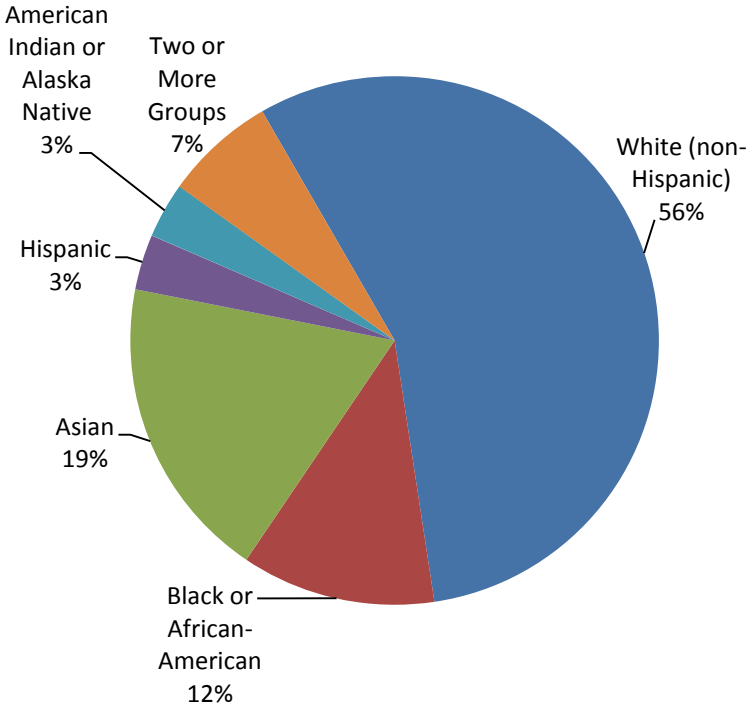


Fig. 2. Parents/Guardians Interviewed, By Race/Ethnicity
(of 59 parents/guardians)



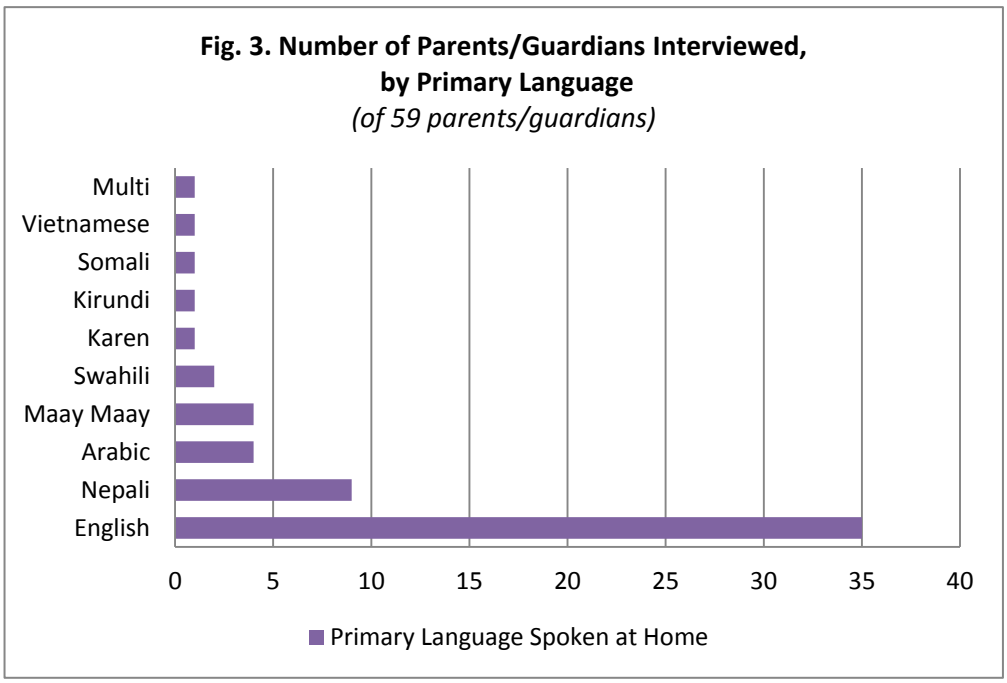
The Interview Process

Interviews of parents and guardians whose primary language is English were all conducted by phone. With parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English, 16 were conducted in person and seven by phone. 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;

[3] See the interview in the Appendix.

2. How parents and guardians use several standard tools of communication, such as Web2School 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).



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 for them 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 Web2School, 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 recommendations. At the bottom of each summary, readers can access

additional material on the topic, including many more comments from parents and guardians and an expanded list of suggestions.

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 who want to read more can click on the links that are provided.

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 or summarized 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 group of 59 interviewees as a whole. Other times we have broken down the interviewees into subgroups, either two (primary English-speakers and non-primary English-speakers) or three (by language and then by free/reduced lunch status). Decisions about whether to provide breakdowns by subgroup were based on whether differences between the subgroups seemed large enough to warrant providing an extra level of detail. Regardless of the presentation, the total sample size of 59 is relatively small. Therefore, 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 in Winooski would answer the same questions.

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.

Throughout this study, we have used two different styles of bullet points.

- Round bullet points, as seen to the left, indicate <u>comments made by parents and guardians</u>.

➢ Chevron bullet points, as seen to the left, appear under two headings. Under "Takeaways," they indicate <u>important findings that the schools should act upon,</u> 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 that there was 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 concrete suggestions that may have been made only once or twice, but that we nonetheless wanted to call the schools' attention to.

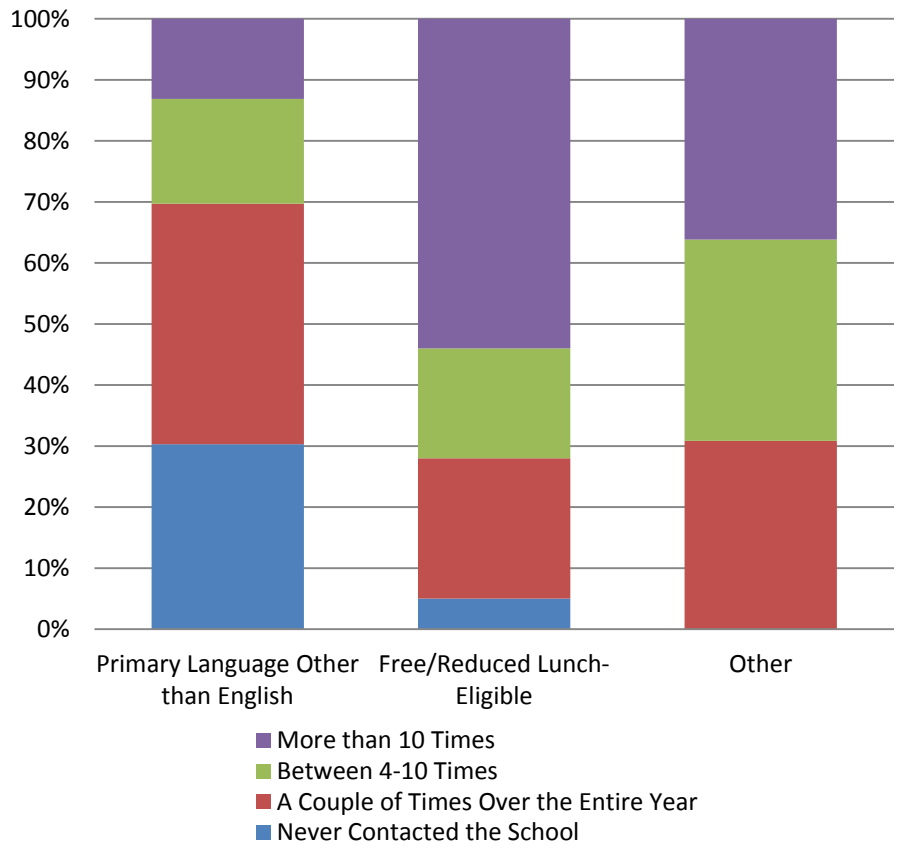
Communicating with the School about Your Child

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 school staff. 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 others make regarding their children, but to assess whether families generally feel heard and understood, and whether they get clear, complete answers from the school when they ask for information or assistance. 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 34% contacted the school more than 10 times. Of all interviewees, parents and guardians whose primary language is other than English were *least* likely to contact the school—only 13% contacted

Fig. 4. How Often Did You Contact the School Last Year with a Question or Concern about Your Child?
(of 59 parents and guardians, by subgroup)

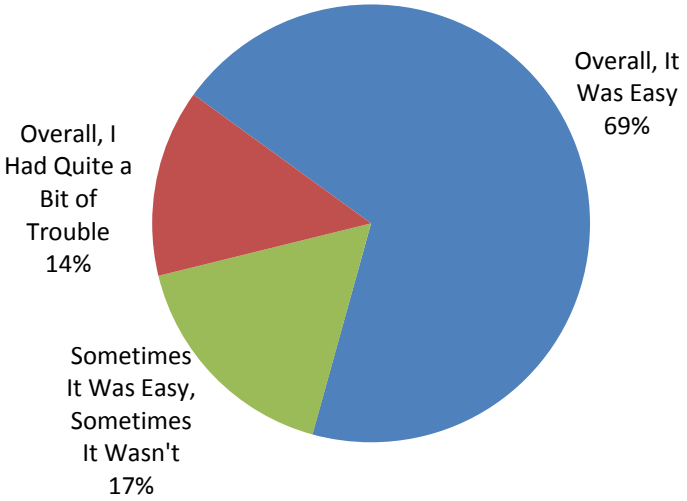


the school more than 10 times, compared to 47% of other parents/guardians. Parents and guardians whose children were eligible for free/reduced lunch were *most* likely to have contacted the school more than 10 times. (See Fig. 4.)

Whom 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. Interviewees repeatedly stressed how much they value feedback from teachers; they regard them as the individuals who know their children best and who oversee a part of their children's lives that parents have no direct access to. 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. Interviewees also named vice principals and principals as go-to people when they can't get a satisfactory resolution with a teacher. Parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English rely heavily on multilingual liaisons; serious problems arise for families when there are no liaisons to assist. One father with no interpreter said he was reduced to using "thumbs up, thumbs down" to communicate with his child's teacher about how things were going.

Fig. 5. Last Year, How Easy Was It to Find Out Everything You Wanted to Know about How Your Child was Doing?
(of 59 parents/guardians)



Getting Information about Your Child

Parents and guardians get information about their children through many sources: report cards, Web2School, 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 parents/guardians and teachers, guidance counselors or other staff in response to some issue that either the family or school 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. 5, most parents/guardians said it was easy for them to find out everything they wanted to know about their child's progress. Of all interviewees, those whose primary language is other than English

were most likely to say getting information was easy. 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 multilingual liaisons 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."

Parents/guardians whose children qualify for free/reduced lunch report having more difficulty finding out everything they want to know than other parents—51% said it was sometimes or usually difficult to get all the information they wanted, compared to 24% of other parents. From interviews and focus groups, it appears that these families are 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, when they have contacted the school about their child, they feel the people they talk to really understand their questions or concerns. The results, in Fig. 6, indicate that overall, three-quarters of interviewees do feel that the school understands them. A breakdown by subgroups indicates that parents/guardians whose children are eligible for free/reduced lunch were *most likely* to feel understood, followed by parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English.

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, 66% said yes, they usually have received such answers, while 22% said sometimes

Fig. 6. When You Contact the School, Do You Feel that Your Questions and Concerns are Understood?
(of 59 parents/guardians)

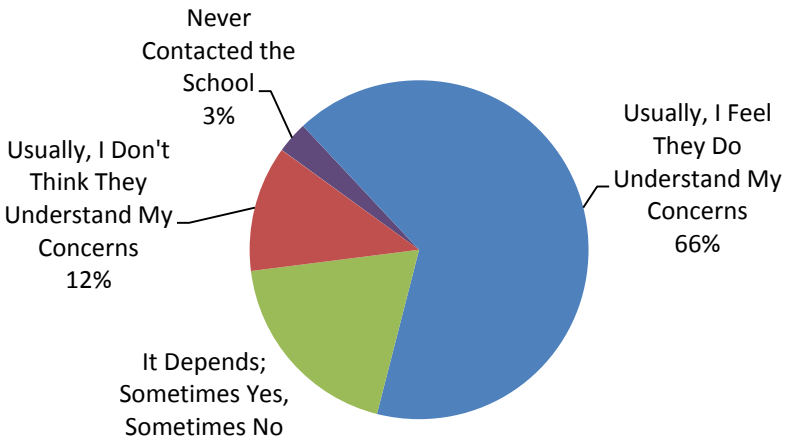
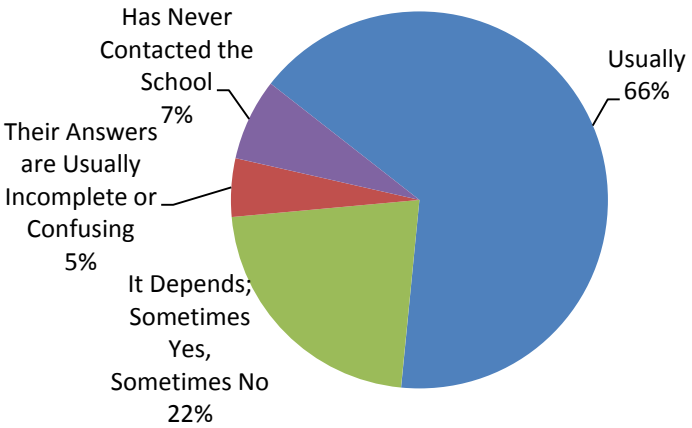


Fig. 7. When You Contact the School, Do You Get an Answer that You Understand, and that Seems Complete?
(of 59 parents/guardians)

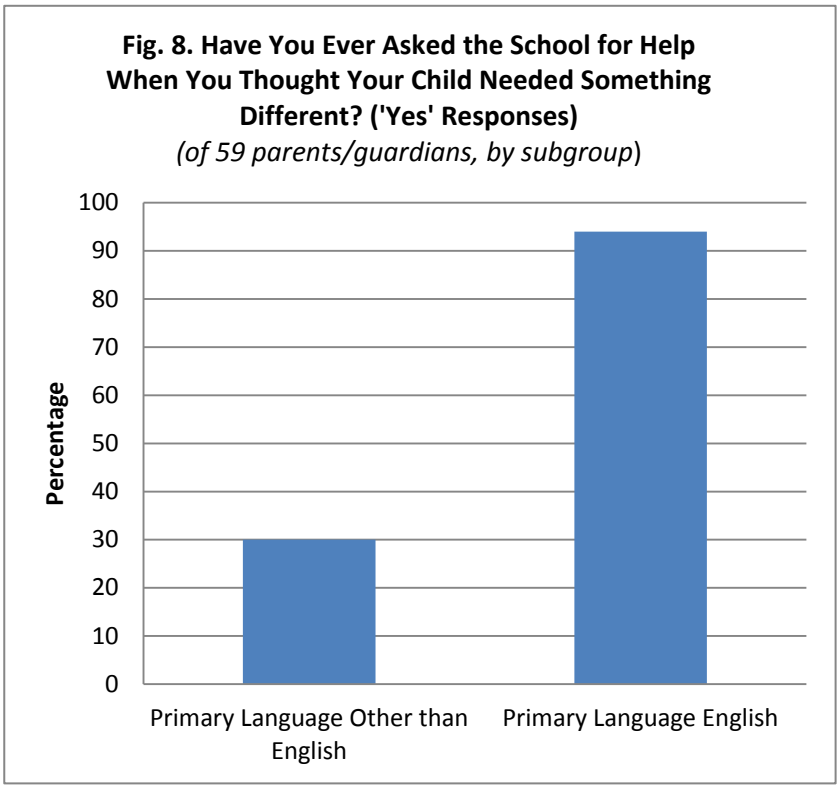


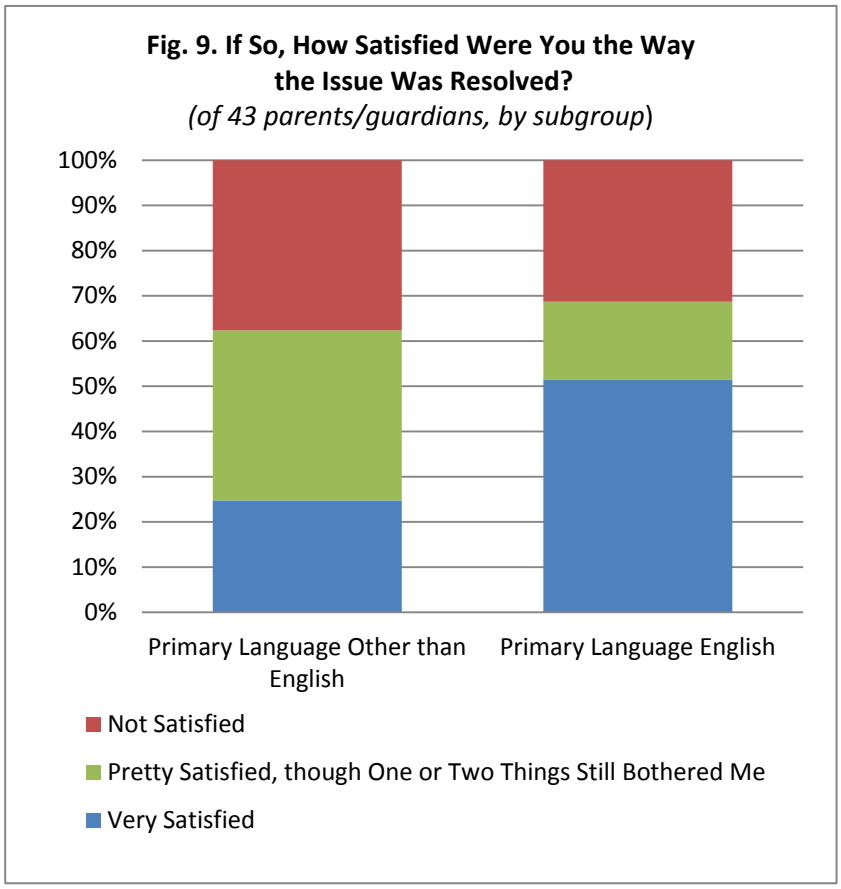
they did (Fig. 7). There were no large differences between subgroups.

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 special support or accommodation for any reason. Among parents and guardians who speak English as a primary language, almost all had made a request of the school for one reason or another (Fig. 8). Remarkably, parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English were far less likely to have made such a 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. Based on this study, 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.

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? It varies. As Fig. 9 indicates, parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English report being unsatisfied more often, or just partially satisfied. Sometimes this dissatisfaction reflects cultural differences. For example, in focus groups, some of these parents expressed dismay that the





school is not as strict with their children as they want it to be.

