



# ACPS FAMILY ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE

## FINAL REPORT

November 2019

*Submitted to:  
Alexandria City Public  
Schools*

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## Introduction and Methodology

Research efforts have long supported the benefits of parent engagement in education, but more recent research has demonstrated the myriad ways robust family engagement activities can benefit students, parents, educators, schools, and communities (see, for example Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017; Epstein, et. al, 2002; ICF, 2017; Lopez & Caspe, 2014; HHS, 2018;). School districts like Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) are actively promoting family engagement through strategic planning efforts and the establishment of Family and Community Engagement (FACE) Centers. The formative evaluation of ACPS family engagement programming involved a mixed methods study conducted in two phases. During Phase 1, ACPS staff conducted two parallel surveys of staff and families focused on the five key areas of their family engagement conceptual framework (key areas are bolded in the Guiding Research Questions box). For Phase 2, ICF used rigorous qualitative data collection and analysis techniques to broadly examine family engagement practices, services, and perspectives through interviews, focus groups, observations, and secret shopper phone calls. Details about the methodology for Phase 2 are presented in Appendix A.

### GUIDING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To what extent do ACPS schools and Central Office departments foster a welcoming and supportive **environment** for families?

To what extent is ACPS developing mutual **relationships** with families?

To what extent does ACPS include families in educational **decision-making** of their children?

To what extent do ACPS' **communication** practices meet the needs of families?

To what extent do current ACPS family engagement initiatives and **activities** meet the needs of families?

## Key Findings: Environment/Culture

**Welcoming Environment.** A majority of families reported that ACPS schools provided a welcoming environment for families. More elementary school parents found schools welcoming than secondary school parents, however. Parents' opinions of how welcoming their child's school were shaped by a variety of factors, primarily their interactions with school staff, the physical school environment, and the school culture. Parents who described the school environment as welcoming recounted positive experiences with school staff and teachers who made them feel welcomed and valued. They indicated that support staff were friendly and helpful, and that they felt the staff and teachers sincerely cared about their family. Interviews and focus groups revealed that school principals and lead administrators set the tone for staff interactions with family, leading by example.

**Challenges to Feeling Welcomed.** Parents who did not feel their child's school was a welcoming environment described a variety of concerns, including negative experiences with staff and negative perceptions of the building. For example, parents who had difficulty communicating with their child's teacher or support staff, or who had had negative interactions with support staff, felt less welcomed at their child's school. Parents who felt that the physical building wasn't welcoming typically focused on maintenance and safety issues. Some parents, however, particularly from secondary school, mentioned being overwhelmed by the size or layout of the school building and were unsure where to go when they visited.

Non-white parents and non-native English speakers also faced unique challenges regarding the school culture, which made them less likely to feel welcomed at their school. Some parents reported explicit discrimination or negative comments related to their race or native language from

either staff or other parents. In addition, both staff and parents shared that parent leadership at several schools was dominated by affluent, predominantly white families, making families of color less likely to feel welcomed at their child's school.

### **Key Findings: Relationships**

**Definitions of Family Engagement.** When asked to describe what family engagement means to them, many ACPS staff described the importance of a two-way partnership or two-way relationship between families and schools. Strongly associated with this partnership was bi-directional, responsive communication. For example, staff noted that parents and schools should be responsive to each other and that trust and rapport are needed between both parties in order for family engagement to grow and develop. Staff also mentioned family engagement in their child's learning as a key aspect of family engagement. This was described as families attending school-based events, as being comfortable raising questions or concerns, and as teachers and staff helping families understand the role that parents and families have in their child's learning.

**Staff Roles.** Overall, ACPS staff from all roles and levels stated that family engagement was part of their job. However, staff reported that the school principal had a large influence over the tone and culture of family engagement at the school. Front office staff or support staff were sometimes thought of as having an explicit role in family engagement, but parent liaisons were consistently described as playing a critical, explicit role in family engagement.

**Perceptions of Relationships.** Findings from the Phase 1 parent and staff surveys show disparities in perceived trust between families and schools. School staff reported a lower level of perceived trust by families than parents did; this disparity may play a role in relational issues between families and staff. There are differences by school level as well with high school parents and staff reporting lower levels of trust, care, and respect than middle and elementary schools.

**Cultural Responsiveness.** When asked to what extent parents/families felt that their child's school was respectful of their culture, values, and language, responses from the Phase 2 focus group participants were mixed. English-speaking and non-English speaking participants reported instances of discrimination and feeling unwelcome or ignored by their child's school. Indeed, the Phase 2 Secret Shopper Calls resulted in several evaluator staff members being hung up on when they called in non-English languages. In addition, in several Arabic-speaking focus groups, participants noted feeling overlooked by the division as they discussed the challenge of having Standards of Learning (SOL) exams scheduled during Ramadan. However, participants also noted feeling welcomed and respected by their child's school, specifically noting schools' efforts to translate written materials and provide cultural events.

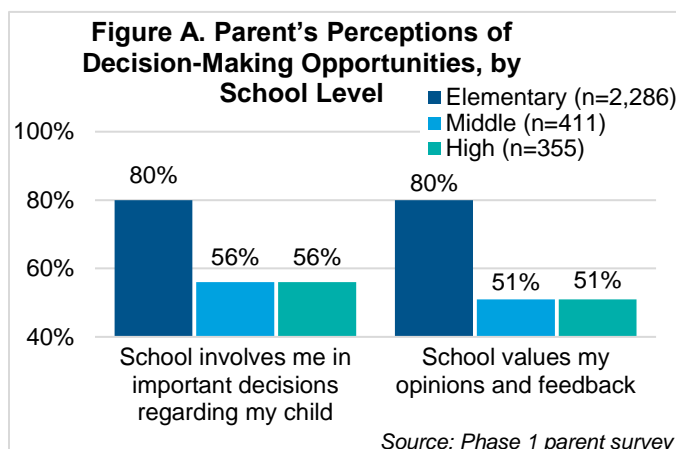
### **Key Findings: Decision-Making**

**Decision-Making Opportunities.** Parents reported being involved in academic and behavioral decisions about their children primarily through parent-teacher conferences, with a smaller subset of families also citing Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 meetings, or advisory committees for programs like Talented and Gifted (TAG) or Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID). Recurring events like Principal Coffees, Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, and other division-wide meetings were often reported by school staff as opportunities for parents to learn about academic information or school-based events that could help inform decision-making; however, these events were often limited in attendance due to their timing or location, or a perception that they were not as welcoming to minority or non-English speaking families. Schools also provided a variety of one-time informational events intended to provide parents with critical information including orientation, back-to-school night, elective fairs, and information nights for special programs.

**Information to Support Decision-Making.** Parents, teachers, and administrators described a range of events to provide families with information about the school system, educational programs, or individual courses. Although substantial amounts of educational information and resources were provided through Principal Coffees, PTA meetings, and Canvas or PowerSchool, a combination of a general lack of parent resource rooms with various personal limitations (e.g., work schedules, childcare needs, language barriers, or lack of or limited access to technology) prevented families from accessing these resources.

**Perceptions about Decision-Making.**

Overall, parents at elementary schools reported higher levels of agreement about decision-making opportunities (see Figure A). In addition, Phase 2 respondents reported that in-person opportunities to share opinions and offer feedback varied by school, with greater opportunities across elementary schools than secondary schools. Title I schools also reported greater levels of agreement about decision-making opportunities than those with children at non-Title I schools.



**Key Findings: Communication**

**Effectiveness of Communication Methods.** ACPS schools and individual teachers leveraged a wide range of communication platforms across and within the categories of printed materials, telephone communication, in-person communication, and digital outreach. Families and staff participating in Phase 2 reported that in-person conferences and communication were essential and effective starting points for building relationships or beginning discussions. However, parents of secondary school students frequently raised concerns about the limited number of conference slots and the difficulties of connecting with teachers.

Although the majority of parents surveyed in Phase 1 expressed a preference for email communication, this varied by preferred language and was *not* the preferred communication method among non-English speaking groups, who instead reported phone calls or in-person communication as the best way to communicate with them. Families and staff also reported that access to translation apps (e.g., Google Translate) and online engagement platforms (Dojo, Blackboard Connect, Remind) have proven to be a strength for family engagement, although communicating to non-English speaking families through these platforms was not without challenges. In particular, many participants were unaware of these platforms, or had not participated in training on them. As one secondary school teacher explained,

*Our teachers are not trained enough to know how to access Canvas well...[But] more than just the access, it's navigating it; it's using it; it's responding. Because [parents] can comment and they can send us messages through that. Most of our parents do not know how to do that because most of our teachers don't know how to do that.*

ACPS leveraged a variety of methods to effectively communicate with non-English speakers including bilingual parent liaisons, translators, contracted interpreters, and the Language Line (contracted interpretation by phone). With the exception of parent liaisons, each of these methods was less effective than designed due to implementation issues, particularly the use of the

Language Line. Staff across several schools reported that they lacked confidence in using the Language Line, or had only a limited number of phones with conferencing technology to best use the Language Line. In addition, the Phase 2 “secret shopper” calls revealed a lack of consistent use of the Language Line across schools.

**Communication Process and Content.** Overall, a majority of parents surveyed in Phase 1 agreed that their child’s school responded to concerns promptly and connected them to appropriate staff or resources to address their questions or concerns, although this agreement declined among parents of middle and high school students.

At the elementary school level, school staff reported communicating the most about general news related to a class or the school (64%), while at the middle and high school levels, school staff reported communicating the most about student problems and behavior (76% and 79% respectively). Throughout Phase 2, participants reported that communication about school- and classroom-based events was sufficient in reaching families with key information and that communication from the division and from individual schools about registration and enrollment was accessible and provided in a timely manner. Among parents of secondary school students, participants frequently reported that communications about attendance policies were confusing.

### **Key Findings: Activities and Future Desires**

**Activities and Opportunities.** Elementary schools reported hosting a larger number of social events for families, while all school levels reported relatively equal levels of educational activities, tailored in substance and format to the age of students. Across schools, the volume of available programs and events was frequently mentioned as a strength of the division’s family engagement efforts.

The Phase 1 survey found that across the division, 87% of parents surveyed agreed that they had opportunities to participate in school events, and 69% reported attending activities at their child’s school over the past year; however, these percentages decreased among parents of middle and high students. A substantially greater percentage of elementary school parents and Title I parents surveyed reported that their child’s school provided them with opportunities to better understand how to support their child’s learning at home compared with middle and high school parents.

