

## Overview of Research on Effectively Engaging Parents

The following is an overview of research related to parent public opinion research that HCM conducted on behalf of Learning Heroes, The Collaborative for Student Success, and The High Quality Assessment Project over the past two years. HCM has helped lead an unprecedented amount of qualitative and quantitative research in partnership with Edge Research and Hart Research. The formulation of a reform-minded organization singularly focused on parents, Learning Heroes, has been a driving force in this newfound emphasis on communicating with parents on critical education issues. HCM compiled this research overview for the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and its members to use in meaningfully engaging parents.

In recent months, the focus of the research has shifted to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and how the new parent engagement requirements and report cards can be leveraged to create a parent community that is well informed on the value proposition inherent in a strong accountability system. By their own admission, state departments of education have not been in the business of communicating directly to parents. ESSA requires that chief state school officers and their teams engage directly with parents as they receive input on their proposed accountability plans. In addition, ESSA calls for parents to provide feedback on the development of updated school level report cards that require a deeper level of information. Although these school level report cards were mandated under No Child Left Behind, there is a new effort to ensure that not only are the reports user friendly and accessible, but also that there is a distribution plan in place to ensure they reach all parents. This heightened commitment to transparency requires a more thoughtful approach to the construct of the state, district and school level report cards. In order to design a document that is meaningful to parents, we must code-switch, just as teachers do, and put ourselves in the shoes of the parents who will be receiving these documents—many of whom have students who are struggling and no wherewithal to leave a school that is chronically underperforming.

Many thanks to Learning Heroes, the Collaborative for Student Success, and The High Quality Assessment Project for funding the research. To date, there have been more than 50 focus groups across 20 states, and five national surveys.<sup>1</sup> The connective tissue across the various bodies of research has been and continues to be a desire to meet parents where they are and communicate effectively about policies and practices intended to improve student outcomes, including: higher standards that emphasize real world skills, high-quality tests that identify gaps in learning, and robust state accountability plans that shine a light on the inequity in the system.

The overview below illustrates learnings from this work that are relevant to states as they engage parents in ESSA conversations. It is not intended to be a comprehensive checklist, but rather a collection of directional information that provides guidance to states in planning their communications strategies and outreach efforts to parents.

### Research Findings

#### The Disconnect that leads to a “Demand” Problem

#### **What We Know:**

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<sup>1</sup> Focus groups conducted in CA, CO, DC, DE, HI, ID, IL, LA, MD, MS, NC, NH, NJ, NM, NV, NY, OH, OR, RI, WA.

- According to the [Parents 2016 Report](#) conducted by Learning Heroes, there is a large disconnect between parent perceptions of their child's academic achievement and reality. In both math and reading, 90% of parents believe their child is at or above grade level, which is in sharp contrast to 2015 NAEP data, which shows that approximately one-third of all fourth grade students are proficient. Minority parents hold the same misperceptions about their children's performance, despite those numbers being dramatically lower. In math, 88% of African American parents believe their child is at or above grade level compared to NAEP data, which shows that only 19% of students are actually performing at this level. That gap is larger for Reading, with 90% of parents stating their child is at grade level, and only 18% achieving proficiency on NAEP.<sup>2</sup>
- The reason for this disconnect comes from the sources that parents are prioritizing to inform them about their child's progress. Parents rely most on information from teachers, grades, and report cards as their top sources for how their child is doing academically. Only 4% of parents say they rely the most on standardized test reports and scores.<sup>3</sup>
- Not only is there a disconnect at the student level, but one also exists at the school level. Most parents grade their statewide education systems as needing improvement, but think their child's school is doing a good job. Three out of four parents feel their child is getting an "excellent or pretty good" education, and only 3% say it is "not so good".<sup>4</sup> As states move into ESSA implementation, there is a lack of demand for change from parents because they believe their child is on track academically. Anxiety levels are highest with regards to the social and emotional needs of the child, especially as they get older. Fifty percent of parents say they worry most about their child facing peer pressure and 48% are most concerned about their child's emotional health and happiness. In comparison, only 35% of parents are most concerned with their child being on track with the expectations of the grade level.<sup>5</sup>
- These findings are not completely surprising, given that there is a widely held misperception that recent education reforms and initiatives have been developed and mandated by out-of-touch politicians and corporations who do not have students' best interests at heart, but rather are fueled by dishonest political and financial ambitions. Parents see education reform as coming from "the man", which can be played by several players, which vary depending on location: state or federal legislators, billionaires, and testing companies.
- There is also a widespread belief among parents that "the system is rigged." We also know that school performance and quality is often determined by its location and zip code in many cases, underscoring the inequity in the system.
- When it comes to differentiating between levels of authority, parents do not understand the different roles of the federal government, the state education agency and district level leadership. They often do not know where initiatives stem from, including who creates testing guidelines and is responsible for laying out requirements for teachers.

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2-5 "Parents 2016: Hearts and Minds of Parents in an Uncertain World", Learning Heroes

- Parents generally respond to the frustration and misperceptions in one of two ways:
  - Protectors: They want to shield their child from what they view as negative or unfair situations. They often seek to find external explanations that take responsibility away from their child.
  - Problem Solvers: They immediately want to better understand what they can do to help their child. They place more responsibility on themselves than protectors.