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 communications 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.

- My daughter wasn't being challenged enough; she was rereading books she had read the years before. She's a straight A student. I went directly to the teacher. I told them it wasn't working, and they fixed it. They actually gave her different books, kicked it up a whole level of reading.
- My daughter had trouble with one class and she went in during study halls to get help and she'd go in during TA times, too. She is an athlete so she can't stay after school for help. They made it easy for her to get help either before school or during school hours.
- Last summer my son's math grade dropped way down and I was worried he wasn't going to have everything he needed for next year. I talked to his math teacher and he gave him extra work on a website, and my son did fine with it. Now he's doing great.
- My son has a lot of energy and can't really sit still for long, so a social worker came in anytime he needed to go play basketball—or he could go to her and she'd go out with him and shoot hoops or whatever.
- I feel people at the school [are] very helpful and they are doing a good job. Even with my language issue they tried a lot to make sure that I got it [understood it].
- Last year the teacher at WMS called me in because she had observed that my daughter has dysgraphia [a writing problem]. The teacher had specific suggestions about what to do. She was very open and accessible. I feel like I can approach her anytime to keep working on this.
- Most of the teachers we talk with are very clear and open.
- If they had ways to make things work about for my child, they always tried all the options.
- This parent didn't actually contact the school about any problems, but the school did contact him to let him know that his son was having speech problems. They discussed the issue and placed his son with a speech therapist.

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

- ➢ Someone at the school noticed issues and contacted the parent or guardian.
- ➢ If the parent/guardian noticed the issue, they knew who at the school to call about it.

- School staff listened to the parents' concerns and ideas, and to the extent possible, incorporated them into the plan they ultimately put in place.
- Parents were involved, but it was teachers, guidance counselors, and others who acted as the experts and took the lead on creating plans tailored for each 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 others are not solely focused on problems. They really know the students, and will help even ambitious students reach higher.
- Teachers, guidance counselors and others are clear and complete. They give all the information a parent/guardian wants.
- The school followed through in every case. Issues weren't dropped.

Communication that Doesn't Go Well

While the majority of parents and guardians in this study appeared 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. The school didn't let me know that my child was struggling.
2. Calls and emails aren't returned, or are returned late.
3. There's a negative attitude in the high school toward students; the atmosphere is harsh, and it's not clear why.
4. There wasn't any follow-through for my child. I bring up issues, but nothing ever happens.
5. I have to coordinate with lots of different people, and it gets complicated.
6. It took a long time to sort out problems with my child's class schedule.
7. I want the school to have high standards for my child, instead of letting him/her "pass through."
8. Parents/guardians don't have the information they need.
9. My child was being bullied, and not enough was done about it.
10. I don't really understand what they're telling me.
11. I have a hard time finding out what everything I need to be because I speak very little English.
12. There aren't enough resources to go around, so I can't get any attention for my child.
13. Some people I talk to at the school have an attitude problem.

What's Ideal for Parents and Guardians?

Finally, to learn a bit more about what parents and guardians really want from the children's 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?

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 regular updates on all aspects of their child's school lives, and they want to choose which mode of communication they use. Many parents/guardians either don't have access to computers and email, or they don't want to use them to find out about their children's school progress. Some parents/guardians get around the lack of electronic communication by dropping into the school informally to catch up with teachers. For many, this is convenient because they are picking up and dropping off their children anyway. But others cannot do that. Talks with teachers, by phone or in person, have to take place on their schedule.

Interviewees said they want to know right away if there is an academic problem, and 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 promptly 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

- I think the teachers should contact parents once a month or once in a while on a regular rotation. It doesn't need be a long, drawn-out thing, and it could even be some checkboxes to say your kid's doing great, doing pretty well, could use a little more of something, or your kid is really not doing well. That would be really helpful.... If your child is doing consistently badly for a week, there should be some kind of flag that goes up that says, 'Hey, I should contact the parents ....' That way, parents would know almost immediately if there was a problem.
- I'm concerned about turning in assignments, homework, because that's 50 percent of [students' class] grade. I would need to know that and if that became a real problem, I would need the teacher to meet with me after school and give me the assignment so I'd know what it was that was missing. I called; the teacher said 'I always have the assignment posted on the internet.' I don't have the internet. You might reach other parents that way, but not me.
- I would get contacted by the guidance office, about any situation related to my kid; I would get contacted by mail. Also I prefer it to be translated into my language.
- This parent would want to hear from the teacher or the student services person. For middle school, she wants to hear about how the student is doing socially and emotionally. For high school, she wants to hear about behavioral concerns, assignments missing, what assignments are due long-term. She would also like to see all teachers on board with the technology for informing parents re: assignments and things coming up. Email is best way to reach her.
- I would be contacted about everything that has to do with my kids. I would love to get contacted by an Arabic interpreter by phone.
- I'd want to be contacted by anyone who works with my kids directly. I'd want to be contacted about anything: how awesome my child did, any not-so-outstanding performances, issues or concerns they

might have. Academics, behavior, anything. They should call my cell phone, or if it's not serious, they could send a note home.

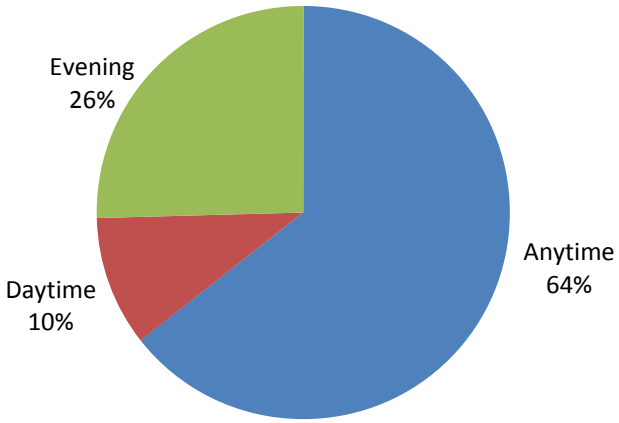
How Do Parents/Guardians Prefer to be Contacted?

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 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 is 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 They Talk?

Over half of parents and guardians said they could usually talk or respond to messages from the school anytime (Fig. 10). Among primary English-speaking families, "anytime" was by far the most common answer (72%). Two comments are representative. One parent said, "I have a lot going on and a schedule that changes, but I can make time when it's needed." Another said, "I want to be informed earlier in the day if there is a problem—I don't want to be called at 9 at night to say that there was an issue during the day. Call me as soon as you can after it happens."

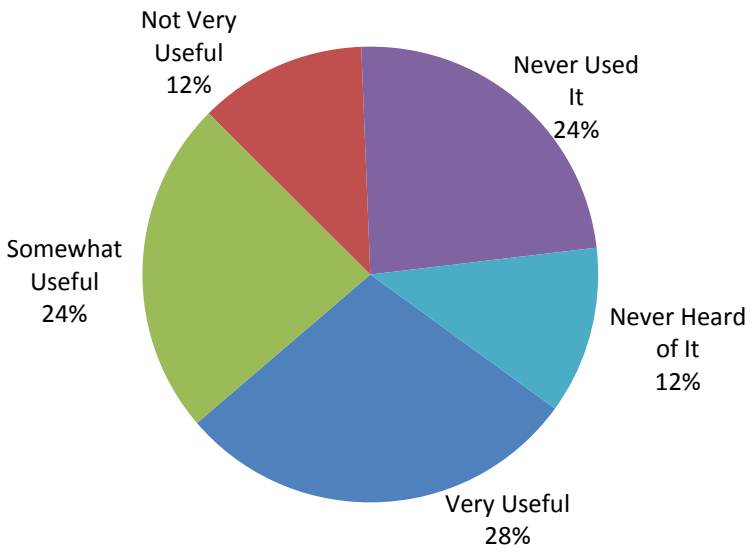
Fig. 10. When is the Best Time for You to Talk or Respond to Messages from the School?
(of 59 parents/guardians)



Web2School

As Fig. 11 indicates, just over half the parents/guardians we interviewed said that Web2School, the web portal for student assignments and grades, is either somewhat useful or very useful as a way of monitoring their children's academic progress. Still, nearly half of parents and guardians whose primary language is other than English said they had either never used or never heard of it. In their comments, interviewees said the portal is not updated regularly enough to make it a reliable tool for communication about how students are doing.

Fig. 11. As a Way of Finding Out How Your Child is Doing in School, How Useful is Web2School?
(of 59 parents/guardians)



Sample Comments

- I can get to it anytime I want to see where things are at grade-wise. But the teachers aren't always good about updating it or putting in enough details so I know what they're talking about. If the math assignment is chapter 4, questions 1-20, and they only write 'chapter 4,' or 'weekly work' or something vague, I don't really know what to ask my son about.
- It allows me to keep a weekly dialogue with the children about work expectations versus work being handed in.
- Nobody explained about it to me. I think even if it was explained, I wouldn't be able to use it and understand it because of my language limitation.

Takeaways

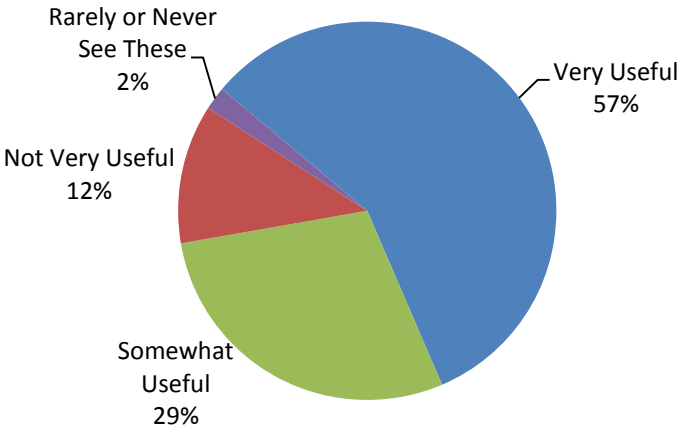
- Web2School should be regularly updated, and parents and guardians should be told when those updates will occur. They should also be advised at the beginning of each term which teachers use Web2School and which don't.
- All parents/guardians need information directly from the school about Web2School and how to use it. Throughout our interviews, parents stressed that information sent home with their children doesn't always reach them. Therefore critical information about how to access and use a primary communication tool should be delivered directly to parents.
- Almost half of parents/guardians whose primary language is not English say they don't have the computer or language skills to 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.

More information, comments and recommendations

Report Cards

As seen in Fig. 12, more than three-quarters of parents and guardians said report cards are either very useful or somewhat useful as a way of finding how how their children are doing in school. Parents whose primary language is other than English were most likely to find report cards valuable, followed by parents whose children are eligible for free/reduced lunch. Higher-income parents were least likely to find them very useful, suggesting they were more likely to check their children's progress online. In general, parents/guardians said they like the ritual of the report card, but feel the comments should be more detailed and specific. Several interviewees said the report cards don't help them understand the nuances of their child's performance or help them understand exactly why grades are poor. Some parents also said the report cards come too late to adjust performance.

Fig. 12. As a Way of Finding Out about How Your Child Is Doing in School, How Useful are Report Cards?
(of 59 parents/guardians)



Sample Comments

- A report card speaks for itself, but we get most of their grades online…. For me it's redundant. But I know some parents don't have internet, so I guess they need it.
- The comments are nice, but you only get one teacher that does it. It would be nice if they had more content; they could be more useful.
- I can only see the grades but not why my child is failing the class.
- I already knew the grades; however, attendance is most helpful to me. This was indicating that she [is] always there, not skipping school.

Takeaways

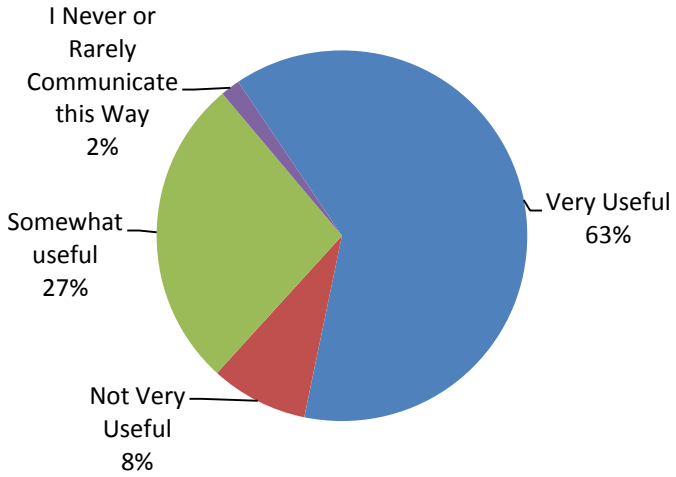
- Parents prefer personalized and detailed comments to generic comments.
- Parents don't want to be surprised by poor grades on a report card. They want to be informed about problems when they first occur, so they can help improve performance.
- Parents/guardians whose primary language is other than 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. Enough context needs to be provided so they understand what good or bad grades mean now and in the future for the children.
- Parents/guardians whose children are not performing well need far more than a report card to understand what's not working and how they can help fix it.

More information, comments and recommendations

Conversations with School Staff

The vast majority of parents/guardians said they find conversations with people at the school very useful or somewhat useful (Fig. 13) as a way of monitoring their children's progress. There were no large differences among primarily English and non-English speaking groups. Several parents/guardians indicated they value the way that conversations with the school lead to better understanding of the situation among all parties. Many interviewees also mentioned the importance of collaboration between teachers and caregivers, and a strong desire to actively support their children's academic success. Other common themes were the sense that conversations with the school are efficient, convenient and give parents/guardians direct feedback, as well as acknowledgment that the quality of these conversations varies greatly depending on which person at the school people contact.

Fig. 13. As a Way of Finding Out How Your Child is Doing in School, How Useful are Direct Conversations with School Staff?
(of 59 parents/guardians)



Sample Comments

- You have to find the teacher who will go the extra mile. It depends. It's luck.
- I really respect the teachers who do face-to-face up there. A lot of schools deal with difficult situations, difficult family issues. They are very sensitive to that and they do a lovely job.
- I only speak with my home-school liaison; I don't speak with teachers or counselors because my English is not good and I may not understand everything.
- You can get so much more information out of a conversation than a grade on a piece of paper; you check in on how they're doing socially and behaving in the classroom.

Takeaways

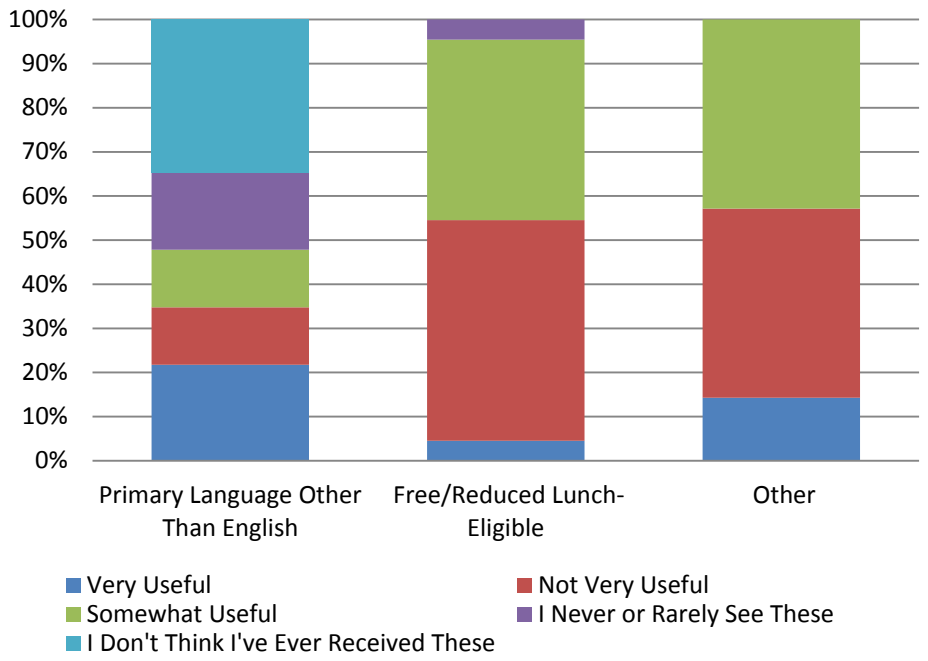
- Parents and guardians want school staff to respond to their questions and concerns. Even if they don't get the desired outcome, they want to communicate with the 'right' person, on the same or the next day, and get prompt answers that relate to their specific child.
- Parents and guardians prefer to talk to someone who knows their child personally, views the student as an individual, and is directly involved in the situation.
- Parents/guardians say that the quality of communication entirely depends on the person with whom they are speaking. This obviously should not be the case; communication protocols need to be standardized so all school staff respond with equal speed and openness to hearing the family out.

More information, comments and recommendations

NECAP Test Results

Most parents and guardians said NECAP test results are only somewhat useful, or not very useful, as a way of finding out how their children are doing academically. (See Fig. 14.) Among families whose primary language is other than English, more than half were not sure they had ever received the test results, though those who had said they were an important indicator of their children's progress. Overall, many interviewees said that they don't understand what results mean. Furthermore, they said it is unfair to test students in English when it is not their primary language.

Fig. 14. As a Way of Finding Out How Your Child is Doing, How Useful are NECAP Standardized Test Results?
(of 59 parents/guardians, by subgroup)



Sample Comments

- It just kind of gives you a base of how your kids are learning, but they don't really say what needs to change. I don't remember talking to the teachers about the results, about what they mean, and what could be helpful. They just come in the mail and that's it.
- Nice to know where the school stands, but hopefully in the end the school will change and teachers will be able to accommodate the student's needs where they're weak.
- Test results showed the real level of my kids. When he sees the scores, the child can do his best to do better, to improve his skills. This kind of test really encourages the kids to do their best at school.

Takeaways

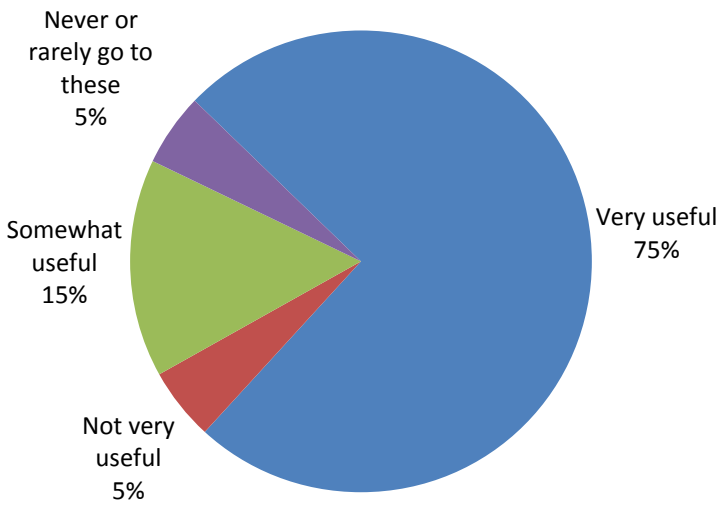
- Parents/guardians want more help understanding NECAP test results. They don't know what the test measures, how it connects to the classroom or what scores mean for individual students.
- Parents/guardians would like more information about how various student populations are accommodated, as well as how performance affects policy and school funding decisions.
- Without a multilingual liaison to deliver and explain results, most people whose primary language is other than English will not see them, or will have virtually no understanding of what the scores mean.