**Processes and Procedures for Engagement.** Across the Phase 2 interviews and focus groups, several structural patterns emerged related to supporting events and activities. FACE-sponsored activities that provided childcare and interpretation services were positively perceived and mentioned as facilitators to participation. A few study sites and participants described key partnerships with community organizations that helped to facilitate family engagement. In contrast, many school-level staff reported that the preponderance of events were held during the first half of the school year, which limited the opportunities for continued engagement. And although parents across all schools reported opportunities to volunteer, some parents and staff reported that the necessary background checks were often overly burdensome for some families.

**Staff Professional Development.** Less than half of all staff who participated in Phase 1 agreed that staff had been trained on effective approaches to working with families of diverse cultural backgrounds. Teachers and staff at every school in Phase 2 reported needing additional professional development related to family engagement.



## **Key Findings: Strengths, Challenges, and Barriers**

### **FAMILY ENGAGEMENT STRENGTHS**

**Elementary Schools and Title I Schools.** Parents with children in elementary schools and in Title I schools reported more positive perceptions about and greater opportunities for decision-making related to their child's education compared to parents at secondary schools or non-Title I schools. Parents with children in elementary schools or at Title I schools also reported substantially higher rates of awareness of and attendance at events and activities. Elementary school teachers also reported strong practices related to teacher-parent communication and elementary school parents reported more positive experiences with communication in the Phase 1 survey.

**Teachers and Staff.** The most often-identified strength of schools in fostering family engagement was the personality and dedication of the teachers and staff. Many parents described positive interactions with individual teachers or support staff who were friendly, helpful, attentive, and caring and reported some teachers who truly went above and beyond to help children and families. Bilingual staff (including parent liaisons, front office staff, counselors, and classroom teachers) were particularly highlighted as an important resource to their schools.

**School- and Division-specific Resources.** Many staff reported that a strength of their school was the ability to provide resources for families with a variety of needs, including educational resources and food pantries. Division-wide supports including the FACE Center and its childcare services, the Language Line, interpreters, and translators were frequently mentioned as resources that strengthened family engagement.

**Available Programs and Platforms.** The events most commonly reported during Phase 2 by teachers and staff as contributing to family engagement were social or community events that included families such as International Nights or start-of-school events. Events where parents had the opportunity to learn about what their child was doing in school were also regarded as strengths by school staff and parents. These events included elective fairs, literacy nights, science or math night, and AVID night. Teachers and staff also reported that access to translation apps (e.g., Google Translate) and online engagement platforms (e.g., Dojo, Blackboard Connect, Remind) strengthened family engagement.

### **SCHOOL- OR COMMUNITY-RELATED CHALLENGES**

**Staff Limitations.** Across ACPS, teachers and staff reported that there was not enough time in the day to engage families at the level they would like. Parents, teachers, and principals who worked at schools that did not have parent liaisons stated that they would like a liaison at their school to provide bilingual support and to better enable robust family engagement.

**Cultural Challenges.** Across school sites, parents and school staff reported a cultural divide between the highly engaged, middle-class, predominately white parents and the non-white and/or non-English-speaking parents. Various respondents pointed out that not every family feels equally welcomed across ACPS. In particular, staff noted that non-English speakers, African American families in gentrifying neighborhoods, and lower income families tended to feel less comfortable at school, although these perceptions and experiences varied among individuals. For Muslim families, a challenge was posed by the clash between the school calendar and the current Muslim religious calendar, particularly the need to take exams during periods of fasting during Ramadan.

**Community Changes.** Across Alexandria, individual schools were navigating the challenges of gentrification. They were trying to balance their mission of welcoming all families (including those

that have recently moved in) while coping with the genuine sadness for the people whose community was being disrupted.

**Communication Limitations.** Although teachers and staff across all Phase 2 schools were aware of a variety of communication tools and resources available to them, some participants reported limitations of these resources and platforms, noting a perception that the Language Line took a lot of time or was awkward to use, or citing translation limitations within some of the platforms used to track and convey student information such as Canvas and PowerSchool.

**Representation.** Teachers, parents, or administrators at nearly every school and staff at the Central Office reported that school- and division-wide committees and organizations such as PTAs or advisory groups lacked representation, reporting that these committees tended to be majority-white and middle-class.

### INDIVIDUAL BARRIERS TO FAMILIES' ENGAGEMENT

**Logistical Challenges.** The biggest logistical concern cited in interviews and focus groups was parent work schedules, which was also mirrored in survey findings. Forty-two percent of parents reported that their work obligations posed a “medium” to “very large” problem in becoming involved in their child’s school. During focus groups, some families reported not attending events because they lacked access to a car or because the bus service between their home and school was inconvenient or prohibitively expensive. Childcare was also frequently mentioned as a barrier to participation in events or activities.

**Technology Access.** Some families in focus groups reported not having access to email, computers, or smartphones required to fully utilize the diverse communication platforms used by ACPS. In addition, ACPS staff found that some families’ phone numbers changed often, which made contacting them difficult.

**Language Barriers.** Across all of ACPS, one-fifth of the parents surveyed (20%) reported that language barriers posed at least a “small problem” to engagement at their child’s school with 5% reporting that this was a “very large problem.”

**Structural Community Barriers.** At some schools, a major road or dangerous intersection lay between the school and the neighborhoods that the school served. Many families didn’t live in the immediate neighborhood of the school and reported not having cars. These family members reported that Metro or DASH buses rarely had direct routes from their neighborhoods to the schools, requiring families to build in additional time to get to and from events.

### Recommendations

The following are targeted recommendations for continuous improvement, that draw upon the research literature and best practices and are aligned with the family engagement concept map that guided this study.

**Environment/Culture.** ACPS could work to sustain and further leverage existing community partnerships to promote trust and meaningful relationships across the family populations it serves. These and new potential partners in the faith-based community could be a strong resource in identifying a more diverse and representative range of community leaders to support individual schools and division-wide efforts. Related to the physical buildings, ACPS could work to expand multilingual signage inside and outside school buildings and increase building accessibility to help families navigate with greater ease. Finally, secondary school parents reported feeling less welcome at the school. These schools could provide additional support or training for front office



staff on implicit biases or welcoming practices and using language services, or provide resource guides for parents to help them navigate the transition to secondary school.

**Relationships.** ACPS could capitalize on the strong parent-teacher/staff relationships at elementary schools by adopting similar practices and programs across school levels, which could include providing more opportunities for conferences in secondary schools, or having elementary and middle school or middle and high school principals jointly host Principal Coffees for parents of rising sixth and ninth grade students to help facilitate transition to a new school. The division could also provide principals and school leadership with practice-driven training on how to create a broader school culture that is welcoming and respectful to both staff and families, serving as the foundation for establishing family engagement. Other complex relational dynamics influenced by gentrification, transience, and implicit biases may be positively affected by supports including additional parent liaisons, additional cultural competency training for staff, intentional outreach into gentrifying communities, or buddies for new families.

**Decision-Making.** ACPS could expand opportunities for parent-teacher conferences or introduce academic parent-teacher teams or grade-level dialogues, particularly in secondary schools for parents to participate more directly in decision-making. To promote more widespread collaboration, information-sharing, and inclusive voice, ACPS could work to support PTAs in efforts to increase representation and diversity by modeling additional equity and inclusion practices in Principal Coffees or informally nominating or recommending diverse leaders for PTA leadership. In addition, school leadership could leverage and expand the more diverse Principal Coffees to disseminate critical information, solicit parental opinions, and create space to hear from a range of perspectives. To further support awareness and access, ACPS could build on the large amounts of information and materials already produced by schools and teachers by broadening their dissemination through increased training or awareness campaigns on existing resources such as PowerSchool or through the creation of school-based parent resource rooms.

**Communication.** ACPS should continue to build upon their communication strengths and leverage available resources for family engagement through additional training on the Language Line, additional phones with available three-way calling, ongoing efforts to ensure written communication in English is family-friendly, which will therefore support clear and concise translations and hiring additional bilingual staff including full-time Arabic-speaking and Amharic-speaking parent liaisons and full-time Arabic and Amharic translators. Many bilingual teachers and staff were providing information interpretation and translation; ACPS could consider offering stipends to these individuals to reduce burnout and compensate these staff for their additional work. In addition, ACPS could provide guidelines for written digital communication both through email and digital apps used by staff for communication and translation across the division. Parents also recommended additional follow-up about emergency or building incidents and increased access to course syllabi and greater distribution of translated report card templates.

**Activities and Future Desires.** ACPS could build off the strengths of events at the elementary school level and tailor similar events at the secondary school level, particularly events with a more relationship-building function, as schools across all levels provided a variety of educational opportunities. ACPS could also consider expanding home visits, which can cut across both educational and relationship-building functions and have been shown to positively impact family engagement, student achievement, and teachers' cultural understanding. Related professional development and practical guidance would greatly support the success of this effort. Across all school levels, some Principal Coffees, particularly about critical topics like SOLs or school safety, could be held in the evening to broaden the range of parents able to participate. In addition, although the process to volunteer may be necessary to ensure student safety, steps could be taken to broaden volunteer opportunities, for example, by creating a list of "skilled" volunteers to

participate in after-school volunteer activities for those unable to complete a full background check. Finally, ACPS could work to create opportunities for all staff, specifically front office staff, to participate in professional development related to family engagement and cultural competency.

## **Conclusions**

To support the utilization of this evaluation, this report concludes with two, high-level recommendations that cut across several family engagement domains and could be prioritized for systematic improvement across the division.

**Priority Recommendation: Relationship Building.** Relationships are at the heart of family engagement. A key investment that ACPS could make to support relationship building is more comprehensive family engagement-related training for all staff, with a focus on front office staff and secondary school teachers and staff. Investing in additional key staff including increased parent liaisons and/or bilingual staff, particularly to support Arabic- and Amharic-speaking families, could increase the comfort level of a broader range of families in engaging directly with the schools. Finally, the division could work to expand opportunities for face-to-face interactions between families and schools across secondary schools through increased conferences, the introduction of Academic Parent-Teacher Teams, additional school-specific programs focused on relationship-building, or dedicated Principal Coffees across all secondary schools.

**Priority Recommendation: Expanded Resource Utilization.** The division has already made numerous investments in communication and technology platforms and in the development of guidance related to family engagement. Yet this evaluation found that many of these resources were reported to be un- or under-utilized with pockets of participants who were unaware of processes or procedures the division had in place to facilitate engagement. As a first step, ACPS could engage in a more systematic internal assessment to determine why these resources were being under-utilized. Then, aligned with those findings, ACPS should move to increase awareness of or effective utilization of those existing resources such as the Language Line, translation services, PowerSchool, translated report cards, and activities at secondary schools.

