



Partnership for Public Education

UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT  
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# PARENT ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION USE

Lauren P. Bailes, PhD

Meaghan N. Vitale



## Introduction

In 2015, the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission, now known as the Redding Consortium for Educational Equity, called for an end to “confrontational dialogue”, which blamed parents in part for the ongoing failure of Wilmington’s schools. Instead, the group emphasized the importance of parent and family engagement to the effectiveness of public education. However, the complex task of navigating educational systems has become further complicated by the pandemic over the past two years. Some in-person opportunities for family engagement are no longer available, some schools do not have the technological or human resource infrastructure to prioritize family engagement, and some families’ other care and professional commitments have simply made engagement with the school prohibitively difficult. Therefore, it is more critical than ever to ensure that parents and families have timely, complete, and meaningful access to information from their students’ schools.

This brief addresses what we already know about how families of school-aged students get, use, and circulate information. We also report new findings from our own data collection regarding how families seek out information and which kinds of families are most likely to go to which information sources inside or outside of schools. Parent engagement is associated with a host of desirable and beneficial outcomes, including: better grades and test scores, more pro-social student behaviors, better attendance, higher graduation rates, and high college admission rates (Kakli et al., 2006; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Our goal is to inform schools about ways that they can make information about schools more accessible to more families so that families feel empowered to engage with their students’ educational processes.

## Why parent engagement matters

When parents and families engage with schools, their students do better academically, socially, and developmentally (Fenton et al., 2017). This is true across the P12 spectrum, although family engagement can look very different as students mature. For example, families with children in early grades (e.g., elementary school) might engage with schools by attending events or helping with homework. Since middle and upper grade students are closer to completing secondary education, they might benefit from different kinds of support. As such, families might connect with school faculty over report card conferences or collaborate in college-preparatory activities like college visits or essay-writing.

## Engagement requires information

However, the reality is that schools sometimes make it hard for families to support their students because opportunities to engage with schools are not always clear or readily accessible. Teachers perceive families to be engaged when they volunteer for school councils or in the classroom, attend school events, and initiate communication with the teacher (Hillier et al., 2019). The most engaged families are also the most likely to know where to get information about their students' schools. Attending school events allows families to form social networks that gather and share information. Families who are involved in school organizations (e.g., PTAs) are likely to have a greater number of social contacts (Alameda-Lawson & Lawson, 2018; Cappelletti, 2017) and thus access to a greater number of resources, including information. Moreover, the engaged families are also most likely to be able to use that information to advantage their students when it comes to things like opting into advanced or AP classes (Lyken-Segosebe & Hinz, 2015). However, not all families have the same access to those networks and the information and opportunities available through those networks (Cappelletti, 2017).

Families have different kinds of access based on a lot of factors. Some factors include socioeconomic status, language, race, educational attainment, and geographic location--and these factors tend to be related to how comfortable a family feels obtaining information from a school. Typically, unwelcoming environments, limited volunteer opportunities, and infrequent communication from a school decrease families' comfort with school engagement and in turn, decrease the likelihood families will obtain information from a school (Trame, 2020). These individual characteristics also directly interact with school characteristics, including the number of students of color, students who qualify for free- or reduced-priced lunches, students who speak a first language other than English, and the degree to which students share cultural and economic similarities with the school staff. If the mismatches between students, families, and school staff are severe and are not mitigated by the school's culture and engagement practices, then those same families may find it harder to get information and difficult to sustain engagement in the school.

## How families use information

While family engagement has many positive effects, it is important to recognize that not all engagement benefits all students equally. It is possible for some families to use information to advocate for their own students in ways that are potentially detrimental to other students. Research tells us that middle class parents are more likely to use information in order to advocate for tracked classes or to self-fund desired initiatives or opportunities within the school. One study calls this "opportunity hoarding" because families who have relatively greater access to resources (e.g., wealth) also have more power and influence to bring about their desired outcomes in their students' schools. Alternatively, middle class families may use information to reinforce the status-quo by shoring up the support of like-minded and similarly positioned families (Lyken-Segosebe & Hinz, 2015).

On the other hand, families who might be identified as low-income or living in poverty tend to advocate for their students through pathways that are often external to the school and detour to policy- or organization-level efforts. For example, school-choice vouchers, public choice schools, charter schools, and parent-trigger laws (in which parents vote for some kind of school takeover or turnaround) are considered, "opportunity-prying" because they provide some power to low-income families over their students' school options and systems (Lyken-Segosebe & Hinz, 2015).