More information, comments and recommendations

Parent-Teacher Conferences

Overall, three-quarters of parents and guardians said that parent-teacher conferences are very useful (Fig. 15). There were only slight differences among subgroups—87% of families whose primary language is other than English said meetings are very useful, compared to only 59% of those whose children are free/reduced lunch-eligible. The majority of parents and guardians were enthusiastic about meeting teachers face-to-face and want to build relationships with teachers. They said, however, that the quality of the experience varies depending on whom they see. Several interviewees said these conferences are important to them and they wished they could be offered more often. For families whose primary language is other than English, when a multilingual liaison participates, the conferences present an almost singular opportunity to learn how their children are doing in school.

Fig. 15. As a Way of Finding Out How Your Child is Doing in School, Parent-Teacher Conferences are:
(of 59 parents/guardians)



Sample Comments

- You get a better understanding of what's really going on; you really get down to basic issues.
- It's the face-to-face; you can ask questions. You can't ask a report card questions. We can ask how they can get to a better grade, what can we do at home to support the classroom.
- I do like these meetings. The teachers show me tests and quiz results that my kid got. Also I knew from teachers how my kid was doing in the classroom and his/her behavior. I like all details about my kid from teachers.

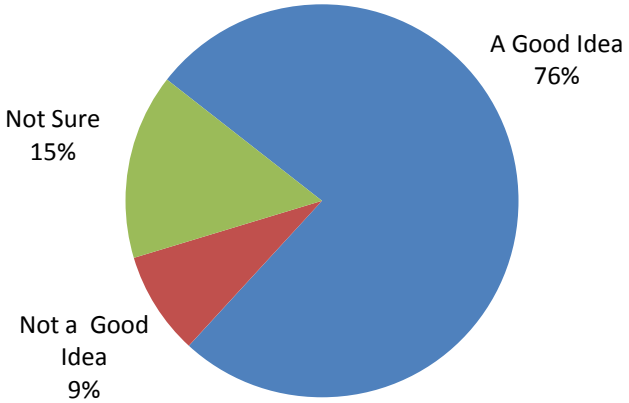
Takeaways

- Parents and guardians want teachers to ask for their input, to have a collaborative attitude and to give them concrete suggestions about how to support learning at home.
- Parents and guardians whose primary language is other than English need an interpreter to participate meaningfully in parent-teacher conferences.
- Many parents said if they are already in touch with teachers, the conferences don't tell them anything they don't already know. They want to hear something new and unique to their child, not just a re-hash of the latest grades and scores.
- Be honest. Even if the student is present, parents and guardians want to know if there's something that needs improvement. They say their children can benefit from hearing it as well.

More information, comments and recommendations

Student Participation in Parent-Teacher Conferences

Fig. 16. Should Students Participate in the Parent-Teacher Conference?
(of 59 parents/guardians)



As Fig. 16 indicates, the majority of parents/guardians were in favor of including students in parent-teacher conferences. Another 15% were unsure. 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. Those who were not sure or disliked the idea were concerned students might be intimidated or discouraged by teacher comments, or that adults may hold back to protect students' feelings. Some people suggested that it's a good idea for some students but not others; those who are particularly sensitive or lack maturity may not benefit. Families whose primary language is other than English, however, said that hearing directly from teachers would motivate students and hold them accountable.

Sample Comments

- It keeps the student accountable for what they can offer to their academics. It's good for them to hear how they're doing alongside their parents so they can work together for the next semester.
- It's a great idea to have the kid there; it forces an answer to the question. Teachers [have] got to be able to ask the hard question well, or give the information. It can be uncomfortable for them, but that's the whole issue.
- Because that is a meeting about them, they have to know about it, and they may also have something to say.

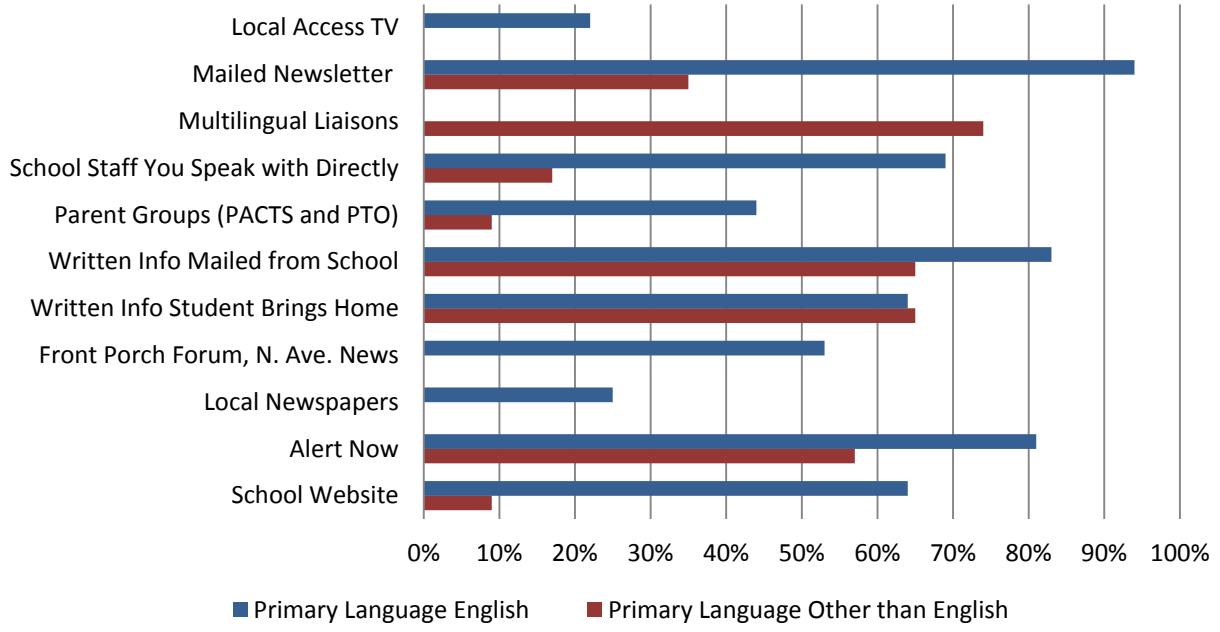
Takeaways

- If students join conferences, many families want a built-in time that is still just for the adults to talk.
- People are concerned about the potential for negative effects on students; parents and guardians need reassurance that sensitive topics will be handled with care.
- Parents and guardians whose primary language is other than English want parents and teachers to present a “united front.” Multilingual liaisons support that idea, saying that in many families, first- and second-generation communication is poor, and parents/guardians need the school’s help.

More information, comments and recommendations

School News: Sources of Information and Who Uses Them

Fig. 17. Percentage of Parents/Guardians Who Report They Get News about School from these Sources, by Subgroup:



As Fig. 17 above indicates, parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English were far less likely than other families to get information about the school from any electronic source, or from school staff or the local media. The mailed newsletter, a near universal source of news for other parents/guardians, was a source for only 35% of these families. In their comments, primary English-speaking parents/guardians stressed that the school website needs to be updated regularly and be more comprehensive and accurate. They also said that written material sent home with their children may never actually be given to them, so using students as conduits of important information is risky.

Sample Comments

- Website isn't comprehensive or up to date—or, for example, it might tell you a date for an event like a play, but not give the time.
- Emails would be good. Maybe a blitz email twice a month that says, 'These are the events coming up in the next two weeks. Mark your calendars. And keep your eyes open in the next email for what's happening in the second half of the month.' I know not everyone has email, but I would like that.
- There is so much information in pre-school to grade 5—they were always sending you info. In middle school it's more independent—it's more on me to find things out…. It's the little things. [Parents] could use a better orientation. For example, what's automatic versus what you are required to sign up for? Again, I don't do the website thing, so I didn't know.

- Because of my language limitation, I couldn't get access to information from many of the above sources.

Takeaways

- The website needs to be updated more consistently if parents are to depend on it as a source of information. It also needs to be more comprehensive and accurate.
- Some parents say they would like to receive information via email. Many—probably the majority—of parents and guardians in Winooski have email, and moving in this direction may prompt others to get it, especially if low-cost service were available and training was offered to interested families, particularly those who don't speak English as a primary language.
- Parents and guardians whose primary language is not English vary a great deal in their ability to understand general school news, whatever the source. Many rely primarily on multilingual liaisons and family members to bring them news or translate for them. Because their news intake is so constricted, the school should not assume that important information is getting to these families.

More information, comments and recommendations

The One Thing Parents and Guardians Would Change

If there was one thing you could change about the way the school communicates with you about your child, what it would be? We asked all 59 interviewees this question. Most parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English said they wouldn't change anything, perhaps because many have multilingual liaisons who assist them. Many others, though, had substantive suggestions. Below is a comprehensive list of comments, excluding those comments in which parents/guardians said they would change nothing.

Sample Comments

- Maybe focus a little more on the positives before jumping in to the not-so-positives. There can be a cycle where teachers get frustrated about behaviors. They do this in the parent-teacher conferences really well [i.e., start with positives] but anything outside that seems to focus on negatives.
- They've instituted a 'ticket' system that doesn't work well—the court has no response to them. Having a parent-teacher conference would be better.
- I've learned as a parent [that] I need to seek out the information I want. I have a vested interest in my child's future and no one else does. It's hard to change that. Some people want more from teachers but they have so much on their plates, it's not easy for them. Parents set the foundation. If people want more, they need to do more to make it happen. You can't leave it all up to the school. Parents are the ones with kids all along the way—you have to be invested.
- It would be good if the teachers could be at the school for a while after school. They seem to leave immediately after school ends. There are a lot of issues that seem to come up immediately after school ends.
- I want the schools to conduct regular meetings with parents to keep abreast of the developments taking place at school.
- My son was getting bullied one time, and I never heard about it until a friend told me. But when my son gets in trouble, I always hear about it. They should contact you both ways, whether your child has been right or wrong.
- Whatever system they've got going has to be revised or revamped so they make sure they're reaching *every* parent, not [just] 95 percent of them. [This parent doesn't have internet access.]

Takeaways

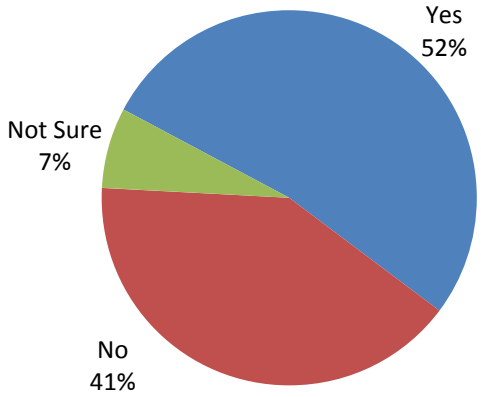
- Provide more frequent updates to families.
- Let parents/guardians know there's a problem with a student's performance early on, long before report cards come out.
- Maintain high standards for all students.
- Be honest about students' performance. Some parents/guardians assume their children will go to college. If that seems unlikely, let them know before senior year.
- Keep the school website up to date.
- Check in with parents/guardians about their own technology skills before assuming they can receive electronic information or help their children with school-issued devices.

More information, comments and recommendations

Partnership for Change

Just over half of the 59 parents/guardians who participated in this study had heard of the Partnership for Change (Fig. 18). Of those, many had heard the name but didn't have any details. Perhaps understandably, parents and guardians tended to connect the collaboration with something tangible in their children's lives, such as the iPads students received at school. Higher-income parents/guardians were most likely to have heard about Partnership for Change; those whose primary language is other than English were least likely to have heard of it. Some interviewees heard about it from newsletters or local media outlets, others at meetings, or from children or friends. Many connect the collaboration with bringing technology to the school along with other improvements.

Fig. 18. Have You Heard of the Partnership for Change [or the Nellie Mae Grant]?
(of 59 parents/guardians)



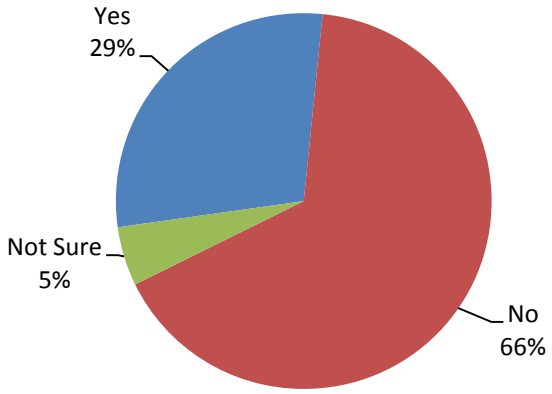
Sample Comments

- I know that it's a cooperative between Burlington and Winooski and they had us brainstorming about things we wanted to see, priorities in the proficiencies, and to provide examples of how someone would demonstrate proficiencies. There were pyramids of different models for each school.
- That they want to get parents more involved in the education process.
- It's a big grant with a lot of money that went to Winooski and Burlington and is to be used to improve the school district in some way.
- They're trying to make more of a collaborative atmosphere, trying to improve the reputation of the school, is the long and short of it. I do think it could be a very difficult transition.
- I attended a meeting at the high school when my daughter got her laptop. I knew this program helps students learn and be up to date with the technology process. It encourages students to do their best at school.
- The kids got a laptop. Is that what it is? That's about the only thing that was ever announced about that.
- It's a wonderful grant for the high schools to come together to figure out ways to communicate better and to educate the kids.
- This parent participated in some community activities associated with Partnership for Change. For instance, she and her kids participated in the weekly community walks.

Learning in the Community

Fewer than one-third of parents and guardians in this study had heard of student learning in the community as it has been discussed locally by Partnership for Change (Fig. 19). Among higher-income, primary English-speakers, just over half (56%) had heard of it, compared to only 16% of those whose primary language is other than English and 36% of parents and guardians of free/reduced lunch-eligible students. All interviewees were told that learning in the community would be part of the regular school day, that it would count toward graduation requirements and that students would get credit for it. Most people had heard only very basic information and may have been confusing it with community service and service learning activities students had done. The vast majority of parents and guardians thought it was a good idea—as long as it is done right. Below are sample comments and concerns.

Fig. 19. Have You Heard of Learning in the Community?
(of 59 parents/guardians)



Sample Comments

- It would be nice because she has ideas of what she wants to do after high school; it would be nice for her to get some experience in things to see if she actually likes them or not.
- It is good for kids to have the opportunity to offer; they have so much to offer. This could be a win-win. Troubled kids may do better in a non-classroom setting with someone to take them under their wing. This may keep them in school.
- It's a good idea. Practical experiences are far more better. Students don't get bored by being out in the community.
- Who would be allowed to do it? Is it going to be for everyone, or just the A students, or just the trouble-makers?
- Just being sure there is accountability for the students' learning. Also that the student will be representing the Winooski school and community, so how they behave will impact the next wave of students who want to participate.
- [No concerns] at all. This will allow my kid to learn new skills. He could use it in his real life.
- What companies are they dealing with? It needs to be a good learning experience, with their own supervisors; we can't just send them and hope for the best.
- Give the kids tests to ensure they will pass the class and know the correct information and the correct process before sending them out to the community. If a student isn't doing well in the classroom, they won't work in the community either. The school and the kids need to work in the classroom and learn how to do the work there.

- My child should be well-informed about the credibility of the program. It should not be a waste of resources and time.

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 are the practical differences for their children?
- Ensuring student safety off school grounds is a primary and 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.
- Many families are concerned that businesses aren't equipped to work with teens. Schools may need to provide their business partners with training that addresses adolescent development, how to foster supportive learning environments, and ways to tailor tasks in order to provide a meaningful experience.
- 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.

Other Recommendations of Parents and Guardians

- Several interviewees were concerned that students might get stuck in bad situations. If students could do a “trial run” at a site before choosing, that would help. Another suggestion was to keep the placements limited to one semester, so that students could change to another site after a couple months.
- Parents and guardians want learning in the community to be managed like any other course, with written learning objectives and a structure for assessment. Some wanted to see a “crosswalk” between learning in the community and college entrance requirements.

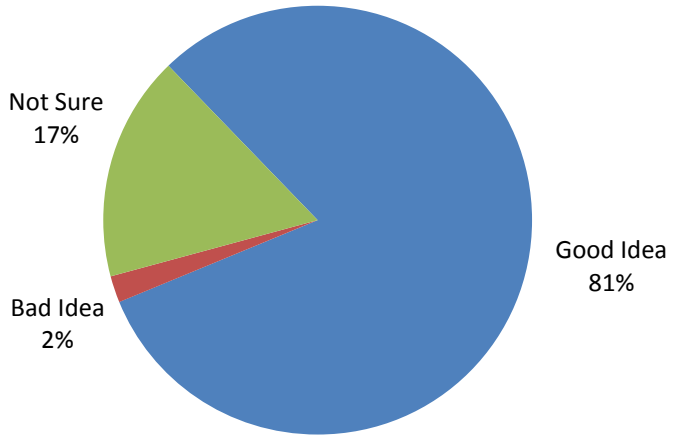
More information, comments and recommendations

Personalized Learning Plans

Fewer than half the parents and guardians in this study had heard of personalized learning as it is currently being discussed by Partnership for Change. Parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English were much less likely to have heard of it than other interviewees, though in fact relatively few interviewees from any group knew 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.

In general, parents/guardians thought personalized learning sounded like a good idea for their children (Fig. 20). Breaking down the statistics, interviewees whose primary language is other than English were overwhelming likely to feel personalized learning would benefit their children. A strong majority of parents/guardians whose children are eligible for free/reduced-lunch also liked the idea. Other parents were more mixed; many said they needed more information before knowing whether the concept was a good fit for their children.

Fig. 20. Knowing What You Do So Far, Does Personalized Learning Sound Like a Good or Bad Idea for Your Child[ren]?
(of 59 parents/guardians)



Comment Themes

Most parents and guardians supported the idea of personalized learning, but most also had basic questions about it as well. They supported giving students the chance to create their own plans and pursue their personal interests, though many felt it would work well only with students who are already motivated. They also expressed concern that personalized learning plans would allow some students to "take the easy way out" while others worked hard. Mostly, though, parents and guardians had questions: What role would parents play? Will students still get the basics they need, or will they be allowed to avoid subjects they don't like? Does the school system really have the number of staff required to monitor students' plans? What would personalized plans mean for students' schedules?