## INTRODUCTION

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Recent research has demonstrated the many ways in which family engagement can benefit students, parents, educators, schools, and communities (Build Initiative, 2017; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017; ICF, 2017; Lopez & Caspe, 2014). Engaging parents<sup>1</sup> in their child's education improves student achievement (regardless of socioeconomic status or ethnic/racial background), increases students' satisfaction with school, and has been shown to increase graduation rates and reduce alcohol use, violence, and antisocial behaviors (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Olsen & Fuller, 2008). Parents also benefit from increased confidence in their parenting skills and develop leadership and collaboration skills (Delgado-Gaitin, 1991; Price-Mitchell, 2009; Olsen & Fuller, 2008). Furthermore, teachers and principals in schools with higher percentages of engaged families experience higher job morale and satisfaction (Olson & Fuller, 2008). Schools that successfully engage families benefit from improvements associated with a school's reputation, increased teacher retention, support in the community, and overall performance (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mozzeo, 2009; Olsen & Fuller, 2008). The value of family engagement has also been recognized on a national level with the Every Student Succeeds Act, which includes parent and family engagement as key pieces of the legislation to help fill gaps in educational achievement (The Leadership Conference Education Fund, 2016).

A range of family engagement literature demonstrates that high-quality family engagement practices are achieved when school leaders model professional, caring relationships (Douglass, 2011), and establish relational trust and accountability (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Much of the literature on family engagement emphasizes the importance of being culturally and linguistically responsive, particularly in the context of these established caring relationships. This includes family engagement practices that promote families' culture, language, and experiences in supporting their children's learning and development (Bruns & Corso, 2001). Cultural and linguistic responsiveness also requires that programs and staff recognize their own biases and work to value differing cultures (Hepburn, 2004).

There are a variety of useful theoretical and conceptual frameworks of family engagement that have helped shape the development of local engagement models. Social capital theory, particularly the components of resources that connect to group membership and social networks, has been influential in shaping family-school partnerships (Bourdieu, 1986; Ream & Palardy, 2008). The funds of knowledge theory which emphasized the individual strengths and knowledge within all families has also been pivotal in shaping the assumptions that underpin family engagement efforts (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Oughton, 2010). On a more practical level, Epstein's (1987, 2002) Types of Family Involvement, which outlines six types of involvement between families and schools, has provided the structural basis for numerous family engagement efforts across the country (Yamauchi, Ponte, Ratliffe, & Traynor, 2017). Epstein's framework can be particularly helpful in establishing the shared responsibilities of families, educators, and other community members (Price-Mitchell, 2009).

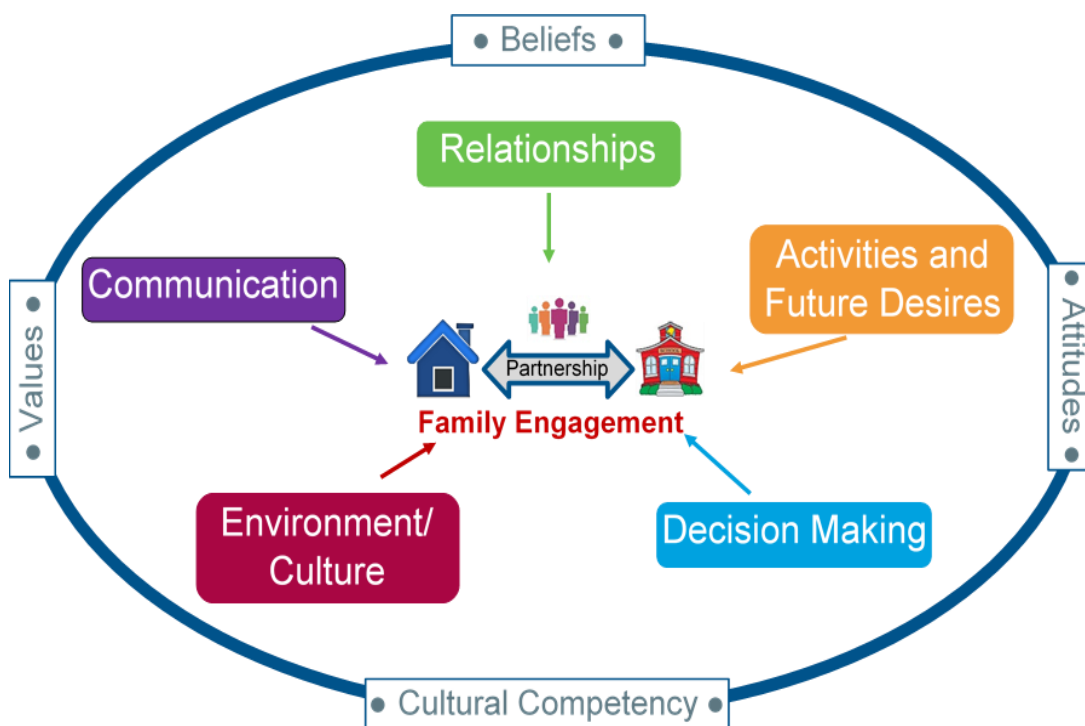
Drawing from these and other foundational sources, school districts like Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) are actively promoting family engagement through strategic planning efforts and the establishment of centers dedicated to the issue such as the ACPS Family and Community Engagement (FACE) Center. Over the last decade, ACPS has worked to establish a framework of 360° engagement that involves families, classroom teachers, support staff, administrators,

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<sup>1</sup> The terms parent/s and family/ies are used throughout this report to represent any adult caretakers with responsibility for the well-being of a child or children. This includes, for example, biological parents, foster care providers, grandparents, aunts and uncles, adult siblings, or fictive kin.

division-wide support, and community partners and accounts for Alexandria’s cultural richness and diversity. The concept map that guided this evaluation was developed by ACPS and was theoretically grounded in the Epstein’s (1995) model of six types of parental involvement, Mapp and Kuttner’s (2013) dual capacity building framework for family-school partnerships, and Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler’s (1997) theoretical model of parental involvement. Based on this research framework, the concept map reflects the importance of building **mutual relationships** between family and schools, offering **opportunities for families** to volunteer and for staff to receive family engagement training, involving families in **decision-making** affecting their child’s education, creating **welcoming environments** for families, and, using **effective communication** methods that allow families’ opinions to be heard (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Family Engagement Concept Map**



This framework aligns with ACPS’s current strategic plan, *ACPS 2020: Every Student Succeeds*, which includes a goal of Family and Community Engagement. Reflected in the framework is the division’s definition of family engagement: “a shared responsibility for school, out of school programs and families. It involves partnering with families to support student learning and success. It includes ongoing, goal-directed relationships between staff and families that are mutual, culturally responsive, and that support what is best for children and families, both individually and collectively.” It is in the context of better understanding the extent to which this framework is contributing to every student’s success that this evaluation is situated.

## PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION

The formative evaluation of ACPS family engagement programming involved a mixed methods study conducted in two phases. Both study phases were informed by the family engagement concept map designed for this study (see Figure 1). The goals for this evaluation were to better

understand the needs, barriers, resources, and services to engage all families across all school settings and offer concrete recommendations for systemic family engagement programming enhancement across the division. The recommendations that come from this evaluation are intended to inform ACPS' future decision-making, practices, and policies related to family engagement.

## OVERVIEW OF THE METHODOLOGY

During Phase 1, ACPS staff conducted two parallel research-based surveys of staff and families focused on the five key areas of the family engagement concept map. For Phase 2, ICF used rigorous qualitative data collection and analysis techniques to broadly examine family engagement practices, services, and perspectives through interviews, focus groups, observations, and secret shopper phone calls. The Phase 1 survey design was used to inform Phase 2 instrument development, and findings from the Phase 1 surveys were used to contextualize and enrich findings that emerged through the Phase 2 data collection. The following is a brief overview of the research methodology; a full discussion of research methods for both phases of data collection can be found in Appendix A.

### Research Questions

The focus of the study explored key elements of family engagement across ACPS including: relationships, opportunities, decision-making, environment/climate, and communication. Key research questions were aligned to each of these dimensions:

1. To what extent do ACPS schools and central office departments foster a welcoming and supportive **environment** for families?
2. To what extent is ACPS developing mutual **relationships** with families?
3. To what extent does ACPS include families in the **decision-making** of the education of their children?
4. To what extent do ACPS' **communication** practices meet the needs of families?
5. To what extent do current ACPS family engagement initiatives and **activities** meet the needs of families?

### Instrument Design

Phase 1 surveys were designed by ACPS staff and informed by existing family engagement surveys that had been tested for validity and reliability while Phase 2 instruments were designed by ICF staff. Each set of instruments were informed by the concept map of family engagement developed by ACPS. The walk-through observation checklist also drew upon the Family Friendly Walkthrough Tool.<sup>2</sup> See Appendix B for copies of the instruments used in this study. Instruments and consent forms were reviewed by ICF's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure adequate protection of human subjects.

### Data Collection

Phase 1 parent and staff surveys were emailed to parents and staff by ACPS and were available from March 11, 2019, through March 29, 2019. In an effort to increase the parent response rate, paper versions of the survey were sent home to all elementary school families in English and Spanish, and in Arabic and Amharic to families with those preferred languages. Arabic and Amharic-speaking middle school families also received mailed paper versions of the survey in English and their respective home language. Paper copies of the parent survey were made

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from the New Jersey PIRC Family Friendly Walkthrough Checklist ([www.njpirc.org](http://www.njpirc.org)), the Alaska PIRC Family Friendly Walkthrough ([www.apirc.org](http://www.apirc.org)), and City of Eugene Inclusive Environmental Self-Assessment tool (<http://www.eugene-or.gov/diversity>)



available in all four languages at T.C. Williams high school. In addition, the parent survey was accessible online in English, Spanish, and Arabic. In total, 3,168 surveys were completed by parents, and 480 surveys were completed by staff representing response rates of approximately 30% for parents and 22% for staff. The demographic breakdown of respondents to the parent survey were: 38% white, 29% Hispanic, 21% black or African American, 7% Asian, and 5% multi-racial. Sixty percent of staff respondents were elementary staff, 18% were high school staff, 14% were middle school staff, and 8% were Central Office staff. The majority of staff (68%) identified as teachers, followed by student support staff (8%), Central Office staff (8%), paraprofessionals (6%), and school-based administrators (6%).