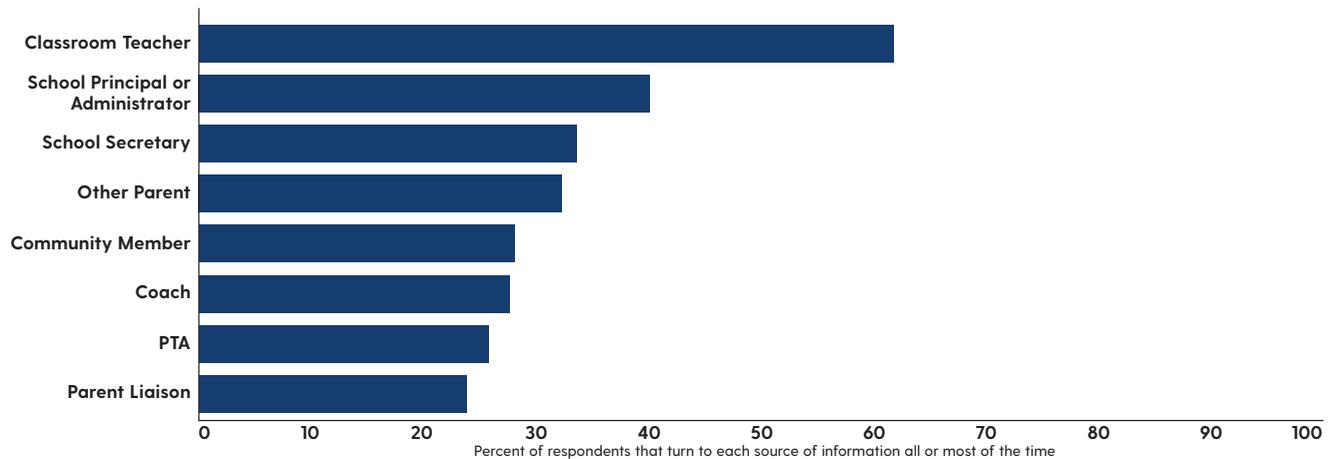
## What did we learn from Wilmington parents and families?

### Who did we talk to?

We talked to nearly 150 Wilmington parents and guardians at family and student-oriented events throughout the city over the course of a summer. A majority (60%) of parents identified as Black, a third identified as white, and 7% identified as Hispanic. The parents we spoke to represented a range of income levels, with roughly a third reporting less than \$35,000, a third between \$35,000 and \$75,000, and a third making more than \$75,000.

### Where do families get information?

We asked how parents get information from school personnel and people in roles related to schools. Specifically, we asked respondents how much of the time throughout a typical school year they reach out to one of the following sources for information about their student's school: PTA (parent-teacher association) leader or member, coach, community member, classroom teacher, school principal or administrator, school secretary, another parent, or parent liaison.



**Classroom teachers were the largest information source for families:** almost 40% of respondents reported that they always spoke with their student's teacher and 94% of respondents listed a classroom teacher among their informational sources. The next highest-ranked sources of information were other parents or school principals or administrators. Of all the information sources, respondents report the least frequent information-seeking from community members, parent liaisons, and coaches.

### What do we know about families that seek information about schools?

Our study showed that information-seeking among Wilmington families did not vary significantly by parent's education level, ethnicity, age, or income. However, gender did stand out as a differential factor among guardians' information-seeking. Specifically, female family members were more likely to seek information about school than were male family members. This finding aligns with previous literature which suggest that mothers are typically the parents most likely to connect with schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). It may be important for schools to note that--at present--the family members who may connect with schools are likely to be women. This finding may shape how and where schools and districts choose to distribute information and tailor information to family members. For example, a school might craft events and information such that busy moms can pick up a flyer at school drop-off or participate in a health clinic and a PTA meeting at the same time.

We also found two different approaches to parents' strategic engagement based on something we refer to as *political efficacy*, which is defined as an individual's degree of confidence when navigating public and political systems. Family members who had higher levels of *internal political efficacy* were confident in their ability to navigate the educational system. These individuals were more likely to speak frequently with coaches, classroom teachers, school principals and school secretaries. Those who had higher levels of *external political efficacy* were confident in the responsiveness of the political system. These parents were more likely to speak frequently with PTA members, coaches, and parent liaisons. These findings suggest that those with different beliefs about their own political efficacy engaged with different sources of information when engaging with the school system.