Sample Comments

1. How rigorous is this going to be? One kid will put anything down; will they get the same credit as the kid who is an overachiever and puts a lot down? Will a kid be able to slide by and work 10 hours at the community center and get all his achievements done, as opposed to a kid who worked at a law office or something?
2. I don't want any student to be able to take the easy way out. There has to be some bottom line for the school. I'd need to know the basics, what [my daughter] has to have and then if she's got a passion, how can she get more of it covered in high school so in college she's got a foundation.
3. I would like to see a list of criteria that the Board of Education in Vermont expects to be met from the plans. I would like to be assured that the plans can be modified if there is an area of strength being met or surpassed and/or an area of weakness that needs more attention or support.
4. It could be a good idea for a student who is really aware of themselves and know what works for them and doesn't work for them—if they have a firm grasp and know what they want.
5. It's a great idea for students who are academically motivated. Not such a good idea for kids who are not really focused on their education and just want to be out of school.
6. This sounds like home schooling. Kids need to learn how to be respectful in the classroom. Kids need to learn how to sit in the classroom and learn what the need to learn in the way the school is teaching. This is the real world; this prepares them for the real world. If the school needs to separate kids with learning disabilities, autism, to give them a special plan, do it. Otherwise the kids need to learn how to work together and get prepared for the real world in a classroom together.
7. I would want to understand what the benefits are. How is it different from what's happening now?
8. This parent's biggest reservation is that they will have four teachers in the iLab and she wonders how four teachers "can go in 16 different directions. What if a student has a different perspective, such as marine biology, and there isn't a teacher who has the specialty?"
9. I want to know the availability of the resources to continue the plan until its mission is accomplished.
10. [Personalized learning] "should definitely be a part of their learning from 7th grade to graduation." This parent compares it to college, where you have a major and choose your classes around the major's requirements. She says that as long as there is a plan or a path, this type of approach would be great. For one thing, it would help students be better prepared when they actually do go to college, because they'll already have taken some of the prerequisite classes for whatever they're interested in studying.
11. This parent doesn't have faith that the current guidance department can do a good job with this.
12. It's a very cool idea. It gives the student a say in what and how they're learning, instead of being told what to do. They are having their voice be heard about what they want to do. I would talk to my child about it, to see if they are given choices or criteria to choose from and then have my child sit down with teachers and guidance and share their ideas. Again, it's a communication piece. The teacher, student and guidance can share ideas and come to mutual agreement about the plan.
13. It sounds like an IEP and this parent feels that IEP's don't really work. Someone would need to be checking up on the plan and make sure that the students are meeting their goals along the way. Kids with anxiety or other disorders would benefit most from personalized learning.

14. As long as my daughter can comprehend what she needs to focus on, I'm totally fine with a personal plan. In home schooling or smaller private schools they do that. It really would enhance things. It wouldn't be a detriment unless the person is not interested. There are people who hate school and don't want to be involved in something like that. So it might not work for everyone.
15. I think when it is implemented, I want as a parent to be explained about the merits and demerits [of] the program before it starts for my children.
16. I would want to know about how this plan functions in the school and for my children.
17. [I need to know] how it works, what processes does it take to accomplish its role? How it will generally work for my child.

Takeaways

- Parents and guardians need many more details about how personalized learning would actually be structured. Given what they currently know, they are cautiously upbeat about the idea.
- Interviewees were concerned that the school might not have the capacity to make personalized learning work. Is there enough staff to monitor each student's plan? Do teachers have expertise in all the different areas students would be interested in?
- Parents and guardians are unsure if this concept would work well for all students. Several parents thought it would benefit highly motivated students but not those who struggle in school; two parents thought it makes sense for students with anxiety disorders, autism or other issues, but not for the student body at large.

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

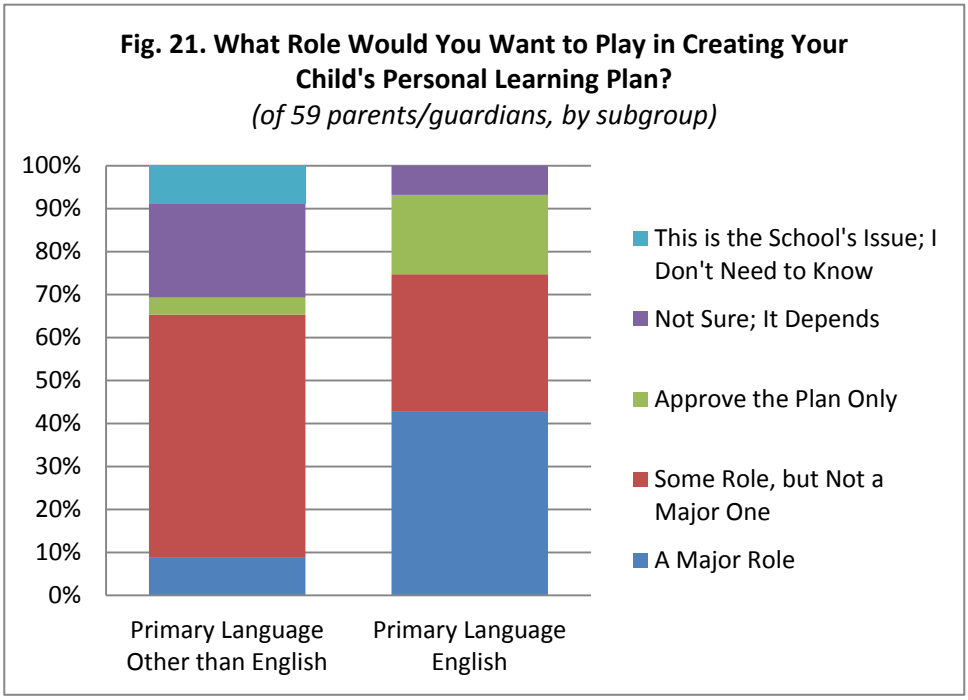


Fig. 21. What Role Would You Want to Play in Creating Your Child's Personal Learning Plan?
(of 59 parents/guardians, by subgroup)

As Fig. 21 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 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 their involvement. Parents and guardians whose primary language is English were more likely to say they wanted a major role. One possible reason is that these parents are more likely to worry that a personalized plan will impact their children's college plans in

some way. Another reason is that interviewees whose primary language is other than English were more likely to have never heard anything about personalized learning, and thus they didn't have enough details to make an educated guess about the role they would like to play.

Sample Comments *(of 59)*

- I'd love to be a part of it. Ideally we'd all work together and be on the same page. That way, students buy in.
- I have often asked the educators at Winooski if there could be an individualized education plan for the gifted and talented students in our school. When I used the acronym IEP I was shot down, saying that it's only for certain students. I pointed out that the words '*individualized education plan'* could apply to anyone who needed more personalized curriculum—namely, my daughters and other children who are exceptional….There's a lot of grant and earmarked money going to schools for students who are behind, but there isn't anything for them to support students who excel. This is why my husband and I have taught our daughters to make our own 'plan' at home.
- One of our jobs is to teach our kids to be independent and start making their own decisions and frame their own futures, so I would not want to be at the table necessarily.
- It would vary depending on the child, but I'd want to know what the choices and possibilities were, so I could encourage them to maybe try something new or different.

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 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.
- How much any particular parent/guardian wants to be involved may vary depending on the child in question.
- Personalized learning plans may be a way to give more attention to students who are already excelling.

More information, comments and recommendations

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 schools communicate with them, many potential areas for improvement were uncovered.

In the course of this study, we conducted interviews with 59 parents/guardians, spoke with 25 parents/guardians in four focus groups, and eight multilingual liaisons (most of whom interviewed Winooski families for this project). Many of them expressed an appreciation of the small-town atmosphere that allows them to pop in and say hello to teachers on the spur of the moment. Several interviewees said they never have problems with communication because they “know everyone” at the school. These are real strengths of the district.

On the other hand, certain experiences, complaints and recommendations were voiced over and over — so often that we can confidently say that the following factors are key to healthy communication between schools and families. To promote consistently positive communication, schools should:

- **Respond.** Teachers, guidance counselors and administrators should universally welcome family input, respond to parents'/guardians’ concerns promptly and follow up until issues are resolved.
- **Be the experts.** Teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators should act as the experts and take the lead on creating plans that help individual students, both those already doing well and those who are struggling. If the 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 to help themselves.** Teachers and other school staff should not only work for solutions to immediate issues, but also help 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 and disciplinary actions. The justification for 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 must 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.

- **Improve the website.** 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.*
- **Make the most of your e-tools.** The web portal should be reliable and accurate, and all (or most) teachers should use it.

Practical First Steps

Implementing the changes outlined above should not be overwhelmingly difficult. In many cases, improvements can be achieved by fine-tuning 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 who to contact for what, and have phone numbers and emails easy to find. It might help to have an FAQ section on the school websites.
- **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 Web2School. This immediate outreach to families should be a matter of policy, and teachers should be held accountable for doing it.
- **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). And respond to all the questions asked, not just the first one. Prompt and complete responses should also be a matter of school policy. 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.
- **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.
- **Find the right electronic/paper balance.** Electronic communication works well for some 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.
- **Update Web2School on a regular schedule.** Ensure that all teachers who use Web2School 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. Many families said that Web2School compared poorly to other school portals they

had seen; the school should investigate the options for switching to a more flexible, information-inclusive tool.

- **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 what's going badly. Generic comments, such as "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 middle-of-the-road and high-achieving students want to know that their children are getting equal attention. In Winooski, several interviewees said they feel that their children are pushed aside to educate higher-need students whose families are new to the country. Yet several also gave examples of how teachers went the extra mile to help their average student over a rough spot, or help connect their high-achieving student with more challenging work. So obviously the school *can* respond to these families' needs in ways that satisfy them.
- **Break it down on monthly calendars.** Provide paper copies and printer-friendly calendars of events instead of just posting information electronically. Not all families are able access it that way, and even if they can, they may have to look 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 "Takeaways" and recommendations made by parents and guardians. These appear at the end of each unit in Sections II and III. The district should look closely at these and implement the easier fixes as soon as possible; moving quickly will assure families who participated in this study that the district is serious about improving communication. Enhancing communication is also essential to the success of the innovations being rolled out by Partnership for Change, so the timing is right.

Overarching Principles to Guide Change

As we have noted, not all the findings from this study point to clear and concrete solutions. But whether any particular remedy is simple or complex, a few principles should underlie all improvements.

There is no substitute for personal contact. Consider using more liaisons in more ways.

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 that support, 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. Can I help you with anything 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, documents sent home at the beginning of school, or on the school website. But just because that information has been made 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 about, say, college planning, many families will not see it. Individualized outreach, inefficient though it may seem, is required, at least for higher-need groups.

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 school, how teachers measure student performance, how student behavior is managed—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 what comes after graduation.
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 specifically 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 prefer that teachers be honest with them; 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.
Perhaps not surprisingly, families who don't speak English as a primary language had very different communication experiences than other families. They also had different needs and expectations. 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 students' behavior with peers and not allowing students to progress without mastering the same material as their non-ELL peers. 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 monitor student behavior and hold students

accountable. Tackling these families' expectations head-on, including finding some compromises with families, would go a long way toward helping these parents/guardians feel heard and respected.

Subgroups of Parents and Guardians

Not surprisingly, 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, whereas those with children eligible for free/reduced-price lunch tended to be the least satisfied with school communication. While this may seem surprising, explanations for these differences are not so hard to find. Parents and guardians who have multilingual liaisons receive a good deal of personal attention, including home visits and after-hours support; they also always knew precisely who to ask for help because liaisons are their sole contact. Moreover, their experience with education in their home countries leads 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 a liaison is deeply reassuring to them.

On the other hand, parents and guardians of free/reduced lunch-eligible students were the most likely to say in interviews that finding out about their children's progress was difficult. Lower-income parents and guardians are less likely to have technology tools at home to monitor their children's progress, and may have less experience navigating large systems successfully. It was these families more than others who complained about a punitive atmosphere toward students in the school, and who said that despite their best efforts, they couldn't get their children the help they need. 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 to provide 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.

Partnership for Change

Finally, this study sought to explore what parents/guardians know and think about two proposed educational innovations 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 very little 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. If they cited concerns, they were 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 is difficult for families 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 communications problems will mean 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 to the greatest effect. Their input should be vigorously sought.

APPENDIX

When Communication Doesn't Go Well

While the majority of parents and guardians in this study appeared satisfied with the way the school communicates with them about their children, there were nevertheless many issues—sometimes interviewees said they were exceptions to the rule, other times they said they had experienced the same problems over and over. The themes that emerged in the interviews are below, along with comments that illustrate them.

1. **The school didn't let me know that my child was struggling.**
   - When they send out the letter at the beginning of the year asking if we want to be notified by phone or email if there is a problem and you say 'Yes,' I wish teachers would really do it. If a kid is struggling teachers should contact parents faster by email or phone and not wait until report cards or progress reports. Contact the parents as soon as there is a problem so they can work on it.
   - We were supposed to get information about our children through letters, which we didn't get, and through emails, but I don't have email. The other way is through direct contact with teachers and counselors, and I went to parent-teacher conferences and was led on by teachers that everything was going great with my daughter… And at the end of the year, I found out she failed four classes. I found out the guidance counselor called her in and talked to her, and never notified me.
   - Sometimes I think they wait too long if there's an issue. Sometimes it's not [even] that big an issue, but a quick email could nip it in the bud.

2. **Calls and emails aren't returned, or are returned late.**
   - [If I have an] issue on Monday, I email the teacher, and it takes two weeks to hear back.
   - A couple of teachers were difficult to get ahold of—they didn't return my calls or emails—so I went to guidance and they told the teachers 'Hey, this guy wants to hear from you.' By the time I did hear from them, it was too late to do any make-up work to improve the situation.

3. **The atmosphere is harsh in the school. It's not clear why.**
   - My son's been in the school since preschool, and everything was fine he until he got in the 9th grade, then it was horrible. They've got an officer in the school, and they focus on 9-12 graders; they just treat every child as a failure.
   - This parent says the school never reached out to her to work on a behavior plan for her child. Instead, in her view, the school viewed her child as "a bad kid."
   - Three-quarters of the school year is done and [my daughter] has failed the year, she's crying every day, and upset. The teachers were not understanding [about] her emotional state, they didn't understand; they just gave her consequences. She's the kindest child on earth, she [just] doesn't learn like everyone else.
   - They don't treat the kids like kids, they're like delinquents to them, and they try to push them through. They give out citations and fines for students, like a police officer would. It's crazy.

4. **There wasn't any follow-through for my child.**
   - The teachers weren't proactive in letting this parent know what was going on with her child. They were supposed to check in weekly, but they only did it every six weeks or so.

5. **I have to coordinate with lots of different people, and it gets complicated.**
   - You had to contact more than one person. My son was having some social issues and to try to get a hold of people and set up a meeting with his team and the principal—especially the principal—was rather difficult.

6. **The school isn't always helpful about fixing problems.**
   - This parent's son was having major behavior and academic problems, but she says the school wouldn't offer any solutions. She found out from a friend that she could request that her son be tested for learning disabilities. It was only after the testing that planning and communication improved.
   - "The kids fill out the forms at the end of the year saying what they need, but the school doesn't follow through with ensuring they get their academics." This parent's child needed to sort out her college prep schedule "and it took three meetings to get."

7. **I want the school to have high standards.**
   - [The school staff] didn't have the same concerns [as I did]. One was about Spanish, actually both were. My daughter was supposed to take it as part of an arts rotation and she switched it to tae kwon do. But I thought she should do Spanish, and they were like, 'It doesn't matter.' But it mattered to me. The other incident was when my son took two years of high school Spanish and now they don't have Spanish anymore, so now he can't take a third year of a foreign language.
   - Teachers should more aggressively push the issue [with the parents] when students aren't getting work done.

8. **I don't have all the information I need.**
   - I felt very lost in 6th grade. Going into 7th I feel more informed. It's the little things ... [we] could use a better orientation. It's way different from elementary. For example, what's automatic vs. what you are required to sign up for. Again, I don't do the website thing, so I didn't know.

9. **My child was being bullied, and not enough was done about it.**
   - My son was getting bullied one time, and I never heard about it until a friend told me. But when my son gets in trouble, I always hear about it. They should contact you both ways, whether your child has been right or wrong.

10. **I don't really understand what they're telling me.**
    - I didn't understand how they described my child's issues—they didn't do an adequate job of describing his issues in a way that I could understand. They used language and terms that I wasn't familiar with and didn't explain them.

11. I have a hard time finding out what everything I need to be because I speak very little English.

- I really need an interpreter. It helps me communicate with the school. It is very hard to contact the school when I have questions or concerns.
- Due to my limited language, I did not get to understand well what classes my son was taking, and I contacted his teacher and his teacher did not understand my concerns.
- I was informed to go to the school for a parent-teacher meeting. I was explained about my daughter's report card. My daughter was the interpreter. I didn't feel like she was interpreting everything that the teachers were saying and also that she wasn't interpreting everything I was saying.

12. There aren't enough resources to go around.

- Sometimes there is a lot of attention given to kids who struggle, but kids who don't struggle as openly don't get the attention and it's harder to advocate for these students.
- The whole problem is you've got kids from different cultures in the same school, and it's knocking the kids who have been here out of the picture. They're trying to help [English language learners] more, and our children are being pushed aside, when they need the afterschool program more. It's not fair.

13. Sometimes people at the school have an attitude that I don't appreciate.

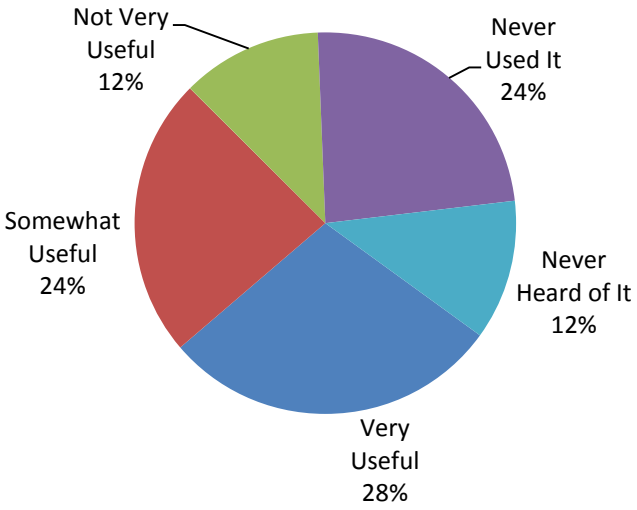
- Sometimes I leave meetings more mad than when I walked in. There are a few people that need to learn better ways of communicating. For example, a couple years ago my child had trouble in a class and was given an F. I did the math and the scores came out to a D, not an F. I talked with the teacher and the teacher basically said I was stupid for not understanding the grading system. I will never talk with that teacher again.