Phase 2 data collection occurred at a subset of ACPS schools from March 2019 to May 2019. Individual schools were selected for inclusion by ACPS to ensure a range of perspectives and experiences including Title I status, English Learner (EL) percentage, school diversity, and geographic variation. The selected sites included six elementary schools, two middle schools, three high school campuses, and the central office.<sup>3</sup> Phase 2 data collection comprised:

- interviews with school administrators (n=11);
- focus groups with teachers and staff at all selected schools and the central office (n=15);
- focus groups with parents of elementary school students, of middle school students, and of high school students conducted in English, Spanish, Arabic, and Amharic (n=16);
- building walk-through observations at all study sites (n=12);
- anonymous “secret shopper” calls to the front offices or main phone number of all sites, conducted in English, Spanish, Arabic, Amharic, or Mandarin (n=48); and
- limited document and policy review to supplement Phase 2 findings.

Individual school participants were recruited with assistance from principal-appointed study liaisons at each site, who were typically parent liaisons or support staff. Focus groups comprised a blend of classroom teachers, front office staff, and other support staff and averaged seven participants; a total of 94 teachers and staff participated in these focus groups. (Two schools held multiple smaller focus groups to accommodate participants’ schedules.) Individual parents and family members were recruited with assistance from district-level parent liaisons and were randomly selected and invited to participate based on lists of language preferences and school of enrollment.

### ***Analytic Methods***

Data from the Phase 1 surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics and the high-level findings presented in this memo were compiled by ACPS staff. Qualitative interview and focus group data from Phase 2 were recorded and transcribed, then coded thematically in Dedoose qualitative software. Additional iterative codes were defined and applied by the analytic team. Descriptors including school level, respondent type, and language of the focus group were then applied to each transcript to enable sub-group analysis. Thematic code frequency tables, code co-occurrence tables, and narrative code outputs were all examined individually and by sub-group. Thematic findings, illustrative quotes, and innovative practices reported through Phase 2 are presented throughout this report alongside Phase 1 survey findings.

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<sup>3</sup> Due to the small sample size, comments from Phase 2 participants across middle and high schools are referred to as from “secondary schools” throughout this report.



## LIMITATIONS

This evaluation is not without limitations. This evaluation was not longitudinal in nature; it is possible that observations and discussions reflected outsized recent concerns or reflections that did not represent school-year long patterns. Notable survey limitations include the lower response rates for the staff survey and the representativeness of the parent survey; respondents within that sample were not representative of the school system when examined by race/ethnicity. In addition, limitations of the survey platform prevented the availability of online surveys in Amharic, which may have impacted the response rates among Amharic-speaking families; however, hard-copy paper surveys were mailed home to Arabic-speaking elementary and middle school parents, and hard-copy paper surveys were available at T.C. Williams high school in Amharic.

Limitations of the qualitative study resulted from the need to protect participant confidentiality and the limitations of focus group transcriptions. This prevented distinguishing comments made by teachers and those made by support staff or front office staff during the focus group discussions.<sup>4</sup> Finally, this report relies heavily on qualitative interviews and focus groups, which by nature are not representative. It is therefore possible that views expressed during interviews or focus groups are outliers or exceptions. We have attempted to minimize these effects by triangulating interview and focus group data with observational data and survey data, but findings may reflect limited perspectives and not broader experiences.

## EVALUATION FINDINGS

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ACPS' family engagement concept map served as the guide for the overarching research questions guiding this study and instrument design for both Phase 1 and Phase 2 data collection. Reflective of this structure, evaluation findings are organized into themes that align with each element in the concept map. Each section begins with an overview of the pertinent research questions that guided analysis, followed by an overview of the key findings discussed in the section. Then, major themes related to each domain are discussed with findings from both Phase 1 and Phase 2, presented as appropriate. Each section ends with a discussion of the cross-cutting strengths and challenges related to that domain followed by participant suggestions that arose during the Phase 2 data collection.

## ENVIRONMENT/CULTURE

Within the concept map, the domain of environment/culture is operationalized to include a welcoming school environment, positive interaction with staff, accessibility, and supportive community partnerships.

### GUIDING RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

To what extent do ACPS schools and central office departments foster a welcoming and supportive environment for families?

- How do parents and staff perceive that ACPS creates a welcoming environment for families (e.g., phone conversations, face-to-face greetings, signage, parking accessibility, emails)?

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout this report, comments made by participants in these focus groups are attributed to staff, which could indicate teachers, front office staff, or other support staff. Exceptions are made when the context of the quotation indicates that the person speaking is clearly in one of those roles.

#### KEY FINDINGS:

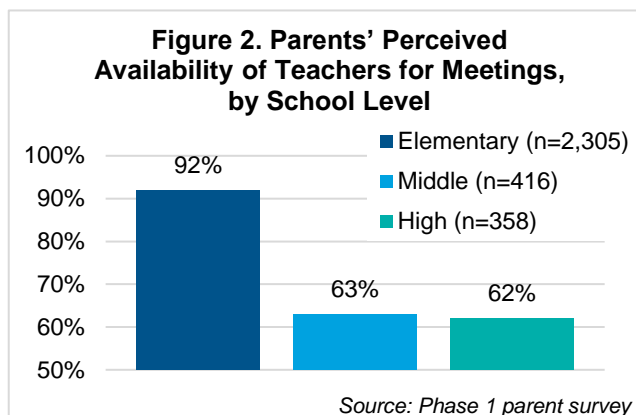
- Principals and teachers were widely regarded as positive contributors to school environments.
  - Communication and accessibility, particularly via parent-teacher conferences influenced parents' perceptions of how welcome they were.
- Front desk and other support staff also played a critical role in creating a welcoming environment, and reports varied substantially across schools as to the extent that these staff were succeeding in making parents feel welcome.
  - In general, elementary school front desk and support staff and bilingual front desk or support staff contributed the most to positive, welcoming cultures.
- Inclusive art and displays, overall cleanliness, and perceived safety were critical elements of a welcoming environment, while a lack of multilingual signage made some families feel less welcome.
- Across schools and levels, parents and school staff reported cultural divides primarily between highly engaged, middle-class, predominately white parents and the predominately non-white and/or non-English-speaking parents.
  - Families and staff at some schools reported an additional divide among non-English speaking parents, with more translation and interpretation available for Spanish-speaking families, primarily due to higher numbers of Spanish-speaking staff at ACPS schools.
- Community partnerships, where present, also helped facilitate family engagement and foster a welcoming climate.

#### **Major Theme: School Staff**

**Principals and Administrators.** Phase 2 participants reported that ACPS schools varied widely on how welcoming an environment they created for families. Staff at some schools noted that their principal or lead administrator created a positive environment where staff felt inspired to do the most for families. Staff at other schools mentioned that educators could not put forth their best work when they did not have good leaders and when staff themselves did not feel welcome. Principals and parents concurred that it is important for administrators to be visible, friendly, and accessible. Parents who felt that their principal was highly visible and accessible tended to have a better impression of the principal and the school.

**Teachers.** Parents universally expressed appreciation for teachers who were friendly and attentive and attributed these qualities as contributing to an overall welcoming environment. Across the division, the majority of parents surveyed in the Phase 1 survey agreed or strongly agreed that school staff cared about their children (86%) and that they trusted the staff at their child's school (85%, results not shown). Parents in the Phase 2 study also underscored the value of having multilingual teachers, who were able to communicate with parents in their native language. Parents, teachers, and principals all said that teacher-parent communication had a large impact on how welcome parents felt. Some principals indicated that parent communication was a strength of the teachers at their school, while other principals noted that communication practices varied from classroom to classroom, and that some teachers needed more guidance in this area. When asked about how welcome they felt, some parents who participated in Phase 2 focus groups expressed dissatisfaction with the communication from their child's teacher. In particular, some parents indicated that their child's teacher was not proactive about contacting them when their child had a problem, was not empathetic enough when discussing their child's issue, or did not make sufficient time for them. On the other hand, some parents felt that they had good communication with their child's teacher, and that this made them feel particularly welcome at their child's school (see the [Communication](#) section for more detail.)

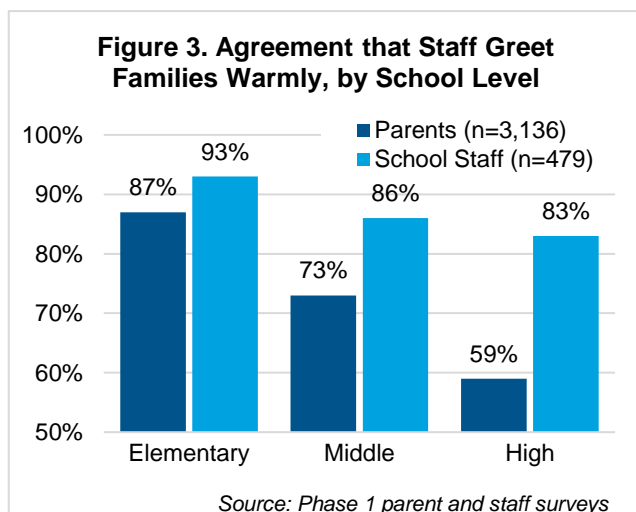
Several parents in the Phase 2 study mentioned feeling unwelcome by their child’s teacher or school because they were not able to get a parent-teacher conference slot (e.g., all times were booked) or their conference was not long enough (see the findings on parent-teacher conferences within the *Decision-Making* section for more detail). Overall, 84% of parents and guardians surveyed by ACPS reported that their child’s teacher was available if they needed to meet with him or her (see Figure 2).



**Support Staff.** In Phase 2 interviews and focus groups, numerous school employees mentioned that front desk staff play a critical role in making families feel welcome in the school. Assessments of how well front-office and support staff achieved the goal of welcoming families varied from school to school and person to person, however. Some parents mentioned that they felt it was difficult to get information over the phone, and they preferred to come in person; one Amharic-speaking parent even mentioned that front office staff had hung up the phone on them multiple times. Secret shopper callers reported similar experiences, in which they were either hung up on immediately, or told that translation was not available. For more detail, and a figure of secret shopper results, see “Effectiveness of Telephone Communication,” under the *Communication* section. Both parents and staff indicated that having bilingual front desk or support staff, including parent liaisons, led to more positive experiences, easier communication with families, reduced wait time, and less need for external interpretation. One secondary school administrator reported specifically recruiting bilingual staff for their school. One secondary school teacher expressed gratitude for support staff who were willing to reach out to families when she was on a tight schedule:

*Teaching six [classes] a day, reaching out to parents who don't speak the language that I speak and I don't speak the language they speak gets so frustrating. Like, I really needed to reach a parent today and I literally sent an email to my main support... saying, "Help me. I need someone to translate it." So, we put an awful lot of stress on our counselors and our admin secretaries. I mean, tons of it. I mean, we would not operate without them.*

Most parents at the elementary school level and some parents at the secondary school level mentioned having good experiences with the front desk and support staff and reported that they were attentive and caring. These findings were similar to survey findings of parents across ACPS; 87% of elementary school parents reported that staff at their child’s school greeted them warmly when they called or visited compared to 73% of middle school parents and 59% of high school parents. School staff surveyed reported more positive rates of warm greetings than parents did, with the gap between parents’ and staff’s perceptions being larger for older students (see Figure 3).