We also looked at the engagement of respondents with high *parental efficacy*, which is defined as the believe that parents can help their child succeed in school (Sheldon, 2002). Respondents with higher parental efficacy reported more frequent information-seeking with only one source: classroom teachers. The frequency of information-seeking from other sources was not associated with the strength of parental efficacy beliefs. This suggests to us that parental efficacy beliefs have little to do with how much parents or family members seek information from schools. Thus, information-seeking is likely predicted by other characteristics.

## Key Findings and Recommendations

In summary, we found that families may reach out to the members of the school staff who are typically visible, like teachers, coaches, principals, and office administrators. However, families may be less likely to seek information from parent liaisons or parent-teacher association members. While information-seeking varies based on school level (e.g., elementary, middle, and secondary), families nevertheless continue to seek information at every school level. Information may be most potent and have maximum reach when it is embedded in community or organizational routines and events, such concerts, sports, and report card conferences.

### 1. Schools must communicate with every member of the school community

Our data indicate that, while families are more likely to reach out to some school roles than others, everyone in a school role is likely to be considered a source of information. Thus, schools would benefit from making sure that all of their personnel—teachers, coaches, administrators, staff people, and parent outreach—are equally informed about the school and equally equipped with information that families might seek. This might include information as straightforward as upcoming events, important timelines or deadlines, or whom to contact with questions. This might also include more complex information such as how to navigate parent information systems online. One strategy might include informational graphics or one-page FAQ documents that school personnel can use and that can be easily circulated (in hard or soft copy) to families. This way, a parent’s “first line” information source like a coach or a teacher can easily identify and disseminate information that is relevant to the family’s inquiry. **Recommendation: Provide information that is relevant to families to all school staff members and instructional personnel.**

### 2. New or nontraditional roles may not be familiar to parents

To our surprise, families seeking information about schools did not frequently contact parent liaisons and parent-teacher association members. Extant literature suggests that there may be several reasons we observed this. Firstly, those roles may not be familiar to some families (Arce, 2019). The Every Student Succeeds Act directly funded several family-community engagement efforts at the school level and many schools hired a parent liaison. However, just establishing the role does not automatically make that person a trusted source of information in that school community. Moreover, families who have traditionally sought information from other community members or from their students’ teachers may not know about the role of a parent liaison or the purpose of a parent-teacher association. For example, a school might choose to integrate those roles into other aspects of the life of the school such as welcoming students at the door, calling families to make introductions, or circulating with a principal on neighborhood or home visits. Providing families with additional information not only about the school, but about their allies within the school may enhance ongoing efforts at engagement and cooperation. **Recommendation: Support liaisons’ introductions to school community and existing parent networks as well as support ongoing relationship building.**

### 3. Information-seeking varies by school level, but families need information at every level

Our findings confirmed the idea that most families who seek information from schools are families of students in elementary school. This may be due to the fact that elementary school students need different kinds of support from their schools and families than do middle and high school students. For example, elementary school students may need more direct supervision for homework help. This may also be related to the fact that the activities often characterized as family engagement (e.g., homework help, event support and attendance, and fundraising) are more visible in the early grades than in the upper grades. In the upper grades (middle and high school), parent support may include transportation to extracurricular activities or support for college applications. However, we encourage schools to continue their diligent efforts to make information accessible to families of upper-grade students. Even

though, for example, high school students' report card conferences may have lower in-person attendance rates, their families may be more likely to connect with teachers, grades, and support opportunities virtually. Schools can make alternative options to connect with schools readily available and easily accessible. **Recommendation: Create adaptive information sources that grow with families.**

#### 4. Information-seeking may be embedded in other social networks and activities

Our data revealed that families do not necessarily seek information about school directly from that school or school-based personnel. Instead, they often rely on their own networks of community members and other parents to provide them with information. This may be based on a number of factors including language, convenience, access, or interpersonal trust. Knowing this, schools should consider working directly with well-connected community members and equipping those individuals with information, access, and resources to support information dissemination. Those individuals, then, who are trusted community leaders may in turn empower parents and families who seek information about their student's school. **Recommendation: Identify and inform formal and informal community leaders to whom families likely already turn for information and access.**

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