Back to report

Web2School

Chart: Just over half of the 59 parent/guardians we interviewed said that Web2School, the Winooski School District web portal for student assignments and grades, is either somewhat useful or very useful. Higher-income and parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English were more likely to express enthusiasm. On the other hand, 10 of 23 non-English-speaking parents/guardians said they had either never used the portal or never heard of it. In their comments, parents/guardians said that the portal is not updated regularly enough to make it a reliable tool for monitoring students' progress. Almost half of lower-income parents/guardians said they don't use computers at all, or don't want to use them for checking their children's grades.

As a Way of Finding Out How Your Child is Doing in School, How Useful is Web2School?
(of 59 parents/guardians)



Comment Themes

Interviewees tended to view Web2School as a work in progress. While it has the potential to be a very valuable communication tool for parents and guardians—and for students themselves—users face several obstacles. For instance, grades and assignments are not updated regularly, and some teachers don't seem to use the portal at all. Two interviewees mentioned password glitches that have either made the portal difficult to access, or forced them to use their children's accounts. Parents and guardians also say the portal lacks many details—such as an updated calendar and email addresses and phone numbers—that could make it a single, go-to spot for parents/guardians seeking any kind of information. Finally, some parents/guardians are leery of the school's ever-greater reliance on using technology to communicate with families. Some interviewees don't have computers, or don't want to use their computer to check their children's academics. Others find it much more efficient to simply talk to teachers and other school staff in person. The school is relatively small, they said, and it's easy to simply walk in and speak with someone personally.

Sample Comments *(of 55)*

1. I can get to it anytime I want to see where things are at grade-wise. But the teachers aren't always good about updating it or putting in enough details so I know what they're talking about. If the math assignment is chapter 4, questions 1-20, and they only write 'chapter 4,' or 'weekly work' or something vague, I don't really know what to ask my son about.
2. It allows me to keep a weekly dialogue with the children about work expectations versus work being handed in.

3. Nobody explained about it to me. I think even if it was explained I wouldn't be able to use it and understand it because of my language limitation.
4. [My son] used to go to Hunt Middle School where they used Jupiter Grades, and that is way better than Web2School. I guess if you use the program appropriately, any system could work, but Web2School doesn't give information about the assignments or what will be on a test. They [students] can only get that in Winooski by going to the teacher calendar. In Jupiter Grades, they could even email their teacher. In Web2School, my daughter's password wouldn't work—it was some glitch that happened with some of the kids, I don't know why—so she'd have to go in with my password. In Jupiter Grades, we each had our own password, which I liked better. If teachers don't update it, it's hard to follow up with anything. I *do* use it, all the time. I just wish it had everything in one place like Jupiter Grades.
5. I don't really do the online stuff; I'm more a hands on person. I'm at the school asking teachers, other parents, etc. My daughter goes on, and she shows me, but I don't really do it.
6. Completely un-useful. It's never updated. I think the last time I went in to check it was in May and it hadn't been updated since October.
7. It's a little bit of a work in progress; it doesn't have as much information as I'd like it to have. If you want to look at missing work, it's not perfect. The calendar tab is usually blank, which isn't helpful.
8. Parent doesn't use it, but her daughter does, and "it's a great tool." Parent reiterated that she doesn't use the internet to check into her daughter's progress ("I don't have an office job") and so she really prefers getting information by phone.
9. Sometimes it just gives one point about what the grades are at that time. It doesn't provide how they are doing personally/socially in the school. It isn't always up to date.
10. It's difficult to figure out for this parent; she would prefer "real communication." She also feels that the responsibility for helping kids succeed at school belongs to the school. "That's their job. The website for parents is like putting the school's job onto the parents."
11. There is information that I would like to add. For example, I couldn't find the library phone number. … I also couldn't find the elementary principal in the database. I don't want to have to call the school to get an email address. So there could be more there that's easier to find.
12. It's very useful for finding the information that I want about my kid's progress. Also when my kid knows that I have access to his/her scores, my kid will do his/her best.
13. I don't know how to use it.
14. I can't use the computer so there is no way I can visit Web2School to check my kids' grades or assignments.

Takeaways

- Web2School should be regularly updated, and parents and guardians should be told when those updates will occur; they should also be advised if particular teachers *don't* use the portal.
- More information could be provided in Web2School; the school calendar should be filled in and kept current, and emails/phone numbers of school personnel and departments should be listed there.
- All parents/guardians need information directly from the school about Web2School and how to use it. Parents stressed that information sent home with their children doesn't always get to them. Therefore information about how the portal works should be delivered directly to parents.

- Some parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English find the portal valuable, either because they have learned to use it themselves or because their children or other relatives help them use it. But almost half say they don't use it all, saying they don't have the necessary computer and English-language skills. Some also have very limited knowledge of the American grading system. In a focus group of Bhutanese parents/guardians, eight of nine participants said they themselves did not have computers, though some of their children did; only one parent checked her child's grades online. The focus group participants said that they would not need the grade portal to be translated into Nepali in order to use it. They would simply need a bi-lingual translator to train them. With this help, they thought they could pick up other computer skills themselves, which might benefit them beyond school. Interviews with multilingual liaisons suggest that such training needs to be coupled with education on larger issues, such as how the school grading system works and what grades mean.

Other Recommendations from Parents and Guardians

- Could Web2School be updated every day, the same way attendance is updated?
- Comments about students' personal or social progress, apart from grades, would be welcome.

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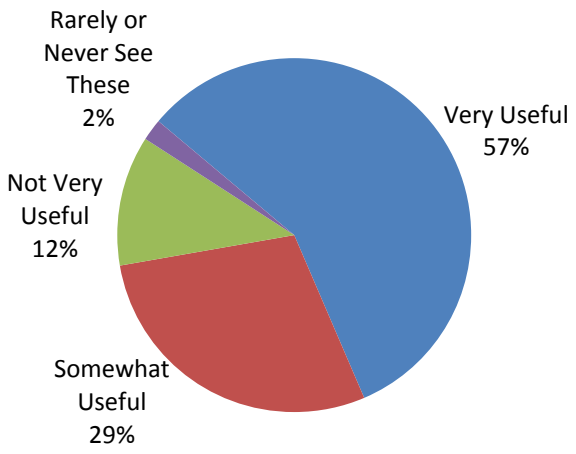
Report Cards

Chart: More than three-quarters of Winooski parents and guardians said report cards are either very useful or somewhat useful as a way of finding out how their children are doing in school. Parents whose primary language is other than English were most likely to find report cards valuable, followed by parents whose children are eligible for free/reduced lunch. Higher-income parents were least likely to find them very useful, suggesting they are more likely to check their children's progress online.

As a Way of Finding Out How Your Child Is Doing in School, How Useful are Report Cards?
(of 59 parents/guardians)



Comment Themes

In general, parents/guardians said they like report cards, but feel the comments should be more detailed and specific. Several interviewees said the report cards don't help them understand the nuances of their child's performance or why grades are poor. Some parents also said the report cards come too late to adjust performance. Parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English appreciate having a document of their children's progress on paper, but many must rely on multilingual liaisons or children to interpret for them. Their comments indicate that sometimes help is available, but sometimes it is not.

Sample Comments *(of 59)*

1. A report card speaks for itself, but we get most of their grades online. The report card's no different than online; same with progress reports. For me it's redundant.… But I know some parents don't have internet, so I guess they need it.
2. The comments are nice, but you only get one teacher that does it. It would be nice if they had more content; they could be more useful.
3. I can only see the grades but not why my child is failing the class.
4. I already knew the grades; however, attendance is most helpful to me. This was indicating that she [is] always there, not skipping school.
5. Parent gets tired of seeing her son's failing grades and one line comments that aren't particularly helpful. They also don't make any suggestions.
6. They provide an indicator of where [my son is] at; what's not useful is that they're just a flat moment in time, a snapshot. It doesn't provide any window for a meaty discussion about what could help or where the obstacles are. If he did poorly in writing but well in reading comprehension, it doesn't show that. And the comments typically are only two or three words.
7. Honestly the only thing I would add to the report card is more info from the teachers about student attitudes or student whatever, and not just a grade.

8. [The report card] doesn't really reflect the work my child has done. An example: My child was in chorus as an art class and was told that he could change to another class. This resulted in a bad grade because they made an error in scheduling and he wound up with no class to attend.
9. Report cards don't have enough information in them. It doesn't have comments, little blurbs from the teachers, and it comes too late to adjust for progress. Every parent is different, I know that. But education comes first in our home, so we want more current information, when we can still help improve the situation.
10. They could put a few more comments on it; a lot of times [they just write] 'Doing good job.' It'd be more helpful if she has a B or lower if they could suggest a remedy. Like, 'If she did [a particular thing], she could pump that grade up.'
11. The report card is actual proof of what they're actually learning. My kids are on IEPs so they get a report card and an IEP evaluation. It has set goals and you can see what accommodations are in place, how they're doing.
12. [They are not very helpful] because my child gets F's mostly and I never found it useful to see.
13. [They are very useful] if my children explain or interpret to me whatever is in their report cards, because I don't know how to read report cards myself.
14. I have to ask my daughter to help me read the report card. I understand what my daughter explained to me. I can't read English.
15. [Not very useful] because I can't read and write, and my children don't always interpret what's in the report cards.
16. I knew what grades they were getting and could see comments if the teachers made them, but they aren't really specific enough, they're just a grade. The cards make me feel kind of bad if the grades are bad, and good if they're good, and I end up comparing [my child] with other kids, which doesn't always feel good.
17. I don't find them so useful because they are too late. I'm not getting progress reports like I used to; they were more useful because they were more current.
18. They are confusing. This parent doesn't like the use of S, S+ and S-. He understands that S means satisfactory, but feels that the old A, B, C, D, F scores were more clear.
19. Report cards are very important especially for people like my daughter who play sports. They have a rule that if you don't perform, you can't play, which I think makes perfect sense.

Takeaways

- Parents and guardians would like all teachers to make comments, and the comments should be personalized and include details about each child individually.
- Parents don't want to be surprised by poor grades on a report card. They want to be informed about problems when they first occur, so they can help improve the grades.
- Parents/guardians 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.
- Parents/guardians whose children are not performing well academically need far more than a report card to understand what's not working and how they can help fix it.

Other Recommendations from Parents and Guardians

- Put more information in the report cards, such as comments on a child's attitude.
- Add comments indicating what the student needs to do to improve a particular grade.

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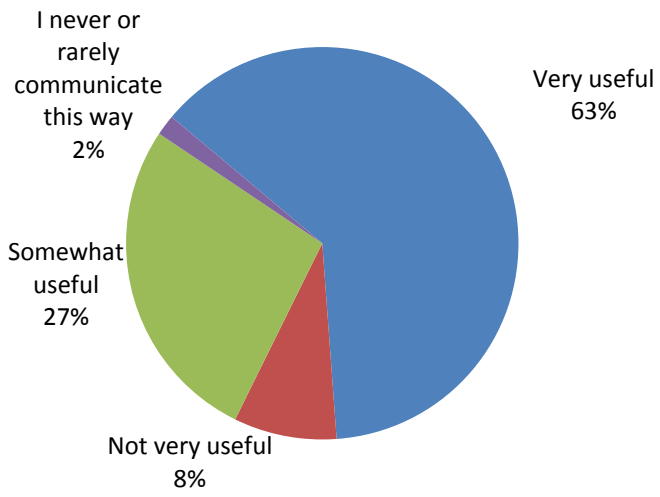
Conversations with the School

Chart: The vast majority of Winooski parents/guardians interviewed said they find conversations with people at the school very useful or somewhat useful. There were no significant differences among subgroups; however, parents and guardians whose primary language is other than English were more likely to find these direct conversations useful. This finding supports what both interviewees and multilingual liaisons said: That direct conversations—with an interpreter—are the only way that many families can really communicate with the school.

As a Way of Finding Out How Your Child is Doing, How Useful are Direct Conversations with the School?
(of 59 parents/guardians)



Comment Themes

Several parents/guardians indicated they value the way that conversations with the school lead to a better understanding of the situation among all parties and a more balanced view of issues. Many parents/guardians also mentioned the importance of collaboration between teachers and families, and a strong desire to actively support their children's academic success. Other common themes were the sense that conversations with the school are efficient, convenient and give parents/guardians direct feedback. However, interviewees also said that the quality of these conversations varies greatly depending on which person at the school they contact.

Sample Comments *(of 57)*[4]

1. Talking face-to-face helps me get to know them [teachers] and helps them understand any situations the kids are in. We can make a plan for what each of us will do—'Okay, I'll check in on her assignments and you'll make sure she understands...' I'd rather meet a teacher before sending email. Conversations help you problem-solve together. Really, communication is key for understanding. If there's no communication, nothing's really salvageable.
2. I try to do email because I know the teachers are really busy; with guidance, I'll call. Every email communication I have, I copy my son on it so he's in the loop. It's part of my 'training' to advocate heavily for him during the transition year to high school but then to slowly back off. By the time he's a senior, he should be able to handle this stuff himself.
3. The school checks in with me often enough. My daughter stays on task on her own, and she knows who to go to on her own without me getting involved.

[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.

4. I really respect the teachers who do face-to-face up there. A lot of schools deal with difficult situations, difficult family issues. They are very sensitive to that and they do a lovely job.
5. I like to hear about what's going on from the people who are directly involved. I don't like to hear it from a third party—like, if one teacher tells you what happened in another teacher's classroom—because it's too convoluted.
6. You get a lot of input and output in conversations. I don't have any negatives on that count; it's always a positive interaction.
7. [Somewhat useful] because some of the people I talk to I don't understand. In the past, when [staff person] was involved, she would talk to me after the meetings and summarize and explain what went on.
8. I'm a much more direct person; I want things addressed immediately and more or less face-to-face, so we can handle it and it can be done with.
9. You can get so much more information out of a conversation than a grade on a piece of paper; you check in on how they're doing socially and behaving in the classroom.
10. They don't listen and they don't respond by providing any suggestions or additional supports. They never even suggested that [my son] should be tested for learning disabilities.
11. For the most part interactions are useful. Sometimes I leave meetings more mad than when I walked in. There are a few people that need to learn better ways of communicating...
12. Parent loves the direct communication, and the fact that she can write a quick email and get a response sometimes on the same day.
13. I just think the administration should be easier to access. I know they're busy, but they should be more there for the parents. Some issues need to go beyond the teachers. I've had both good and bad experiences with administrators. There's no consistency. My son was getting bullied one time, and I never heard about it until a friend told me. But when my son gets in trouble, I always hear about it. They should contact you both ways, whether your child has been right or wrong.
14. Maybe focus a little more on the positives before jumping in to the not-so-positives. There can be a cycle where teachers get frustrated about behaviors. They do this in the parent-teacher conferences really well [i.e., start with positives] but anything outside that seems to focus on negatives.
15. It's not the way they communicate I would change, but maybe the tone could be better. For example, if your child misses a lot of school, they send a letter home. My son has had eight surgeries and he misses a lot of school because of medical appointments. We try to work around it but sometimes we can't. We know this is a form letter, but for us, they're excused absences and they never make note of that. The letter is threatening in tone—it says they'll take you to court—and it's copied to the school parole officer. That's frustrating, to have this letter that is meant for people who really don't care if their kids go to school but we get lumped in. [Two parents whose children have 504 plans made this complaint.]
16. You have to find the teacher who will go the extra mile. It depends. It's luck.
17. The quality of the conversation is very dependent on whom the parent talks to. With some, it's "like talking to a wall." Others are great.
18. They tell me how my children are doing and that helps me to understand about their performance as well as school.

19. I only speak with my home-school liaison; I don't speak with teachers or counselors because my English is not good and I may not understand everything.
20. I wished there was an adult interpreter for me. Also, I don't have email and I don't speak English.
21. Communication between the school and the parents is very important.
22. When I talked to the teacher the conversation was very helpful. I knew that she cared [about] my child's academics. She wanted my child to go to college.

Takeaways

- Parents and guardians want school staff to respond to their questions and concerns. Even if they don't get the desired outcome, they want to communicate with the right person, on the same or the next day, and get prompt answers that relate to their specific child.
- Families expect that when they communicate directly with someone at the school, that person will follow through until the issue has been resolved.
- 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.
- Efforts to understand multiple points of view and contributing factors are important to parents/guardians. When people sense negative judgment or prejudice against their children, they stop wanting to collaborate with the school.
- Parents/guardians say that the quality of communication entirely depends on the person with whom they are speaking. This obviously should not be the case; communication protocols need to be standardized so all school staff respond to families with equal speed and openness.
- 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 students. They don't necessarily want teachers and other staff to paint a rosy picture; instead, they want the full story, from someone who can help them make educational decisions in their children's best interest.

Other Recommendations from Parents and Guardians

- Relationships between freshmen students and homeroom teachers aren't as close as those in middle school; perhaps strengthening this connection would give parents/guardians one person to go to with questions about behavior and social issues as students adjust to high school.
- When parents and guardians contact someone at the school via email, staff should respond within 24 hours (as a matter of policy).
- Some interviewees said they want school staff to be held accountable for good communication.