Parents and staff expressed appreciation for front desk and support staff who greeted them as soon as they entered the building, knew who they were, and went out of their way to be helpful. Particularly at the secondary school level, though, some parents mentioned that they did not feel welcomed by the front office staff: they felt that no one paid attention to them when they came into the building, and that it wasn't clear where to go or who to talk to. A secondary school parent described one such experience:

*I would say, every time I've actually had an interaction, I've found it to be positive. I mean, I do think it seems like the administrators are interested, and the administrative staff are the same – kind and welcoming, but it's not always easy to actually get yourself in. For example, we had an issue with our son, it was, we struggled for several weeks trying to figure out who we needed to talk to. And, like I said, again, sometimes I think it's a lack of communication or organization that parents can feel like, I have to, kind of, go through this maze, and I don't really know how to navigate.*

On the other hand, parents reported that once they got to the right person, their experience was better.

For the most part, throughout Phase 2, parents reported positive experiences with counselors, social workers, psychologists, and other specialized support staff. Even parents who reported having negative experiences with their children's teachers felt that their counselors or social workers were supportive and reliable and cared about their family. Indeed, many parents expressed gratitude for an ACPS staff person who went out of the way to help them. In contrast, a small number of parents had unpleasant experiences with social workers whom they perceived as either unhelpful or critical of their parenting.

**Overall Welcoming Environment.** Overall, among parents surveyed by ACPS, 92% of elementary school parents, 74% of middle school parents, and 66% of high school parents reported feeling welcome at their child's school (see Table 1). Combined with perceptions of availability for meetings and agreement that staff greet families warmly, this indicates that middle and high schools may benefit the most from efforts to improve the school's climate and welcoming environment. In addition, 87% of parents with children in Title I schools reported that their child's school was a friendly environment for families, compared with 80% of those at non-Title I schools. Similarly, 89% of those with children in Title I schools reported that they felt welcome at their child's school compared with 83% of those in non-Title I schools (see Table 1). Although these differences were less stark than the differences across school levels, non-Title I schools may also benefit from additional support in fostering a welcoming environment.

Table 1. Parents' Perceptions of Welcoming Environment, by School Level and Title I Status					
	Elementary n=2,310	Middle n=416	High n=358	Title I n=1,496	Non-Title I n=1,583
Overall, I feel welcomed at my child's school	92%	74%	66%	89%	83%
My child's school is a friendly environment for families	90%	70%	59%	87%	80%

Source: Phase 1 parent survey

### Major Theme: Physical Environment

Through interviews and focus groups, participants focused less on the physical buildings and more on the people in the building as contributors to a welcoming environment. When asked about the physical environment, principals and staff primarily described their school's art and decor. A number of staff mentioned that their school creates wall-hangings and decorations that reflect the diversity of the school. One secondary school principal described their school's philosophy by saying:

*For instance, October is Anti-bullying Month, let's celebrate it and make it visual. It's Autism Month, let's make sure that we're recognizing through our student organizations*

*that embody the different students that attend our school who have different needs, intellectual needs. For Hispanic Heritage Month, you know, we use that as an opportunity to decorate our hall as well as, you know, Black History Month. We also use our student group, we have a student group called Community Builders, and they promote equity and inclusion. So, they're responsible for a lot of the artwork that decorates the hallway.*

Parents, on the other hand, focused on the physical cleanliness, security, and ease of finding their way around the school. Some parents reported that their child's school was clean and new, while others asserted that their child's school had unacceptable maintenance problems, such as broken heating and cooling systems, and pests. When asked how welcoming the school felt, one secondary school parent said:

*You can start from the physical building itself, right? Some schools have mice running around. That tells the kids, "You're just nothing."*

A few parents also reported more substantial security concerns, including broken security cameras, violent outbursts from individual students, students' stolen possessions, drug use, and weapons in schools. Where these concerns were reported, they appeared to greatly outweigh any feelings of goodwill towards the school and loomed large as obstacles to feeling welcome.

During on-site visits, observers found that some schools' main entrances were not accessible for people with mobility impairments. While many of the school front entrances were on level ground or accessible with a ramp, not all schools had automatic door-openers. This, coupled with a lack of signage indicating which entrances were accessible, could present a challenge to children or family members with mobility issues.

Both school staff and parents mentioned that more signage inside and outside schools would be helpful, including signs directing visitors to the front entrance and multilingual signs inside the buildings. These findings were also seen through the building walk-through observations conducted for this evaluation. Across school levels, the observation sites generally scored high for having friendly and welcoming staff behavior, clean school buildings, and a well-arranged front office (including comfortable chairs for visitors and desks that did not create a barrier between staff and visitors). The interiors of buildings were generally decorated with art, photos, and displays of students' work: elementary schools tended to have more artwork and student projects displayed, while the high schools displayed more photos and decorations that reflected the diversity of the school. In addition, the sites generally looked inviting from the outside and had the name of the school clearly displayed on the outside. On the other hand, observers noted a few weaknesses that made the schools slightly less welcoming. Only one of 12 study sites provided signage in multiple languages, either outside the building directing visitors to the front door, or inside the building. Where they were present, these multilingual signs were in Spanish and English; no site provided substantial signage in Arabic or Amharic. Secondary schools in particular lacked signs directing visitors to the front door, and observers found it hard to identify the front entrance; elementary and high schools did a better job of directing visitors to the front entrance.

### **Major Theme: School Culture**

**Cultural Divide.** Across school sites, parents and school staff reported a cultural divide between the highly engaged, more affluent, predominately white parents, and the predominately non-white and/or non-English-speaking parents. Opinions differed, however, on how successful the more privileged white families had been in reaching across that divide and welcoming families from other cultures, particularly those new to the country. Teachers at some schools noted that American-born parents have actively helped recent immigrant parents become more engaged at



school, by talking to them about volunteer opportunities, recruiting these families for the PTA, and setting up informal play dates to foster relationships outside of school. Most non-native English-speaking parents agreed that they felt welcomed by the English-speaking parents at their school. Some, however, indicated that they had been discriminated against or ignored by white parents and felt discouraged from participating in the PTA for this reason.

Various respondents pointed out that not every family feels equally welcome across ACPS. In particular, staff noted that non-English speakers, African American families in gentrifying neighborhoods, and lower income families tended to feel less comfortable at school. For example, many Spanish-speaking parents indicated that they felt welcome by the staff and parents at their school, while a smaller number said they wished the school would do more to reach out to them. Similarly, some black parents said they felt comfortable with the school, while others described negative experiences with school staff, including teachers or support staff, and did not feel welcome. In cases where families did not feel welcome, it was often due to a few negative interpersonal experiences in which a front desk person did not greet them politely, a fellow parent made a rude remark, or they had trouble getting in touch with a teacher or administrator about a problem, underscoring the value of each and every interaction.

**Child's Experiences.** Families' impressions of how welcome they were in the school also depended on their child's impression of their teacher and classroom. Some particular points of distress included cases where parents felt their child was being treated unfairly: either bullied by peers, treated poorly by a teacher perceived to be prejudiced, or simply overlooked by a teacher who hadn't noticed their child falling behind. While these incidents were not directly related to parent engagement, the experiences shaped parent perceptions of the school.

**Community Partnerships.** A few study sites and participants described key partnerships with community organizations that helped to facilitate family engagement. These included joint programs sponsored by individual schools or the FACE Center and Casa Chirilagua, working with Hispanic families; an after school program (Let's Invest in Neighborhood Kids [LINK]) for residents of Brent Place Apartments; and a partnership between ACPS and the Ethiopian and Eritrean Alliance for Education, working with Amharic-speaking families. Through these and other community partnerships, school staff, like this secondary school administrator, described how the FACE Center leverages connections to strengthen school communities:

*[The FACE Center] can help with trying to get parents to come to events. And more specifically, just...they know who in the community to reach out to, to kind of spread the word. It's also who you're talking to, not just translating the materials, although the FACE Center makes sure that the events we have are put out in multiple languages.*

## **Strengths, Challenges, and Stakeholder Feedback**

### **STRENGTHS**

**Teachers and Staff.** The most often-identified strength of schools in fostering family engagement was the personality and dedication of the teachers and staff. As one principal put it, they “*have such an open heart to our families.*” Many parents described positive interactions with individual teachers or support staff who were friendly, helpful, attentive, and cared about their family.

**Visual Representation.** School staff ensured that schools were decorated with student art, photos and memorabilia, and educational posters that reflect the vibrancy and diversity of the school. At one school, teachers and students make decorations for observances like National Autism Awareness Month and Black History Month, while other schools hung class photos, international flags, or posters to reportedly make the building feel brighter and more inclusive.



## CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

**Community Barriers.** A few community factors posed barriers to family engagement including gentrification, which had caused a cultural rift in the Alexandria area. One elementary school principal shared that families who had historically lived in the school's neighborhood felt displaced, and that school staff had to balance their mission of welcoming all families (including those that had recently moved in) with coping with the genuine sadness of people whose community was being disrupted. At another school, parents mentioned that they felt that PTA meetings and school meetings were often overwhelmed with families who had recently bought a house in the neighborhood, had a lot of new demands, and didn't understand the historic challenges that the school faced.