### Parents' Thoughts on ESSA and Accountability

#### **What We Know:**

- It is evident from our recent qualitative research that parents have little to no knowledge about ESSA. It will only matter if they believe it will affect their child's school experience; they want to know how it will improve their school. Only then does it matter how we are going to measure whether or not a school is successful, which is the primary purpose of ESSA.
- Accountability is a loaded term. Parents interpret it to mean that changes will take place as a result of a school's performance, though not all parents think any real consequences will occur. The term itself can also have a political connotation, so the more practical the definition the more likely parents are to believe it. One research-based approach to messaging accountability is "School accountability evaluates and grades schools the same way schools evaluate and give grades to students."
- Parents agree with the concept of accountability, but they believe schools are more than just test scores. This directly corresponds to parents' belief that their children are also more than just test scores. Reinforcing that state tests are only one measure used to evaluate students should also be used to describe accountability—test scores are only one of many measures used to evaluate the performance of a school.
- A school system that is rich in choice and options puts greater emphasis and weight on the school report card. For example, in San Francisco, a system with a robust choice program, parents were very conversant in the metrics ascribed to the school and how they compared with neighboring schools.

### Prioritization of Accountability Information

#### **What We Know:**

- No surprise, parents see the world through the lens of their child's experience. They are most interested in knowing information that has a direct impact on their child. This plays out in a multitude of ways. For example, parents are most interested in comparing data to the schools in their district and neighborhood and place a very low value on state level comparisons. When asked to prioritize the required ESSA indicators, teacher qualifications and measures of the

learning environment were highly valued. Parents found disaggregation of achievement data much less valuable.

- We have dedicated a considerable amount of our qualitative research trying to better understand how parents interpret disaggregated data. We have found that for some parents of students in low-performing subgroups, disaggregated data can feel like a shaming exercise instead of an effort to provide those students with additional support. It will be critical to clearly communicate that the intent of the disaggregation is to ensure that underperforming subgroups get the extra supports and services they need and that it is a failure of the system, not the student or the parent. Conversely, some parents misinterpret disaggregated data as evidence that certain students are not capable of achieving at high levels.
- The increase in outspoken prejudice that seems to be prevalent in the public sphere today is leading to more raw and unfiltered conversations amongst parents pertaining to student subgroups.
  - There is an inherent tension between identifying areas where the system is not meeting expectations and more supports and resources are needed, and the perception that certain groups of students are being identified as incapable of meeting expectations.
  - There is an inconsistent level of awareness among African American and Hispanic parents, with some being quite knowledgeable and others being among the least informed. For these parents, it becomes even more problematic as we strive to communicate the reason, interpretation, and purpose of disaggregating data for their children and comparing it to other student populations.
- Parents across all demographics are very interested in school safety and social emotional growth because they help to paint a picture of overall school performance. Although these are not objective measures and have traditionally not been given much weight in the policy world, we cannot discount them when talking with parents, as they are areas of great concern. Academics alone are not enough for parents.
- Because parents prioritize what directly impacts their child, they value information about their child's teacher. But it is important to remember that parents put teachers on a pedestal. Conversations around teacher evaluation, levels of experience, and credentials need to be approached with humanity and compassion rather than with a clinical or academic tone.

### Giving Parents the Information They Need

#### What We Know:

- In order to implement effective engagement with parents, states must truly meet them where they are. This can be interpreted literally, by holding meeting at locations and times that are convenient for parents who already lead busy lives. But we must also meet them with the information they want, in ways they can easily access, and using language they understand, including having translation services available for non-English speaking parents.
- Language: Even commonly used phrases and terms that policymakers and leaders assume are easily understood can be misinterpreted by parents. For example:

- Slogans to describe programmatic efforts need to be pressure tested for unintended meaning. Parents interpret the phrase ‘culture and climate’ literally, as weather and various cultural backgrounds. An alternate phrase meant to capture many of the same indicators, labeled ‘opportunity to learn’, garnered similar confusion, especially when a school performed well in opportunity to learn, but had poor student achievement. A potential alternative for both phrases is ‘learning environment’.
  - Student growth’ or ‘school growth’, when not described effectively, can also be interpreted as the growth of the student population of a school. A potential alternative is ‘student progress’.
  - We also must be cautious in how we communicate a state’s progress as a whole. A parent is less concerned about a state’s progress and more so about their child’s. For example, including the opening phrase “We are pleased to share the progress...” in a cover letter does not translate well when attached to a low-performing individual student report. In our qualitative work this type of terminology made parents more confused and, at times, upset.
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- **Materials that Resonate:** Materials that resonated the most were clear, concise and factual. Some of the most effective materials are actionable checklists and contextual cover letters that explained why a change occurred and the rationale behind it.
  - **Channels of Communication:** Admittedly, parents are inundated with information and do not always have the time to read through all of it. To ensure parents get the most important information, many suggested that all channels of communications be used.