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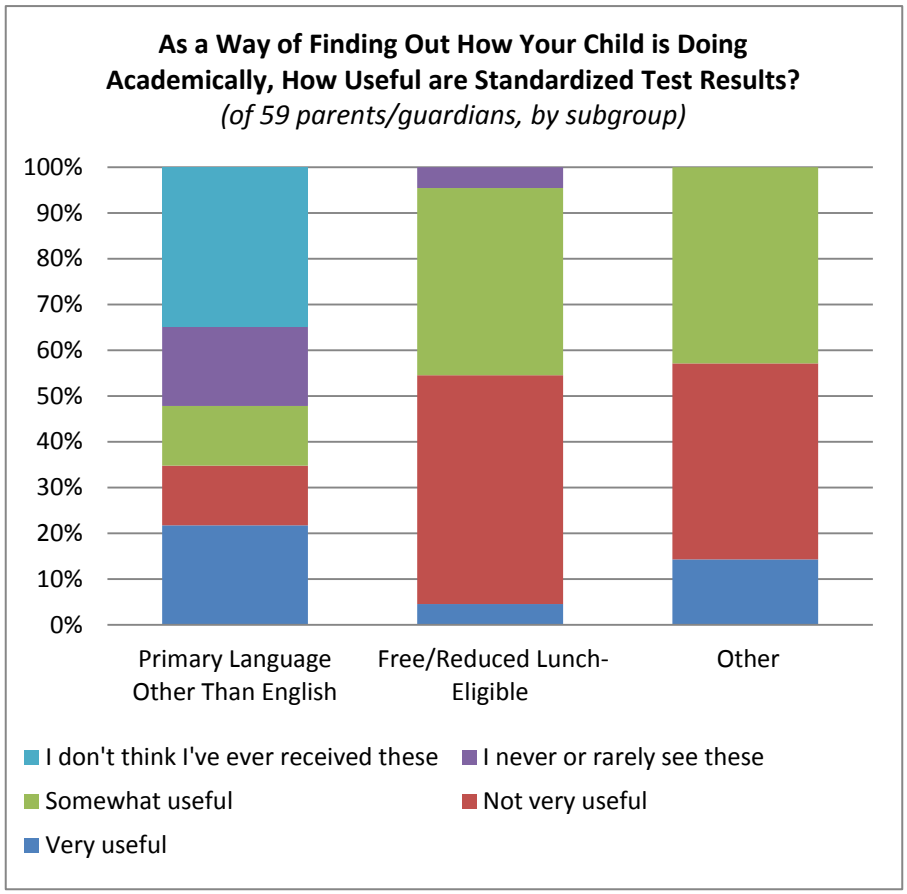
NECAP Standardized Test Results

Chart: Most parents and guardians interviewed in Winooski said NECAP test results are somewhat useful or not very useful as a way of understanding how well their children are doing academically. Families whose primary language is other than English were more likely to find the results very useful; however, more than half were not sure they had ever received or seen these test results, most likely because of language and literacy barriers.



Comment Themes

Many parents—both those who primarily speak English and those who don't—commented they 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? In addition, people seem unclear about the implications of student scores—many don't know if teachers even use test results to inform lesson planning or to identify students who need extra support. Many primary English-speaking parents and guardians said it is unfair to test students in English who come from other cultures and don't speak English well. They worry that bias in the test may be skewing school-wide results in a negative way. On a similar note, a few parents and guardians suggested that students don't try when taking the tests, which would render their scores meaningless and also bring down school-wide results.

The most common benefits of NECAP 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. Among parents and guardians whose primary language is other than English, three-quarters commented they had no idea whether they had ever received the results or, if they had, what the scores meant; of those who had seen the results several relied on students themselves to interpret them. They also said that standardized tests give a reliable measure of what their children are really learning.

Sample Comments *(of 57)*

1. Not useful, because [the parent's] last two kids ... didn't care what answers they put. They just wanted it to be done so the results were pointless.
2. It just kind of gives you a base of how your kids are learning, but they don't really say what needs to change. I don't remember talking to the teachers about the results, about what they mean, and what could be helpful. They just come in the mail and that's it.
3. Standardized tests are not a bad thing, if you keep them consistent. They do different tests different years and then some years, none. If you want to teach kids to take tests, you need to keep it consistent. If you take time away from them, it's hard to build those skills.
4. I just think that's it good to see where everybody's at. On the other hand, you have your days where you're focused and days where you're not, so it doesn't really say that much.
5. Nice to know where the school stands, but hopefully in the end the school will change and teachers will be able to accommodate the students' needs where they're weak. It's also nice for individual students to see where their strengths and weaknesses are.
6. I read them and try to understand them, but don't. I go to [my child's] IEP Coordinator and ask her to explain it to me. Even the IEP stuff I have to be walked through.
7. I like to see where he's at—they do the testing for so many days that it's nice to see the result. I don't understand them, really; I just look at the bar charts. They could explain them a little better.
8. We look at them, but I don't find them very useful. It tells you a bunch of stuff, but it's almost like it's in a different language. It should be more like a report card. I don't really care how they are doing compared to kids nationally; I want to know what areas they need to improve in. I want more concrete recommendations about what to DO and where they need help.
9. "They are bogus, to start with." They only test certain grades in the school. The test asks questions about information that the child had not covered in the classroom. How can they test achievement if the topic wasn't covered in the classroom?
10. We test so poorly because we have a high percentage of ELL students. It's hard enough to take those tests when you understand English, let alone when it's your second language. And there are kids who just don't test well. My kids are on IEPs, so they get special accommodation.
11. I don't know, I just look through it real quick—they don't tell me a whole lot. I find out more with report cards and the teachers' comments.
12. My children interpret the test results. At the beginning I didn't know how to understand, but now I am familiar with it.
13. I receive mail from the school but I give them to my child. I don't open them because I can't read them.
14. First, it was showing my children's academics. Second, it was comparing level of district and state. It shows me how well the student did in our school vs. state. If our school [was] not doing well, then I might move to other district.
15. Test results showed the real level of my kids. When [the parent] sees the scores, the child can do his best to do better, to improve his skills. This kind of test really encourages the kids to do their best at school. It shows the real level of my students.

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 implications of low or high scores are to individual students.
- Parents/guardians would like more information about how various student populations are accommodated, as well as how performance affects policy and school funding decisions.
- Without a multilingual liaison to deliver and explain results, most people whose primary language is other than English will not see them, or will have virtually no understanding of what the scores mean.
- Many interviewees 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.
- Many parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English, both in Burlington and in Winooski, expressed the belief that standardized test results are “official” results that give them the unvarnished facts about how their children are actually doing, particularly in English. True or not, this supports the idea that these families are not entirely confident they get the whole story from the schools.
- Without a multilingual liaison to deliver and explain results, most parents and guardians whose primary language is other than English will continue to miss these entirely in the mail or have virtually no understanding of what scores mean.

Other Recommendations from Parents and Guardians

- Finding some way to make test results count for something (for example, class placement or exemption from an assignment) would help ensure that students take the test more seriously.
- Parents and guardians would prefer to have some concrete suggestions accompany their children's scores. This could be a personal note for each student or simply more general advice that says, “If your child scored between ...”

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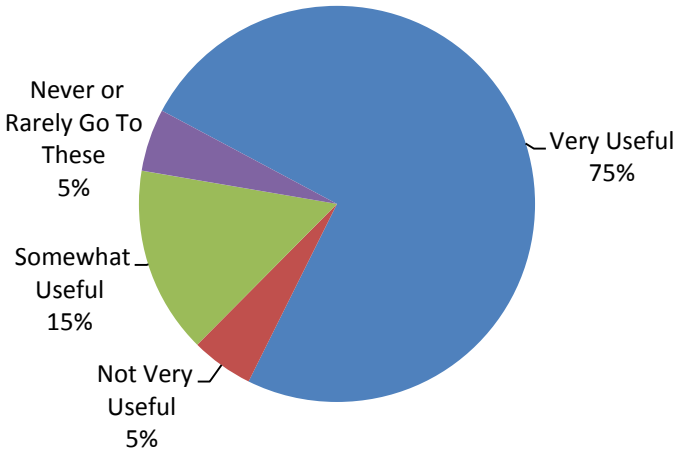
Parent-Teacher Conferences

Charts: Three-quarters of parents and guardians said that parent-teacher conferences are very useful and 15% said they are somewhat useful. There were only slight differences among subgroups. For example, 87% of families whose primary language is other than English said the conferences are very useful, compared to only 59% of parents/guardians whose children are free/reduced lunch-eligible. Face-to-face communication may be particularly effective for families with language barriers, as long as multilingual liaisons are available to interpret.

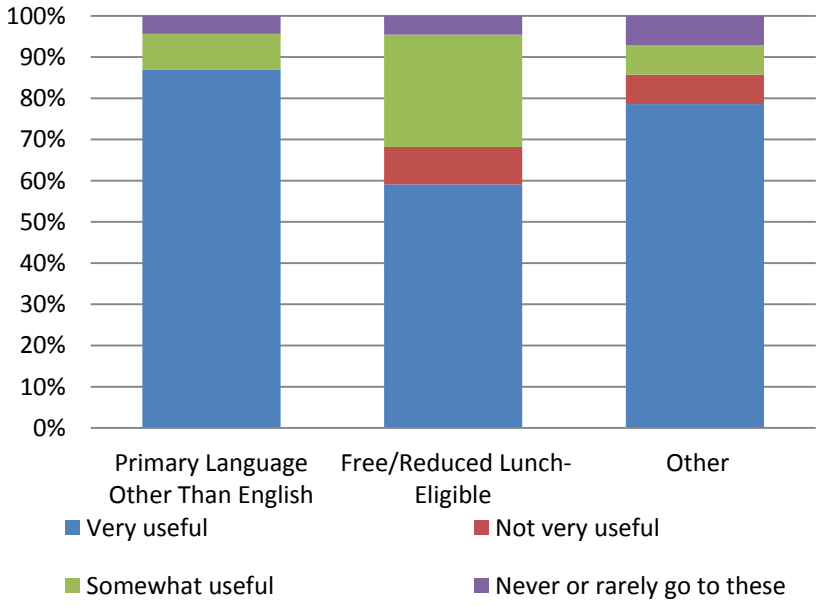
As a Way of Finding Out How Your Child is Doing in School, How Useful are Parent-Teacher Conferences?
(of 59 parents/guardians)



Comment Themes

Parents and guardians expressed a range of opinions about why they liked or disliked parent-teacher conferences. The majority of parents were enthusiastic about the chance to meet teachers face-to-face and placed a high value on building relationships with teachers. Again, the quality of the experience seems to vary depending on who people meet. Numerous people said these conferences are important to them and they wished they could happen more often. For families whose primary language is other than English, when a multilingual liaison participates, the conferences present an almost singular opportunity to learn how their children are doing in school. A few parents and guardians described feeling intimidated or uncomfortable during the conferences and wanting either more structure or a more personal experience.

As a Way of Finding Out How Your Child is Doing in School, How Useful are Parent-Teacher Conferences?
(of 59 parents/guardians, by subgroup)



Sample Comments *(of 55)*

1. Those are great. I wish we could have them more often; they're very useful. A lot gets communicated in a conference and it's a good source of information.
2. You get a better understanding of what's really going on; you really get down to basic issues.
3. I like the personal contact. You can have a conversation about concerns you have at home and concerns the teacher has. It's all out on the table and I look forward to them. So does my son. My husband goes, too.
4. I don't like them. I felt ganged up on when I used to attend them.
5. It's good to hear a little about the how the child is doing in a less formal setting. When your child is there, some of the teachers will actually let the child talk, and they can evaluate what they think of things and the teachers can fill in the gaps.
6. It's the face-to-face; you can ask questions. You can't ask a report card questions. We can ask how they can get to a better grade, what can we do at home to support the classroom.
7. This parent says she didn't get a welcoming feeling or the feeling that they cared about her family. No concern, no hopefulness or suggestions. The first half of year they were not useful. When they switched the teachers after her child had been tested, they were a bit more helpful.
8. There are charts that they use about the standards—if they've been met—and those are really helpful for us to help track our kids' progress.
9. I find them way more useful in the middle school than the high school. In the middle school it is traditionally the parent, teacher and student, and you go and talk to the TA teacher and maybe other teachers on the team, and you get a good idea of your child's performance and attitude. And there's an appointment. The high school one is an open house where the teacher may or may not be in their classroom, and you may or may not be able to find them. If I actually get to talk to the teacher, it's useful. But lots of times I'm just wandering around aimlessly hoping I can talk to someone.
10. Love them. Because it's a great opportunity to celebrate successes and have everybody be on the same page with any failures or opportunities.
11. From the conferences I learn about the weakness of my child and in return I get the opportunity to help him improve.
12. I never had a time/the chance to attend a parent-teacher conference. Usually I am at work.
13. I do like these meetings. The teachers show me tests and quiz results that my kid got. Also I knew from teachers how my kid was doing in the classroom and his/her behavior. I like all details about my kid from teachers.
14. The conferences were this parent’s main connection with the school last year, and he kept hearing from teachers that his daughter was doing fine, when it turns out she wasn't.
15. They were helpful when all the teachers attended the conference, rather than hunting down the individual teachers. Parent also like that the student was included.

Takeaways

- What's most important to parents and guardians is getting to know the teachers who spend time with their children and hearing about how students are doing. People want a welcoming and warm tone that shows them teachers care about the kids and their families.
- People are most satisfied with parent-teacher conferences when there is give and take. Parents and guardians want teachers to ask for their input as well, to have a collaborative attitude and to give them concrete suggestions for how to support learning.
- People see this 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 must have an interpreter to participate meaningfully in parent-teacher conferences. Some chose not to come because they had a language barrier and did not think there would be an interpreter.
- Several people mentioned a preference for the middle school appointment-based format over the high school open house. Of those who said they didn't like the open house format, most of the complaints were about having to “wander around” looking for teachers or feeling like all the teachers weren't available. Having volunteers or staff to act as greeters, answer questions and direct parents and guardians could help.

Other Recommendations from Parents and Guardians

- Parents and guardians want to know more about how the process works. Some people are confused about how the conferences get scheduled, what to expect and how to navigate the “open house” format at the high school. One person said she wanted a reminder phone call.
- Many parents said if they are already in touch with teachers, the conferences don't tell them anything they don't already know. They want to hear something new and unique to their child, not just a re-hash of the latest grades and scores.
- Be honest. Even if the student is there, parents and guardians want to know if there's something that needs improving.

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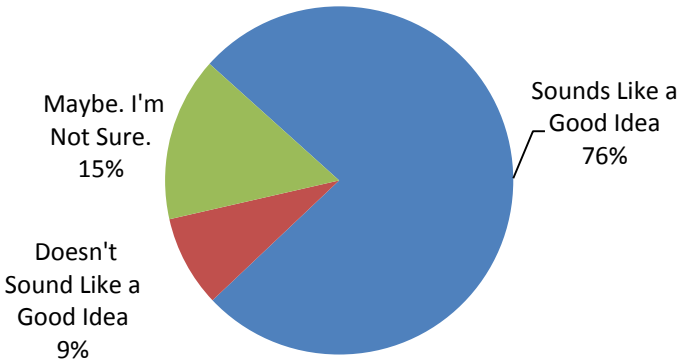
Student Participation in Parent-Teacher Conferences

Chart: The majority (76%) of parents/guardians were in favor of including students in parent-teacher conferences. Another 15% were unsure and 9% said it didn't sound like a good idea. Only slight differences existed among subgroups—parents and guardians of free/reduced lunch-eligible students were the most likely to say that including students was a bad idea (18%), whereas only one of all other families gave this response.

What Do You Think about the Idea of Having Students Participate in the Parent-Teacher Conference?
(of 59 parents/guardians)



Comment Themes

Among parents and guardians 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 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 mentioned being able to support their children in advocating for themselves or broaching difficult conversations with teachers. Those who were not sure or disliked the idea commonly talked about concerns the student might be intimidated or discouraged by teacher comments, or that adults may hold back to protect students' feelings. Some people suggested that it's a good idea for some students but not others; those who are particularly sensitive or lack maturity may not benefit. Families whose primary language is other than English, however, often said that hearing directly from teachers with a parent/guardian present, will motivate students and help hold them accountable.

Sample Comments *(of 51)*

1. It's a critical idea. It's a way for everybody to get on the same page, for the student to hear what good things the teacher says about them, for the student to hear the teacher and parent communicating about if anything needs extra attention. It's a launch pad for more personal conversations at home. Like, 'Your teacher said you need to do 20 minutes of math a day.... Remember?'
2. It would result in arguments between my child and the teacher in front of me. I would prefer to talk to the teacher in private.
3. This parent has always had her children attend with her. "If they have a concern, they can address it with the teacher with parent support. It shows the kids that the parents value their education."

4. I have a lot of communication with teachers all along but every kid is different. With my son, it's all stuff he's heard before. He gets tired and frustrated with it quickly. He ends up saying, 'I'm done' and leaving.
5. It keeps the student accountable for what they can offer to their academics. It's good for them to hear how they're doing alongside their parents so they can work together for the next semester.
6. They actually do it in our school; they want your child to come. I think they should be involved in middle school, the wonder years. [To hear] what everyone expects from them [and] have a united front. I like the whole team thing—where everyone has a say. It helps the child transition. It's the teacher's chance to have the one-on-one with the child outside the classroom. Especially as preparation for high school, [it's] important to involve the child; it's their life.
7. [My daughter] has always gone. It's fine. If the teachers ever had to say anything that would be inappropriate for her to hear, they'd make that known, but I can't imagine that happening.
8. It's a great idea to have the kid there; it forces an answer to the question. Teachers [have] got to be able to ask the hard question well, or give the information. It can be uncomfortable for them, but that's the whole issue.
9. [Students] learn their strengths and weaknesses by participating in the conference with the parents.
10. I like my kid to listen to the teacher's note. If it's good my kid will feel proud, if it's not my kid knows that he needs to work hard.
11. [Not a good idea.] I want the teacher to feel free and tell me anything about my kid.
12. [Good idea] because that is a meeting about them, they have to know about it, and they may also have something to say.
13. I don't know if this may work, but it's not bad to try new ideas or things.
14. It's good for my kid to listen to his teacher and know what needs to change and what needs to continue.
15. When they see the teacher communicating with me, there's no go-between. They know I have the information.

Takeaways

- Involving students directly in their own education, especially at the high school level, was very appealing to most interviewees. If students join conferences, parents and guardians prefer that they be 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, some provision needs to be made for private talk, if necessary.
- There is 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 want parents and teachers to present a "united front." Multilingual liaisons support that idea, saying that in many families, first- and second-generation communication is poor, and parents/guardians need the school's help.