**Racial Challenges and Negative Interactions.** Staff and parents noted that some non-white parents were less involved in the school because of pervasive feelings of being outsiders. In some schools, the majority of highly active parents were white, and teachers and staff reported that non-white parents may not feel that they can "see themselves" at the school. One principal noted:

*I think the overall, like, feel or identity of this school is perceived as white and/or upper middle class, and if you're not those things, you're less likely to feel like you're in the community.*

Some parents echoed these perceptions and reported experiencing judgment or explicit discrimination from other parents or school staff. One Hispanic parent in an English-speaking focus group of secondary school parents recalled:

*There was this lady who was the president of the PTA last year...I say hi, and then we talk, but then when she was around with some other people, I pass by and she wouldn't say hi to me. And sometimes I would pass and she wouldn't talk to me. So, I feel a little bit discriminated. So then I feel like, "Well, okay," then I choose to realize that you're not welcome sometimes.*

Another Hispanic parent participating in a Spanish-speaking focus group of secondary school parents recalled a similar attitude among school staff:

*...[One time], I went to the room and they gave me some instructions. They wouldn't give me a chair. The social worker told me, they said, "You live here for a long time. Why you don't speak English?"*

In addition, school staff reported their perception that many black parents had negative experiences or past traumas in the school system that contributed to them being uncomfortable engaging with the school. One school-based participant reported perceptions of some black parents, saying:

*They associate school with their memory of school and their dealings with the people at school, and so it translates over to their kids. Because a lot of them are from this area, they don't leave this area, so they remember their experience coming through this school, and if it was bad, then they assume that, "You are treating my kid the same way you treated me when I came to this school, and I'm not coming up here to deal with you again because..." I don't think we realize that a lot of people suffer from PTSD, a lot of people have mental health issues that are undiagnosed, untreated, and they're doing the best they can. And so, for them, school is not a pleasant thing, dealing with administration is not a pleasant thing, remembering certain teachers that may still be here when they were here is not a pleasant thing, and the assumption is that you don't care.*

Some black parents also reported negative interactions with school and division staff, which contributed to their perceptions of how welcome they were. In particular, black parents and family

members participating in an English-speaking focus group of elementary school parents reported a variety of negative conversations and interactions across four ACPS elementary schools. One parent summarized some of her experiences, which were typical of the broader group, saying:

*When I walk in there's a locked door. [Staff] may say hi, but it's just a hey, hi, that's it. Ain't no more nothing after that. Or "What you here for?"...So I just feel as though we there, they don't acknowledge us and there's no engagement. I mean, the principal looks at you up and down, from your feet to your toes. The social worker, they just harass you is more like. You know, just do it right, do this, do that, do that.*

Individual black parents across other focus group discussions also expressed negative interactions with isolated school and division staff, particularly highlighting instances where they felt ignored or overlooked by school staff and overcrowded buses, perceived to be more prevalent in African American neighborhoods because, as one secondary school parent explained:

*[White] parents from a different type of neighborhood have a lot of free time to call...and do all sorts of stuff and get results.*

### STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK

Compared with other family engagement domains, participants did not have a lot of recommendations for ways to improve the environment or culture across ACPS or at their child's school. A few suggestions that were mentioned across interviews and focus groups included:

- cultivate a more welcoming attitude among administrators who can set the school culture;
- provide training or resources to support staff to consistently have positive interactions with families
- offer a fun training for parents new to ACPS, possibly hosted at community centers, that explains the educational system and how they can be more fully engaged including an overview of how a PTA works or how they can be involved in school leadership;
- at the secondary school level, encourage teachers to communicate more directly with families; and
- provide more signage at schools and the central office that direct families to front offices, auditoriums, and key support staff, particularly bilingual signage.

## RELATIONSHIPS

The framework's domain of *relationships* includes elements of mutual respect, building trust, relational barriers, and cultural competency. Although cultural competency also exists on the outside of the family engagement conceptual framework, affecting each of the five core domains, it uniquely impacts relational dynamics and is thus called out specifically within this domain.

### GUIDING RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

To what extent is ACPS developing mutual relationships with families?

- How, when, and by whom are these mutual relationships developed with families?
- How do families and staff describe their role in being engaged and supporting the education of ACPS students?
- What are the attitudes and beliefs of families and staff about parental engagement?
- To what extent are culturally relevant and respectful relationships cultivated with ACPS families?
- What are the needs and barriers of family engagements as described by families and staff?

#### KEY FINDINGS:

- Bi-directional partnership and communication between families and schools were key aspects of family engagement according to ACPS staff.
- Teachers, staff, and families reported that the optimum time for relationship building was at the start of the school year.
  - However, ongoing opportunities for relational connection were also seen as critical.
- Principals played a key role in setting the tone and standards regarding family engagement, and parent liaisons were described as crucial in direct family engagement.
- Staff expressed the importance of family engagement in a child's learning, including attending school events, volunteering, and being an advocate.
  - Teachers also recognized their role in making families feel comfortable and welcome so that they would feel more at ease in expressing questions, feedback, or concerns.
- Establishing trust and rapport between schools and families was described as important to building relationships, although here were disparities in perceptions of trust between families and school staff.
- Overall, many non-English speaking families reported feeling respected by their child's school, in part by the communication they received and the availability of culturally responsive events.
  - However, some participants from both non-English and English-speaking households described instances of feeling discriminated against or unwelcome within ACPS.

### **Major Theme: Definitions of Family Engagement**

In focus groups and interviews, ACPS teachers, principals, and administrative staff responded to the question, "What does the term 'family engagement' mean to you?" Overall, participants provided diverse responses that aligned with ACPS's five domains of family engagement: relationships, communication, environment/climate, activities and future desires, and decision-making.

**Relationships and Communication.** Many participants focused on the relational dimensions of family engagement and indicated that family engagement was a "two-way partnership" or "two-way relationship" between the school and families. One secondary school principal stated:

*I think of the manner in which we create two-way relationships and partnership with all the families of our students. I think of it in terms of the level of engagement to which we can create back and forth information that ultimately supports students and how we can create an inviting school atmosphere that really engenders that spirit of collaboration between the school and families to support students' success.*

Similar to this principal, many participants equated or strongly associated this "two-way relationship" with two-way communication and described expanding and sustaining various channels of communication with families as a key piece of family engagement. In addition, a few participants mentioned the importance of being "on the same team" or "on the same page" where families and schools were working together to fulfill the mission and vision of the school.

ACPS staff also discussed the importance of communication in different ways. Some staff emphasized the importance of parents contacting the school and being responsive to teacher/principal phone calls and emails, while others discussed the importance of schools reaching out to parents and inviting families to events, freely talking with them, etc. Several staff expressed that communication is a two-way effort. One elementary school principal stated:

*I think it's good to have that open communication engagement because then the families know what we're doing here at school and we know what they're doing at home and the community, and tying together will give us the best result and the best students.*

**Decision-Making and Activities.** Several participants also reported the importance of parent or family engagement in their child’s learning as part of family engagement. As one component of this, staff mentioned parent volunteering as part of family engagement. One secondary school principal expressed:

*I think it’s making sure that families are informed of what’s going on in the school and how they can support the efforts of the school and of their children.*

Participants also noted that engagement in their child’s learning meant seeing parents and family members attend events at the school. A few participants also pointed out that this meant that schools should create events or continue to hold events that families would enjoy. Some participants reported that family engagement related to helping families understand the role they have in their student’s learning.

These sentiments were also voiced by a few staff who pointed out the importance of decision-making in family engagement. These participants stated that families should feel comfortable asking questions and expressing their concerns. For example, one participant in a teacher/staff secondary school focus group described family engagement as:

*Having parents that know how to reach teachers and school staff and feel comfortable talking to them about their kids or any issues.*

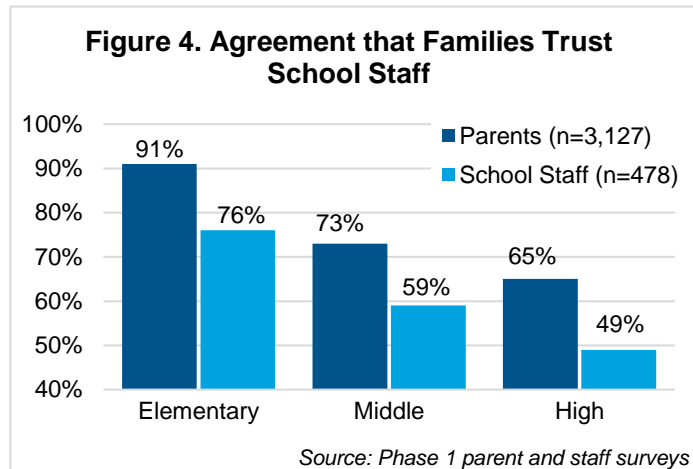
One participant mentioned that family engagement meant that parents or families were able to advocate for change. A similar thought was brought up in a secondary school focus group: respondents felt that making parents feel comfortable and knowledgeable about the school’s system further established trust and rapport between the school and family and contributed to family engagement.

### **Major Theme: Roles in Relationship Building**

**Specific Staff Roles.** Overall, school staff at all levels and in all roles indicated that family engagement was a piece of their job. However, teachers and administrators reported that the behavior of the principal sets the tone for the whole staff and the whole school.

Multiple principals or administrators said that they made an effort to regularly greet parents, whether in the office, at sporting or social events, or at the beginning and end of the school day. At one school, staff commented that many staff members at their school were reluctant to participate in school events or to make an effort to bond with parents because the teachers themselves do not feel comfortable and welcome at that school. Staff ascribed this problem in part to high turnover and in part to the principal. Meanwhile, at other schools, teachers said the administration set a standard of being friendly, welcoming, and accessible. Principals were specifically asked if any staff had family engagement as an explicit part of their job description. Occasionally principals thought this was a key explicit function of front office staff or support staff like social workers or counselors. In contrast, all schools with a parent liaison quickly cited this role as both explicitly and critically involved in family engagement. In addition, several individuals noted that the front desk staff need to be friendly and provide good “customer service” as a means of contributing to family engagement.

All survey respondents were asked to indicate their levels of agreement that families trust school staff. Overall, 85% of parents reported that they trusted the staff at their child's school while two-thirds (67%) of surveyed ACPS staff reported the same, indicating a substantial gap in perception that may contribute to relational strain between school staff and families (see Figure 4). Parents were also asked to report on their perceptions of whether or not school staff cared about their child: 9% of parents of elementary school students did not agree that school staff cared, while more than one-fourth (27%) and one-third (35%) of middle and high school parents respectively did not agree that staff at their child's school cared about their child. Staff were similarly asked if staff respected all students' families. Sixteen percent of elementary school staff, 21% of middle school staff, and 29% of high school staff did not agree that all families were respected. Similar to trends throughout the Phase 1 surveys, high school parents and staff reported the lowest ratings for all questions related to relationships between school staff and families.



#### INNOVATIVE PRACTICES: PARENT LIAISONS

All Title I schools had a parent liaison on staff; the majority of these roles were filled by bilingual Spanish staff. In addition, the division employed two part-time division-wide bilingual parent liaisons who worked with Arabic-, and Amharic-speaking families across the division and one full-time division-wide Spanish-speaking parent liaison. In addition, three non-Title I schools across ACPS also employed bilingual parent liaisons. Among schools with parent liaisons, these staff members were universally cited as one of the key strengths of their schools. One elementary school principal explained that the presence of the parent liaison meant that *“there is someone available to speak with [Spanish-speaking] families when they come in the building, but also someone that can communicate with parents by phone as needed.”* These staff members were said to be key facilitators of relationships, connecting parents with teachers and with key support staff to direct needed resources to families. At some schools, these staff also provided ad hoc translation or interpretation services. A few non-English speaking parents reported that if they had a question about their child's school or classroom, their first call would be to their school- or district-based parent liaison, who spoke their language and could help connect them to whatever they needed.

**Opportunities for Relationship Building.** Teachers, school administrators, and family members reported that the best time to establish relationships was at the very beginning of the year. School staff across elementary and secondary schools explained that the number of events held at the beginning of the year offers parents different opportunities to interact with teachers and school staff, which can serve as the foundation for relationship-building for the rest of the year. One elementary school teacher described this process, saying:

*If you have good communication with them from the start, at back to school night and then at that first conference, there are then different ways that you can communicate with them. You keep that going. They feel like they already have that relationship with you so they trust you more.*



Another elementary school teacher reported:

*I think we do a great job at the beginning of the year, but I think like anyone, we're starting to get bogged down with a lot of other things mid to the end of the year. I think we need to do a better job of doing something socially towards that third and fourth quarter when those retention conversations are starting to pop up and now I've already created that relationship with that family and that parent.*

### **Major Theme: Respect for Cultures, Values, and Language**

Families who participated in focus groups were asked to what extent they felt that their child's school was respectful of their culture, values, and language. Responses were mixed between groups. Several non-English speaking participants stated that they felt respected by their child's school, citing particularly that written communication translated into their own language, events like International Nights hosted at their child's school, and respectful and bilingual office staff made them feel welcome and respected. However, a few participants in both non-English and English-speaking focus groups expressed that they had felt discriminated against, unwelcome, or ignored. For example, across multiple Arabic-speaking family focus groups, participants discussed the challenges of having SOL testing scheduled during Ramadan, and feeling overlooked by the division because of this. Muslim participants also expressed that cultural holidays should be considered when making the school schedule/calendar. In one of the English-speaking focus groups, one of the participants who identified as Hispanic expressed the following:

*I feel like, because I'm Spanish, I don't get welcomed as well. Some people ignoring you because you are from another...yeah, you are from other color of skin. So, I feel like sometimes I am not welcome, but then I remind myself the reason why I'm here is because of my son, so it shouldn't be a big problem.*

In addition to parents and families, ACPS staff also provided insights about respect for families' cultures, values, and language. When asked how their school is doing at engaging families from diverse cultures, languages, backgrounds, and traditions, one secondary school participant said:

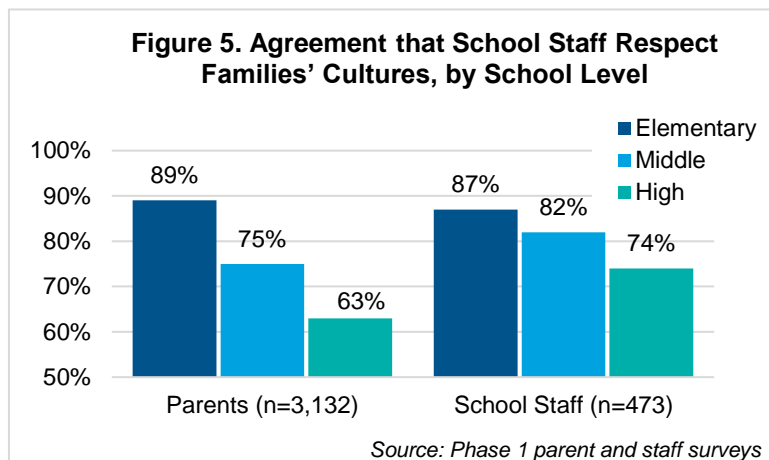
*We really make a concerted effort to translate things, we make a concerted effort to reach out to different communities that also have events that are culturally sensitive. Especially when we serve food, we make sure our food is culturally sensitive. If there was somewhere between okay and great, that would be us.*

Other ACPS staff described some of the events or programs they provide to families to reach across cultures. For example, one elementary school described a bake sale where parents provided baked goods from their country or culture. The event had a large turnout and was reported to be an effective way to break cultural barriers. Parents also saw this as a way to show appreciation for their child's teacher. In addition, all the elementary schools in this study hosted an International or Multicultural Night where families could come and see a diverse range of cultures celebrated.

In addition, respect for culture, values, and language were observed at many Principal Coffees included in the building walk-through observations of Phase 2. Interpreters were provided for non-English speaking families, either utilizing headsets to provide interpretation to larger numbers of individuals, or clustering in small groups to provide interpretation to one or two parents. In addition, ACPS staff sometimes assisted with interpretation. For example, at one elementary school, the principal, who was bilingual, alternated between speaking in English and Spanish, interpreting her own statements to participating families. At another school, the parent liaison, who spoke Amharic and English, greeted parents and provided interpretation. In addition, translations were provided for some written materials, primarily those supplied by the FACE Center rather than those provided by individual schools.



Parents and school staff surveyed by ACPS were similarly asked if school staff respected families' cultural traditions, values, and practices. Broadly, families and staff reported similar perceptions with 84% of all families surveyed indicating that their child's school respected their culture and 83% of school staff agreeing that families' cultural traditions, values, and practices were respected. Although parents and staff had similar rates of agreement at the elementary school level, disparities in perceptions emerged in middle school and expanded in high school, where only 63% of parents reported that school staff respected families' culture compared to 74% of school staff who reported the same (see Figure 5 for greater details).



## Strengths, Challenges, and Stakeholder Feedback

### STRENGTHS

**Teachers and Staff.** Parents and staff across the majority of schools included in Phase 2 noted that the accessibility of teachers both during and after the school day strengthened parent engagement, and school staff described the willingness of teachers and staff to conduct home visits at some schools as a strength. Parents and staff further expressed that some teachers truly go above and beyond to help kids and families. In particular, a few people mentioned examples where a teacher walked or drove to students' homes to pick up kids who did not have a ride to a field trip, or an event like math night. One staff member said the division's greatest strength is:

*Those team members, student support team members...psychologists, social workers, counselors, nurses, and all of our team. And those folks really do a fantastic job at getting information out to families, being a resource for families....It's not only at school but also just in their daily lives. I mean, we deal with homelessness, and we deal with students who are having medical issues and need to have homebound services. So, we deal with all of those kinds of issues that student, or barriers, rather, that students may present and need support, or that their families may need support with.*

**School-Specific Resources.** Many staff reported that a strength of their school was the ability to provide resources for families with a variety of needs. In some cases, these programs provide educational resources, such as learning games and puzzles, or SAT or Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) resources. Other programs focused on necessities, such as a monthly food-pantry partnership with D.C. Area Food Bank, snack packs provided by Communities in Schools, or a laundry program that one school was launching. (Staff also noted that these partnerships with community organizations were a strength in and of themselves.) Some staff also identified a strong PTA as a critical resource for families in their community. An elementary school principal reported:

*I'm very proud to say that our PTA council is doing all kinds of things to help students who have opportunities that may not otherwise have those. By that, I mean that they're paying for field trips. They're paying for buses. They're paying for entrance fees for kids that...would be struggling to figure out [how] to pay for it. The PTA writes the check.*

In addition to providing the needed resources, school staff reported that these school-specific events or programs brought families into the school environment, where they could receive information and form relationships with staff and educators.

## CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

**Cultural Challenges.** Staff at one elementary school noted that staff's demographic makeup did not match the population of the school, which they felt limited family engagement opportunities. Parents in a secondary school focus group similarly reported that many secondary school teachers lived outside of the community, limiting their understanding of current and historic issues affecting Alexandria.

Another perceived challenge was a lack of understanding about the American school system. Principals, teachers, and school staff reported that many recent immigrant families (particularly from Africa and the Middle East, but also Asia and Latin America) perceived school as a part of the government, which is meant to be respected and not questioned. School staff reported perceptions that these parents typically struggled to understand that American parents were expected to visit or interact with the school frequently and to have a voice in educational decisions. However, school staff were quick to note that these parents were not intentionally disengaged, but rather were not aware of *how* Americans engage with schools. One secondary school staff member reflected:

*You know, coming from the outside...they just can't fathom the idea of, "You mean, I can go to the school and I can tell the principal or the director or even the teacher that this is an issue?" You know, it's really, really ingrained. They just don't know that they can. So, the difference, if there was one, it's that perhaps one party knows but cannot act upon, but one party doesn't know, and even if they know, it takes another cultural move. It takes another paradigm for them to think of addressing the school.*

On the other hand, school staff noted that parents or families that have been in the United States for a long time, or parents from Europe, may also need education about the way that the school functions, not because they were unwilling to reach out but because they are overstepping. For example, a few teachers and staff mentioned parents who called a teacher in the middle of the day with the expectation that they would be accommodated immediately, or who frequently called the front office to have messages delivered to their child or to receive reports about their child's daily progress.

For Muslim families, a challenge was posed by the clash between the school calendar and the Muslim religious calendar, particularly the need to take exams during periods of fasting during Ramadan.<sup>5</sup> Parents reported that suggestions given to them to help their children prepare for these exams often involved recommendations for a full night of sleep and a good breakfast before the exam, both of which are extremely challenging while fasting. Parents suggested that ACPS could expand accommodations by adjusting the dates of SOLs, having a designated room for fasting during lunch, and, if it was not possible to move the date of SOLs, offering more accommodations during the tests including additional breaks during testing or additional opportunities to make up missed exams. In addition, several parents recommended offering both Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha as division-wide holidays, although they acknowledged the challenge of granting holidays with moving dates.

**Recent Immigrants.** In addition, school staff and some non-English speaking parents reported that recent immigrants may feel intimidated by principals or teachers or hold them in such high regard that a home visit or a parent-teacher conference was seen as an intimidating or even as a threatening experience. In particular, the desire to behave correctly or make a good impression may prevent some parents from sharing legitimate questions or concerns that they have.

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<sup>5</sup> The dates of Ramadan are tied to the lunar calendar and as such, move from year to year. During the 2018-2019 school year, the entire SOL testing period fell during Ramadan; however, this is not the case every year.