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. There needs to be sensitivity to student perspectives if they are present.
- Some interviewees want students to have a choice about whether or not to attend.
- 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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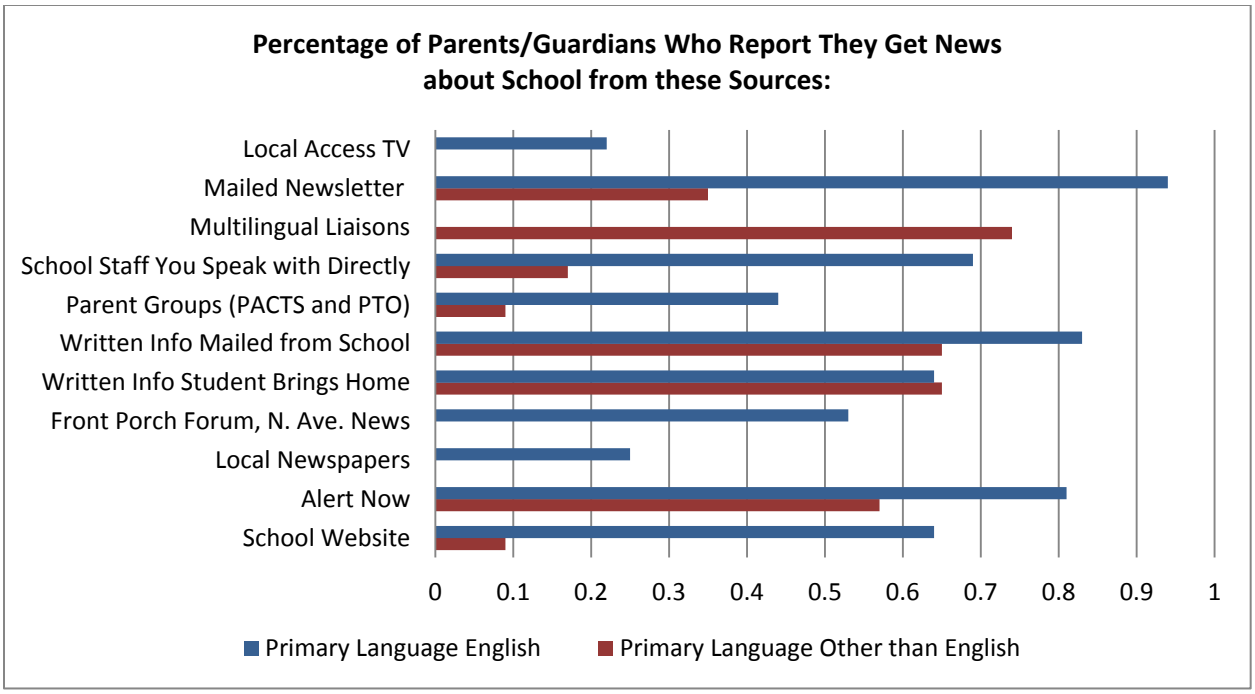

School News: Sources of Information and Who Uses Them

Chart: Parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English were far less likely than other families to get information about the school from any electronic source, and were less likely to get information from school staff or to use local media. The mailed newsletter, a near universal source of news for other parents/guardians, was a source for only 35% of these families.

Comment Themes: Other parents and students themselves are an important source of news for many interviewees. The school website needs to be updated regularly and be more comprehensive and accurate. Parent/guardians say that written material sent home with their children may never actually be given to them, so using students as conduits of important information is risky.

Sample Comments *(of 32)*

1. Website isn't comprehensive or up to date—or, for example, might tell you a date for an event like a play, but not give the time.
2. There is the handbook at the beginning of the year.
3. Alert Now is great when it's about the school; when it's about voting, it's annoying.
4. Sometimes Alert Now goes out and it's not accurate. I got one, one day, saying school was closed because of a storm, but I was actually there, and I'm thinking, 'It's open!'.... The newsletter only comes every three months so you're reading about things that have already happened. It's outdated by the time you get it.
5. This parent said she never received a newsletter by mail. She hears news by word of mouth.
6. Emails would be good. Maybe a blitz email twice a month that says, 'These are the events coming up in the next two weeks. Mark your calendars. And keep your eyes open in the next email for what's happening in the second half of the month.' I know not everyone has email, but I would like that.

7. The website is not always very accurate or complete. Front Porch Forum is an underused resource; there are 1,500 households in Winooski signed up for it and the district could post more often about things that are happening. The sign out in front of the school is underused as well.
8. Re: Things brought home by child, parent laughs: “These end up in the bottom of his locker, I think.” Occasionally people go to door-to-door. “One night I had the Superintendent knocking on my door inviting me to a BBQ! That's one of the perks of living in a small town."
9. Have a much more informative website. The website is pathetic. It has old teachers’ names. Nothing comes up when you click ‘curriculum.’
10. There is so much information in pre-school to grade 5—they were always sending you info. In middle school it's more independent—it's more on me to find things out. I felt very lost in 6th grade. Going into 7th I feel more informed. It's the little things. [Parents] could use a better orientation. It's *way* different from elementary. For example, what's automatic versus what you are required to sign up for? Again, I don't do the website thing, so I didn't know.
11. My children update me about the news because I can't read in English.
12. We have a Nepali speaking registrar at the high school in addition to a home-school liaison. The liaison is very helpful in communicating any messages between the schools and us.
13. Her daughter interprets for her with people at the school. “Because of my language limitation, I couldn't get access to information from many of the above sources.”
14. Basically my home-school liaison informs us about what's happening at school.
15. Newsletters are a good source of information. They keep us all informed about what's happening in Winooski.

Takeaways

- The website needs to be updated more consistently if parents are to depend on it as a source of information. It also needs to be more comprehensive and accurate.
- Some parents say they would like to receive information via email. Many—probably the majority—of parents and guardians in Winooski have email, and moving in this direction may prompt others to get it, especially if low-cost Internet service were available and training was offered to interested families, including those whose primary language is not English.
- Families whose primary language is other than English vary a great deal in their ability to understand news from the school. Many are extremely 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 to these families.

Other Recommendations from Parents and Guardians

- Front Porch Forum could be better-utilized by the school to get information to families.
- Send a twice-a-month “blitz email” that summarizes what’s coming up at school.
- Have better middle school orientations.
- Make sure Alert Now messages are accurate, and go to students’ primary contact.

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The One Thing Parents and Guardians Would Change

If there was one thing you could change about the way the school communicates with you about your child or children, what it would be? We asked all 59 interviewees this question. Most parents/guardians whose primary language is not English said they wouldn't change anything, perhaps because most have multilingual liaisons who serve as all-purpose, personal communication hubs. Many others, though, had substantive suggestions. Below is a comprehensive list of comments, excluding those comments in which parents/guardians said they would change nothing. Key points include providing more frequent updates to families; not waiting to let parents/guardians know there's a problem; being honest about students' performance; improving the school website; and checking in with parents/guardians about their own technology skills before assuming they can receive electronic information or help their children with school-issued devices. Note that some of the comments below have been used in other sections of this report.

1. Sometimes I wish they would talk to us before they approach the kids. We had an instance where my son was taken in for an eye exam and no one communicated that to us. They thought he needed glasses, and no one told us. He's at that age where glasses mean he thinks he'll get picked on. He was brought in to the guidance counselor and told he needed glasses. The funny thing is when we brought him to the pediatrician, his vision tested fine, and here he was all upset.
2. I would really like the homeroom teachers in the high school to be more connected to the students—to be the one go-to person to connect with and for the students to communicate with if there is a problem or, conversely, if there is something positive happening. I want the homeroom teacher to have a real sense of who the student is.
3. When they send out the letter at the beginning of the year asking if we want to be notified by phone or email if there is a problem and you say yes, I wish teachers would really do it. If a kid is struggling teachers should contact parents faster by email or phone and not wait until report cards or progress reports. Contact the parents as soon as there is a problem so they can work on it.
4. Sometimes I think they wait too long if there's an issue. Sometimes it's not [even] that big an issue, but a quick email could nip it in the bud.
5. As long as they keep calling and let you know what's going on. What would make it better would be if they'd follow through. They promise the moon and sun and they give you rain and thunderstorms. They go through all the motions, like the math teacher who arranged for my son to come in for after school for help, but then the teacher leaves the room.
6. The parent feels that there could be more frequent, standard contact, perhaps once a month.
7. They should email parents when [kids] have a good week or achieve something. Especially in the middle school. Sometimes, kids struggle to adjust. Also, kids get technology Net books, iPads, Apple computers, etc. They need classes for the kids and the parents about how to use the technology. Parents need to be able to help their kids on the technology. A lot of kids don't have the technology in their home.
8. Don't focus on the technology; teach the 'old' skills, such as cursive writing. Go back to the basics!
9. Teachers should more aggressively push the issue [with the parents] when students aren't getting work done.

10. Have a much more informative website. The website is pathetic. It has old teacher's names. Nothing comes up when you click 'curriculum.' She is trying to find information about teachers and principals but there is nothing.
11. "Everything is pretty good. [But] I think there's an opportunity for us to cut down on paperwork leaving the school, for example with people that have 504s or medical conditions as far as attendance goes." This parent's child has a chronic condition and over the year, he received about 15 letters about school absences, all of them triggered by state legal requirements. But the school already knew about the situation. The paperwork, he said, is unnecessary and wasteful. [Two interviewees whose children have 504 plans made this complaint.]
12. Contact me consistently [i.e., the same way], and be fair and objective.
13. "Whatever system they've got going has to be revised or revamped so they make sure they reaching every parent, not [just] 95 percent of them." The parent feels that the school assumes every parent can keep in touch electronically, through email and the internet, but that's not true.
14. I've learned as a parent, I need to seek out the information I want. I have a vested interest in my child's future and no one else does. It's hard to change that. Some people want more from teachers but they have so much on their plates, it's not easy for them. Parents set the foundation. If people want more, they need to do more to make it happen. You can't leave it all up to the school. Parents are the ones with kids all along the way—you have to be invested.
15. The school seems so broken to this parent that she doesn't know what to recommend. It might change "if they changed the teachers and school board and superintendent. The whole problem is you've got kids from different cultures in the same school, and it's knocking the kids who have been here out of the picture. They're trying to help [ELL students] more, and our children are being pushed aside, when they need the afterschool program more. It's not fair."
16. Just better communication. And communication with the entire staff, not just the teachers. I got better information last year from the lunch staff in the cafeteria than I did from some teachers, which was great and sad at the same time. Everyone interacts with everybody—they all see each other every day. Maybe staff that aren't teachers have some input or observations about how kids are doing. If everyone thought about 'How can we communicate better with students? With parents?' then it would be better.
17. I just think the administration should be easier to access. I know they're busy, but they should be more there for the parents. Some issues need to go beyond the teachers. I've had both good and bad experiences with administrators. There's no consistency. My son was getting bullied one time, and I never heard about it until a friend told me. But when my son gets in trouble, I always hear about it. They should contact you both ways, whether your child has been right or wrong.
18. Maybe focus a little more on the positives before jumping in to the not-so-positives. There can be a cycle where teachers get frustrated about behaviors. They do this in the parent-teacher conferences really well [i.e., start with positives] but anything outside that seems to focus on negatives.
19. I really don't think I would change anything. I'm really comfortable with the relationships I have and they know that I'm not going to settle for anything but excellence.

20. It would be good if the teachers could be at the school for a while after school. They seem to leave immediately after school ends. There are a lot of issues that seem to come up immediately after school ends.
21. They've instituted a "ticket" system that doesn't work well—the court has no response to them. Having a parent-teacher conference would be better.
22. They should pay attention to each student and include foster parents in the community of caring. This foster parent really feels that every foster child should have a HowardCenter worker.
23. The parent describes one incident last year in which the school chose to take her daughter out of a sport for the day because of a behavioral issue, and didn't contact Mom first. It was upsetting for a variety of reasons, and really made the school look bad, in the parent's opinion. She says there should be clear procedures for this type of thing—when should a parent called, in what timeframe, after what type of incident. With new procedures, this type of incident would be less likely to occur.
24. I want the school to inform me if my child has to stay after school for sports or other extracurricular activities. In addition, I want the school to share with me about the progress that my child is making at school. They should also let me know about the weaknesses of my child.
25. I want the schools to conduct regular meetings with parents to keep abreast of the developments taking place at school.
26. I would like the school to give me a call when my kid is absent.
27. I need an interpreter to help me understand. Because everything is new for me and my family. Most of the time I feel I had a lot to say but couldn't communicate.
28. I wish there was an adult interpreter to communicate with the school.
29. Sometimes I don't have transportation to go to meetings or conferences with the school staff for my children's progress. I need the school to help me with transportation. I live very far from the school environment. I want the school to move me to near the school if possible please.

Takeaways

- Provide more frequent updates to families.
- Let parents/guardians know early on if there is a problem with a student's performance, long before report cards come out.
- Maintain high standards for all students.
- Be honest about students' performance. Some parents/guardians assume their children will go to college. If that seems unlikely, let them know before senior year.
- Keep the school website up to date.
- Check in with parents/guardians about their own technology skills before assuming they can receive electronic information or help their children with school-issued devices.

Other Recommendations from Parents and Guardians

- Parents/guardians need to be trained in the technology their children are being given.
- Not all families have internet access at home. Unless a family has stated otherwise, school personnel should assume that a phone call is necessary to update them about their children's progress.

- Make the website more informative. Every link should lead somewhere, and information needs to be updated.
- Foster parents and children need special attention.
- For children of parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English, the school should not assume parents/guardians know that a child is staying after school. The family needs to be notified with a phone call.
- All parents/guardians who don't speak English well need an interpreter, but some don't have one. Without these intermediaries, parents/guardians cannot meaningfully communicate with their children's teachers.
- In a small school, lots of adults get to know students well, not just teachers and guidance counselors. Is there a way for other adults in the system to share information about students?
- Don't get caught in a negative-feedback loop. School personnel should tell parents/guardians about their children's successes, not just their defeats.
- Teachers should stay after school for some set period of time; it's a good window for parents/guardians to stop by or phone.
- Let parents/guardians know about all the services that are available for their children; don't make families hunt to find out what the school district can offer.
- Regular meetings would be helpful for some families.
- The administration should be easier to reach.

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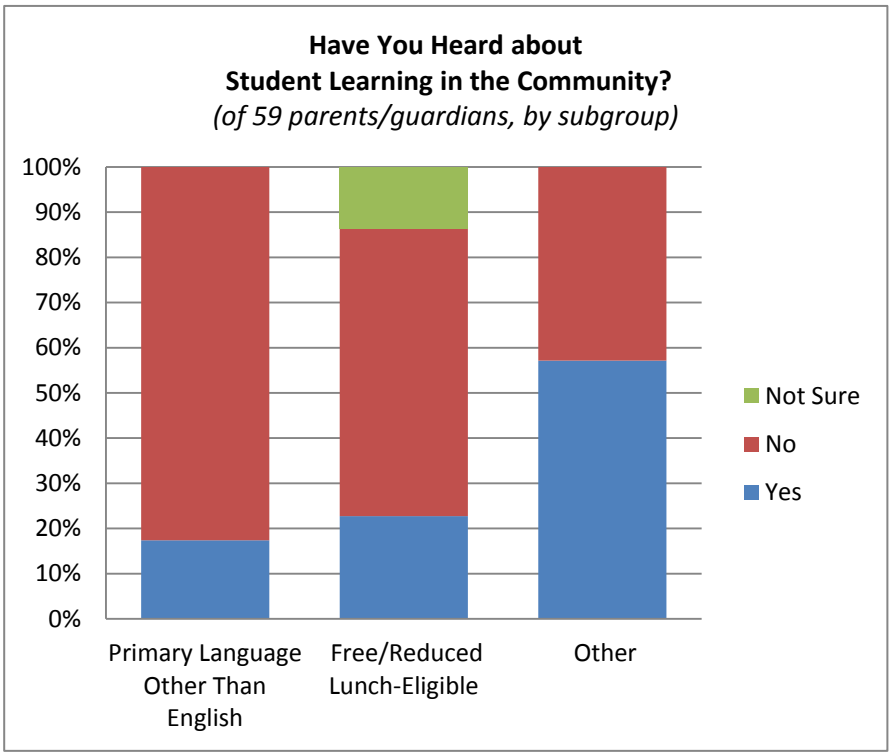
Learning in the Community

Chart: Fewer than one-third of parents and guardians in this study had heard about student learning in the community as it has been discussed locally by Partnership for Change. Among higher-income, primary English-speakers, just over half (56%) had heard of it, compared to only 16% of those whose primary language is other than English and 36% of parents and guardians of free/reduced lunch-eligible students. Those who had heard about the idea tended to confuse it with community service and service learning activities students had done.



When they were told that learning in the community could be structured like internships, with credits that count toward graduation, most interviewees said they liked the idea. They thought hands-on learning was often more valuable than classroom learning, and they wanted to see young people engaged in the community. Their concerns tended to be about whether placements would be appropriate for all students, whether the work would be meaningful, and the worksite itself safe for unaccompanied students.

Comment Themes

Parents and guardians generally liked the idea of learning in the community, but still, they had some concerns. 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?

We asked interviewees how they thought their children could benefit from learning in the community, and about any concerns they might have. Some comments are below.

Sample Comments *(of 118; two sets of responses combined)*

1. It's very applicable in the corporate world because those are the questions they're going to be asked in a job interview—what experiences they've had. On the other hand, they'll also be asked about their diploma.
2. It would be nice because she has ideas of what she wants to do after high school; it would be nice for her to get some experience in things to see if she actually likes them or not.
3. It's a more practical application of what they're doing, but also to vary things a little bit. Traditional learning is fine, but it's 'okay, go sit down, listen, take a test, you've done it.' That's fine, but there are different ways of learning things, and you retain it longer if you learn it in more than one way. My son does well at math, but he's not seeing the practical application of it. If he did, it might be something he'd want to pursue as a career. And also just getting out and about, leaving the building—that's important.
4. I'm not sure in [my son's] case that it would be a good fit for him. To me this kind of learning needs a motivated self-starter sort of and those that aren't like that, or haven't caught a spark of something—for them it seems like a perfect opportunity to not dig very deeply into anything.
5. Hands-on work is important and exposure to careers [is] important. One daughter wants to be a pediatrician and would benefit from the exposure.
6. It is good for kids to have the opportunity to offer; they have so much to offer. This could be a win-win. Troubled kids may do better in a non-classroom setting with someone to take them under their wing. This may keep them in school.
7. Not every child will be going to college, but it's still important that young people remain interested and be exposed to different professions and trades. This could help every child remain engaged.
8. Her daughter hates to learn in traditional ways and be in the classroom for long periods of time, so as long as there is some accountability for what the student is learning, this would give her the opportunity to learn the way she can and to feel successful about herself.
9. It gives them life experiences, and that I'm all for.
10. It would definitely benefit him. He wants to be an engineer and he can't see where his math falls into place in engineering. He could learn things from a professional that his teachers can't teach him.
11. It's a good idea. Practical experiences are far more better. Students don't get bored by being out in the community.
12. This is a very good idea because children or my child can focus on what they like to learn at school.
13. This is a good idea because students get to choose their career path early in their school age.
14. Students can make their own choice; that helps them to be successful.
15. I can see this kind of learning might add a lot to my kid's life and improve his skills and learn new materials.
16. I think with this program in the district students will be ready when graduating from high school.
17. The drawback is that you need a standard diploma. How does this mesh for college-bound students? Because you have to build a strong crosswalk to what colleges are looking for.
18. Who would be allowed to do it? Is it going to be for everyone, or just the A students, or just the trouble-makers?

19. Not at all. I understand that internships are designed to provide valuable on-the-job experience for students without job experience. An internship, as I understand it to be, can be a fruitful first step toward furthering a student's education and discovering his or her vocational bent. Participating in an internship as a high school student may give the student a level of confidence and skills needed to navigate the work force and allow a wide variety of career options.
20. The only thing is if they had to do it for the whole year and absolutely hated it. If it was one semester and they could change, that would be better.
21. Safe transportation.
22. Just being sure there is accountability for the students' learning. Also that the student will be representing the Winooski school and community, so how they behave will impact the next wave of students who want to participate.
23. This parent's son has behavioral issues, and she wonders if he would be supported at the internship the same way he is at school. Would he have breaks? Would anyone check in with him?
24. Nothing worries me if it's all set up by the school and works into the kids' schedules, and doesn't disturb them from their studies and lets them still do what they need to do to graduate.
25. No, not at all. This will allow my kid to learn new skills. He could use it in his real life.
26. I am not sure if this will ever happen, but if [it] does it is a good idea.
27. Transportation is still a problem to meet with all school staff.

What Would Parents/Guardians Need to Know before Their Children had this Experience?

Since most interviewees knew relatively little about the idea, it's understandable that they want to know everything—the "who, what, when, where, why." 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 *(of 58)*

1. What companies are they dealing with? It needs to be a good learning experience, with their own supervisors; we can't just send them and hope for the best.
2. How the services are going to be done, what she will actually be doing. Who is going to be mentoring or supervising? Will she be in a group or alone? I have some concerns about safety, and are students going to have different options? Can they pick? Can they try something out?
3. I would like to know whether the internship was optional or an expectation for graduation. I would want to see a registry of companies and/or organizations participating in hiring my child for an internship, along with a brief description of their products and services. I'd want to be assured that I would have access to my child or be involved in a contingency plan on my child's behalf in case of an emergency. There are fire drills, evacuation drills and lock-down drills at our school, so it is important to me that my child and the company participating in the internship have protocols, safety and contingency plans that assist my child in feeling secure in the community in the event of an emergency.
4. I'd want to know the hours and how she would get there and basic safety stuff. What would happen if something bad happened while she was there? What if she gets hurt there, who covers it? What happens if she gets in trouble, does the school discipline her or the job?

5. The problem with it to me is that every single instance would be unique. Not that that's a problem in itself, but it becomes very complex to measure what 200 students are doing with their own unique experience. Is there really time to measure and monitor and connect and gauge? Teachers barely have time to just get kids through the regular modules day of standardized learning.
6. Give the kids tests to ensure they will pass the class and know the correct information and the correct process before sending them out to the community. If a student isn't doing well in the classroom, they won't work in the community either. The school and the kids need to work in the classroom and learn how to do the work there.
7. Where is she going to be? How will she get there? What are the expectations? Parents need to be able to discuss and support those expectations. Is the parent responsible for getting the students there?
8. It would have to fit in and be overseen so that if something was going wrong with their subjects in the classroom, then it would be cut out. The academics can't suffer.
9. Because of her special needs, she's pulled out of regular classes, and teachers tell me about what she's missing. So I stress about what she's missing. I would need to know what it's taking her away from in order to graduate.
10. I would want to know that businesses realize what age or grade level the students are at and make it age-appropriate. I would want no danger to the kids, limits on the activities so they stay safe—like, don't give a kid who has never cooked a sharp knife on the first day. It definitely could work, it just has to be a good fit for the student and for the business. They should focus on it as 'a safe and fun thing'. You can learn from taking tests and taking notes in class but the best way to learn is really to do something—to be thrown a real-life problem and challenge students to solve it.
11. Who, what, where, when, why and how; what kind of activities they'd be doing. We do a reflection period at the end of the day so I can help reinforce what's going on in school. [So, you'd want to know the details of how it would work but also get regular updates about it as it's happening?] I'd want to know more up-front, for pre-planning and to see how she's doing.
12. I'm a very active parent so I'd probably want to be in on the whole thing.
13. My child should be well-informed about the credibility of the program. It should not be a waste of resources and time.
14. I would like to know will the program work with the school schedules.
15. I want to know who will be working with my student.
16. I want to know what areas of study is this program going to focus on.
17. If I know more about the program I would be able to encourage them. It should help both parents and students.
18. How the program works and improves my son's academics and behavior.

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 are the practical differences for their children?

- Ensuring student safety off school grounds is a primary and 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.
- Many families are concerned that businesses aren't equipped to work with teens. Schools may need to provide business partners with training that addresses adolescent development, how to foster supportive learning environments, and ways to tailor tasks in order to provide a meaningful experience.
- 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 trouble-shoots issues at sites, monitors attendance, and guides them in handling interpersonal or skill-related challenges.
- Many interviewees fear 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 of a college's academic requirements?
- People want assurance that the program will continue over time. One parent suggested there be formal agreements with businesses to ensure follow through. Another way to sustain learning in the community is to keep track of learning objectives that are specific to a particular site (or type of site) so that schools don't have to 'reinvent the wheel' for each cohort of students.
- The school has to provide and coordinate transportation. Parents and guardians cannot be responsible for this during regular school hours.

Other Recommendations of Parents and Guardians

- Parents and guardians whose children are less confident or have special needs want to be able to visit work sites themselves and hear directly from businesses how their children are doing. People prefer that any accommodations that are in place at school will carry over to the workplace (for example, frequent breaks or someone to check in with regularly).
- Several interviewees were concerned that students might get stuck in bad situations. If students could do a "trial run" at a site before choosing, that would help. Another suggestion was to keep the placements limited to one semester, so that students could change to another site after a couple months.
- Parents and guardians want learning in the community to be managed like any other course, with written learning objectives and a structure for assessment. Some wanted to see a "crosswalk" between learning in the community and college entrance requirements.
- 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.
- Students could earn a "certificate of completion" for sticking with one site and getting positive reviews. This would act as a reference when students are looking for jobs later.

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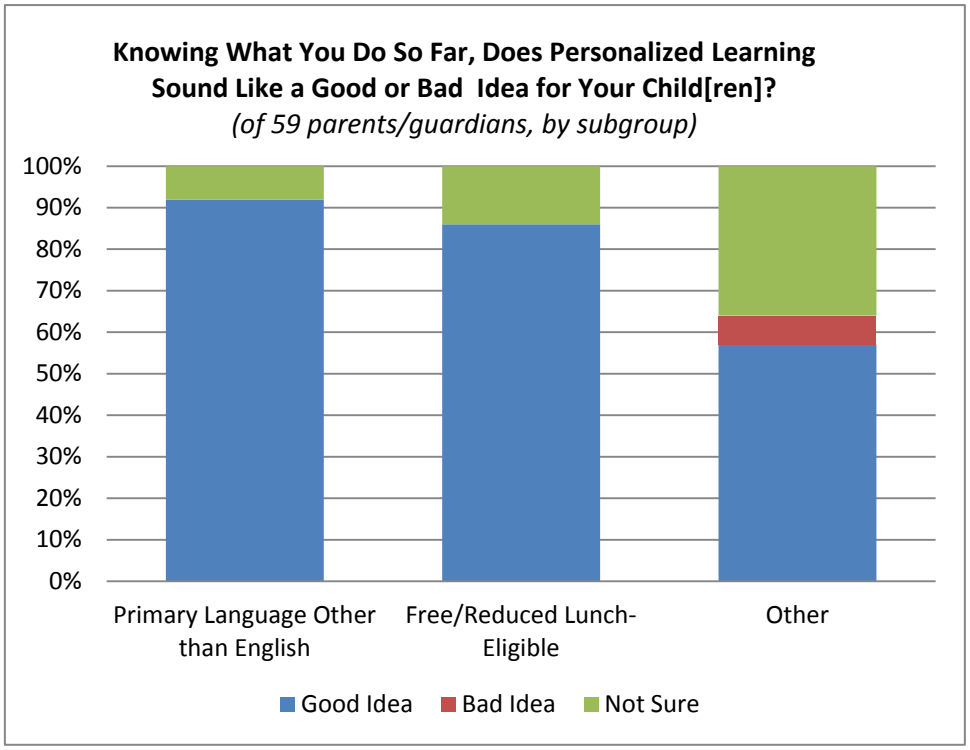
Personalized Learning Plans

Fewer than half of Winooski parents and guardians in this study had heard about personalized learning plans as they have been discussed locally by Partnership for Change. Parents/guardians whose primary language is other than English were much less likely to have heard of them than other interviewees, though in fact relatively few people from any group knew 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/guardians in general thought personalized learning sounded like a good idea for their children. Breaking down the statistics, interviewees whose primary language is other than English were overwhelming more likely to feel personalized learning would benefit their children. A strong majority of parents/guardians whose children are eligible for free/reduced lunch also liked the idea. Other families were more mixed; many said they needed more information before knowing whether the concept seemed like a good fit for their children.



Comment Themes

Most parents and guardians supported the idea of personalized learning, but most also had basic questions about it as well. They supported giving students the chance to create their own plans and pursue their personal interests, though many felt it would work well only with students who are already motivated. They also expressed concern that personalized learning plans would allow some students to "take the easy way out" while others worked hard. Mostly, though, parents and guardians had questions: What role would parents play? Will students still get the basics they need, or will they be allowed to avoid subjects they don't like? Does the school system really have the number of staff required to monitor students' plans? What would personalized plans mean for students' schedules?

Sample Comments *(of 90; two sets of answers are combined)*

1. How rigorous is this going to be? One kid will put anything down; will they get the same credit as the kid who is an overachiever and puts a lot down? Will a kid be able to slide by and work 10 hours at the community center and get all his achievements done, as opposed to a kid who worked at a law office or something?
2. I don't want any student to be able to take the easy way out. There has to be some bottom line for the school. I'd need to know the basics, what [my daughter] has to have and then if she's got a passion, how can she get more of it covered in high school so in college she's got a foundation.
3. I would like to see a list of criteria that the Board of Education in Vermont expects to be met from the plans. I would like to be assured that the plans can be modified if there is an area of strength being met or surpassed and/or an area of weakness that needs more attention or support.
4. It could be a good idea for a student who is really aware of themselves and know what works for them and doesn't work for them—if they have a firm grasp and know what they want.
5. It's a great idea for students who are academically motivated. Not such a good idea for kids who are not really focused on their education and just want to be out of school.
6. This sounds like home schooling. Kids need to learn how to be respectful in the classroom. Kids need to learn how to sit in the classroom and learn what they need to learn in the way the school is teaching. This is the real world; this prepares them for the real world. If the school needs to separate kids with learning disabilities, autism, to give them a special plan, do it. Otherwise the kids need to learn how to work together and get prepared for the real world in a classroom together.
7. I would want to understand what the benefits are. How is it different from what's happening now?
8. This parent's biggest reservation is that they will have four teachers in the iLab and she wonders how four teachers "can go in 16 different directions. What if a student has a different perspective, such as marine biology, and there isn't a teacher who has the specialty?"
9. I want to know the availability of the resources to continue the plan until its mission is accomplished.
10. [Personalized learning] "should definitely be a part of their learning from 7th grade to graduation." This parent compares it to college, where you have a major and choose your classes around the major's requirements. She says that as long as there is a plan or a path, this type of approach would be great. For one thing, it would help students be better prepared when they actually do go to college, because they'll already have taken some of the prerequisite classes for whatever they're interested in learning.
11. This parent doesn't have faith that the current guidance department can do a good job with this.
12. It's a very cool idea. It gives the student a say in what and how they're learning, instead of being told what to do. They are having their voice be heard about what they want to do. I would talk to my child about it, to see if they are given choices or criteria to choose from and then have my child sit down with teachers and guidance and share their ideas. Again, it's a communication piece. The teacher, student and guidance can share ideas and come to mutual agreement about the plan.
13. It sounds like an IEP and this parent feels that IEP's don't really work. Someone would need to be checking up on the plan and make sure that the students are meeting their goals along the way. Kids with anxiety or other disorders would benefit most from personalized learning.

14. As long as my daughter can comprehend what she needs to focus on, I'm totally fine with a personal plan. In home schooling or smaller private schools they do that. It really would enhance things. It wouldn't be a detriment unless the person is not interested. There are people who hate school and don't want to be involved in something like that. So it might not work for everyone.
15. I want to know how will this program work with the school schedule.
16. I think when it is implemented, I want as a parent to be explained about the merits and demerits [of] the program before it starts for my children.
17. I would want to know about how this plan functions in the school and for my children.
18. [I need to know] how it works, what processes does it take to accomplish its role? How it will generally work for my child.

Takeaways

- Parents and guardians need many more details about how personalized learning would actually be structured. Given what they currently know, they are cautiously upbeat about the idea.
- Interviewees were concerned that the school might not have the capacity to make personalized learning work. Is there enough staff to monitor each student's plan? Do teachers have expertise in all the different areas students would be interested in?
- Parents and guardians are unsure if this concept is a good fit for all students. Several parents thought it would work well for highly motivated students but not for those who dislike school; two parents thought it makes sense for students with anxiety disorders, autism or other issues, but not for the student body at large.

Other Recommendations from Parents and Guardians

None.

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

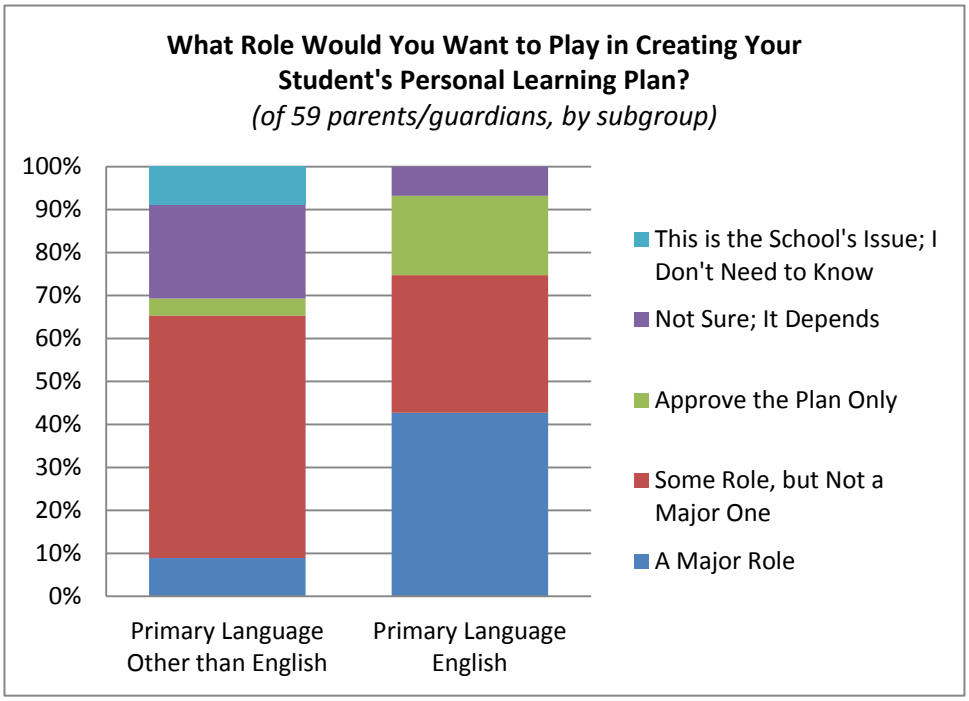

Chart: Parents and guardians would like to play some role in crafting their child's personalized learning plan, but not necessarily a major one. In their comments, many indicated that they would need more information before deciding. Decisions might depend on the child in question, the academic subjects being considered, or whether their children wanted their involvement. Parents and guardians whose primary language is English were more likely to say they wanted a major role. One possible reason is that these parents are more likely to worry that a personalized plan will impact their children's college plans in some way. Another reason is that interviewees whose primary language is other than English were more likely to have never heard about personalized learning, and thus they didn't have enough details to make an educated guess about the role they would like to play.

Sample Comments *(of 25)*

1. I'd love to be a part of it. Ideally we'd all work together and be on the same page. That way, students buy in.
2. I have often asked the educators at Winooski if there could be an individualized education plan for the gifted and talented students in our school. When I used the acronym IEP I was shot down, saying that it's only for certain students. I pointed out that the words *'individualized education plan'* could apply to anyone who needed more personalized curriculum—namely, my daughters and other children who are exceptional….There's a lot of grant and earmarked money going to schools for students who are behind, but there isn't anything for them to support students who excel. This is why my husband and I have taught our daughters to make our own 'plan' at home.
3. One of our jobs is to teach our kids to be independent and start making their own decisions and frame their own futures, so I would not want to be at the table necessarily.
4. It would vary depending on the child, but I'd want to know what the choices and possibilities were, so I could encourage them to maybe try something new or different.

5. I've been in situation where I've voiced my thoughts in the IEP. I don't want them to have total say, because they think that they're the school so they decide. No. I'm her best advocate. It was scary for me in the beginning in pre-school and elementary, but now I understand how to do it.
6. "It's the school's responsibility to educate kids; it is why we pay taxes." Parent does want to approve the plan, though.
7. I would want to be involved in all aspects because I want what's best for my child. I could express what I think is best for her and hear the teacher's perspective as well. It would depend on my schedule, but yes, I'd want to be involved.
8. I'd watch in the background because she'd be determined to do it herself.
9. My son could plan it but he'd need to understand what he was planning. I'd want to be part of it.
10. [My] daughter has already been choosing her electives, so that's five classes, and we discussed it with her, so I'd want to be involved in the discussion, but I don't know what else.
11. This would vary depending on the child.
12. Whatever he needs from me. If I know the plan, I can be consistent and support him in whatever he needs.

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 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.
- How much any particular parent/guardian wants to be involved may vary depending on the child in question.
- Personalized learning plans may be a way to give more attention to students who are already excelling.

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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?
    a. I never had to do this.
    b. A couple of times over the entire year.
    c. Between 4 and 10 times.
    d. 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.
    a. I'd say that overall, it was easy.
    b. Sometimes it was easy, sometimes it wasn't.
    c. 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?
    a. Usually, I feel they do.
    b. It depends; sometimes yes, sometimes no.
    c. 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?
    a. Usually.
    b. It depends; sometimes yes, sometimes no.
    c. 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?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. 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?
    a. Very satisfied
    b. Pretty satisfied, though one or two small things still bothered me.
    c. 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.
    a. Who would contact you from the school, if there was any issue or problem?
    b. What situations or events would you get contacted about?
    c. How would you get contacted?

25. What's most true for you?
    a. I can usually only talk or respond to messages in the evening.
    b. I can usually only talk or respond to messages during the daytime.
    c. 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?
    a. Yes, I like that idea.
    b. No, I don't like that idea.
    c. 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 **Web2School.** 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:
    a. Very useful
    b. Somewhat useful
    c. Not very useful
    d. I've never used it
    e. 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:
    a. 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, <u>not</u> 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
- ☐ 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 PACTS or the PTO
- ☐ Through people at the school such as teachers or guidance counselors who you talk to directly
- ☐ Through multi-lingual liaisons
- ☐ The newsletters from the school that is mailed to you
- ☐ 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 <u>learning in the community</u> 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, <u>what</u> 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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