Additionally, a few school staff reported that some immigrant parents think of education as something that happens only at school, and therefore may not expose their children to the same early education opportunities that American families do. One elementary school teacher said:

*I've had parents who say, well, in their country, school happens in school. The parents aren't teaching at home. You send the child to school when they're five and that's when they start to learn. And so, they're coming in behind, not because the parents don't want their kids to do well, but because they don't understand that in this country, kids often have preschool or daycare or other learning. And I've had a mother who said, "My first child, I didn't know that, and they were so far behind in school. While my second child, I knew that, and they were fine.*

Staff also pointed out that many recent immigrant communities have non-nuclear family structures, where a child might be living with their grandparents, aunt and uncle, or cousins. For this reason, school staff reported that contacting just the parent wasn't always the best option for family engagement. In order to reach out to the whole ethnic community, school and division staff reported that ACPS sometimes partners with community and cultural organizations. Some staff noted that while this strategy has worked for reaching out to Amharic- and Arabic-speaking families (via the Ethiopian & Eritrean Alliance for Education or a local mosque), there was not a similar umbrella community organization across Alexandria for Central American, Spanish-speaking families, which limited their ability to do this type of outreach among that population.

**Staff Limitations.** Across ACPS, teachers and staff reported that there was not enough time in the day to engage families at the level they would like. A few participants specifically mentioned that they had a lack of time to make full use of the interpretation services provided by the division to communicate effectively with non-English speaking families. Some participants also stated the need for support staff, specifically bilingual staff. A few schools also reported that their counselor, nurse, or social worker was only on site part time, which made it more difficult for families to get in touch with them. Parents, teachers, and principals who worked at schools that did not have parent liaisons stated that they would like a liaison at their school, not only to provide bilingual support, but also to better enable robust family engagement.

**Community Barriers.** The constant influx of new immigrants and transient families such as military or government personnel into Alexandria also posed a challenge to the schools. Staff reported difficulty in making sure these families were aware of all the local services and in effectively communicating with appropriate family members when children lived in homes with non-nuclear family structures.

## STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK

Staff across respondent groups expressed the key and unique roles of school administrators and front office staff in establishing and shaping relationships. A few participants recommended providing training on customer service and cultural sensitivity and awareness to these staff members (discussed further in the Professional Development section of the *Activities and Future Desires* section). Across all roles, school staff often noted that they lacked the staffing resources to engage families to the extent that they desired. These stakeholders offered the following recommendations, ordered based on how frequently they were suggested:

- Principals, teachers, and support staff from multiple schools recommended hiring more bilingual staff who could effectively communicate to families.
  - Parents also recommended hiring more bilingual staff, particularly Arabic- and Amharic-speaking staff.

- This included frequent requests from parents and school staff for parent liaisons at non-Title I schools and requests for full-time division-wide parent liaisons who supported outreach to Spanish-, Arabic-, and Amharic-speaking families.
- Requests for a substantially greater number of full-time counselors, psychologists, social workers, and/or nurses to meet the demands of their students and families were concentrated across three schools.
- A few teachers at secondary schools also requested staff who could cover classrooms so that they could have mid-day conferences with individual families or provide broader levels of engagement. One secondary school teacher described this request, saying:
 

*We need the coverage. Even if we were to get some people to come out like part-time, maybe like once or twice a week, so they can cover our classes and then we can go out there and do what we have to do or set up meetings or set up, whatever so that parents can come in. Because some parents actually are available during the day but the teachers are not because they have class, you know?*

## DECISION-MAKING

The conceptual domain of decision-making is operationalized to include elements of both individual or family decision-making and shared decision-making between the school system and families. This domain involves families' feeling heard, having a voice, and being able to share opinions. But it also involves collaboration, awareness, responsiveness, and inclusive voice – all elements of mutuality, requiring action on the part of both families and division staff.

### GUIDING RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

To what extent does ACPS include families in the decision-making of the education of their children?

- In what decisions do parents report being involved?
- To what extent do families feel like their opinions, ideas, and concerns are heard and valued among ACPS staff?
- To what extent does ACPS provide families with the information and resources needed to support learning?
- How are these experiences described by families and staff?

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Parents reported being involved in academic and behavioral decisions about their children primarily through parent-teacher conferences, with a smaller subset of families also citing IEP or 504 meetings, or advisory committees for programs like TAG or AVID.
- Participants, primarily school staff, also described recurring Principal Coffees, PTA meetings, and other division-wide meetings as places where parents could learn about academic information or school-based events that could help inform decision-making.
  - In-person opportunities to share opinions and offer feedback varied by school, with greater opportunities across elementary schools than within secondary schools.
  - Schools also provide a variety of one-time informational events intended to provide parents with information critical to decision-making including orientation, back-to-school night, elective fairs, and information nights for special programs.
- The majority of schools did not have a resource room or area with educational materials or books geared towards families, and, where such materials existed, they were only provided in English and very occasionally in Spanish.
- The majority of parents reported that their child's school valued their opinions and feedback and that they were involved in important decisions regarding their child, but these percentages varied substantially across school type, in some cases dipping to just 50%.
  - Overall, parents at elementary schools and parents at Title I schools reported higher levels of agreement about decision-making opportunities.

## **Major Theme: Decision-Making Opportunities**

Across all data sources, participants described a variety of opportunities for decision-making, with a greater range of opportunities being reported at the elementary school level as compared to secondary school. Participants reported parent-teacher conferences, Principal Coffees, PTA meetings, school board meetings, program- and division-wide advisory committees, and individual IEP or 504 meetings as places that contributed to decision-making.

**Conferences.** Parent-teacher conferences were discussed in every interview and focus group as the best place to routinely communicate with families or teachers, express concerns, and learn about student progress. All participating schools reported having two conferences throughout the year, with estimates of participation ranging from more than 90% to less than 30% with elementary schools tending to report higher levels of participation. Secondary school teachers, staff, and families all reported that the length of conferences (generally reported to be 10-15 minutes) along with the limited number of available slots resulted in some families not being able to see all of their child's teachers, and that when they were able to get conferences, the limited time frame prevented a substantial exchange of information and ideas. For example, one middle school teacher explained:

*A parent says, "Well, okay, you tell me my son is not working on this, but what are you doing or what can I do?" I don't have the chance to [answer] that. It's way too fast. And on top of it, you add the translation. So those 10, 15 minutes blocks, if we have to translate it's not gonna work. You get one or two questions in. So that conferences, the way they're set up here, it's not useful.*

**Principal Coffees.** Parents selected the topics of Principal Coffees via a survey distributed at the beginning of the year. Division and school-level staff reported FACE-sponsored Principal Coffees (those held at Title I schools and two non-Title I schools) as a place where families could come and learn about various events and opportunities at the school, learn how to support their students, and offer feedback to school staff and administrators. Families at these schools largely echoed these perceptions, with the exception of the last point; parents rarely described these events as places where they could offer feedback or suggestions about their child's education. Indeed, at the six Principal Coffees observed for this evaluation, the vast majority of the content was one-way communication. There were opportunities for interaction, but those were primarily ice-breaker games or activities related to the topic discussed at the event, not opportunities for parental input or feedback on the topic discussed or on topics initiated by the parents.

**PTA Meetings.** School administrators commonly described their PTAs as beneficial places to hear from their school communities and to communicate back out to their families. Administrators and some teachers described attending PTA meetings to present on school initiatives or academic programs, leveraging PTA communication platforms to disseminate information to families including school improvement plans, and tapping into PTA membership to fill specific needs such as reviews of strategic hires, development of school-home compacts for Title I schools, and special committees. However, a subset of these administrators, many teachers/staff, and families all described PTAs as a majority of white and predominantly middle or upper class persons. Family members were often unaware of PTAs, and when they were aware of them, frequently were unable to attend them due to personal barriers such as scheduling. This suggests that school administrators' reliance on these groups may be missing key segments of their populations, leaving some families out of the decision-making process, as one secondary school teacher described:

*I've done three presentations at the PTA on different things, and there's only a certain population that are at the PTA, and we're talking about presentation on how to get*



*academic access, presentation on what are the new graduation requirements. We've done a whole bunch of other things, but that's not going to everybody.*

**Other School-Based Opportunities.** A limited number of family and teacher participants mentioned IEP or 504 meetings as opportunities for families to collaborate with school staff in decision-making. These meetings were targeted to families of children who need additional supports; the small number of families who reported attending these meetings felt that they were informative and respectful places to advocate for their child. Primarily at secondary schools, families and school staff mentioned advisory groups for specialty programs such as AVID, TAG, or Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) that offered in-depth opportunities to offer feedback or to help shape programs. However, these groups were also perceived to be limited to or at least tailored to more white and middle class families. One immigrant participant in an English secondary school group explained:

*I was in TAG Advisory for 2 years and the process was awful...I applied, waited, did not get the letter. I show up and I say, "I applied. You did not reply, but I am here." I was kind of a force type...So I did it that way, but I wasn't welcome.*

**Division-Level Meetings and Opportunities.** A small number of family members reported attending school board meetings to learn about key decisions affecting the division or to express their opinions about pending decisions. Some family members reported that school board meetings, held at the central office, were too far away from those on the western end of Alexandria who faced significant transportation barriers to routinely attend these meetings. One secondary school parent at an Amharic-speaking focus group explained the results of this:

*So the west end schools are always "stepchildren" schools. They are always ignored. Because if I'm not there yelling at you, I'm not your first thought.*

A similarly small number of family members had served on or were aware of opportunities to serve on division-wide committees. Several other family members and school or division staff reported that these committees tended to be majority-white and not welcoming for non-English speaking families. One secondary school parent attending an English focus group said:

*And speaking of the advisory, it's hard to be in. I know it's easy for you, but for us, as soon as they see our name as with foreigner names, they automatically discard it for School Board Advisory. I might be wrong, but that's what we felt. We apply so many things, like the 20/20 Strategy. They don't take people with foreigner names.*

In addition, a few school and division staff reported that the division had recently disseminated a survey about family engagement to school staff and to families, but no family members in our focus groups reported participating in or being aware of that opportunity.

### **Major Theme: Information to Support Decision-Making**

Participants described communication practices within schools and across the division that contributed to awareness, responsiveness, and opinion sharing. Some participants also reported on information-sharing meetings for specialty programs including TAG, AVID, and STEM, and opportunities to receive information about course scheduling or selection that contributed to their abilities to make informed decisions about their children's education.

**Communication Opportunities.** In-person opportunities to share opinions and offer feedback varied substantially by individual school, although in general, there were greater opportunities across elementary schools than within secondary schools. Some parents with children in three of the elementary schools in the Phase 2 sample expressed that they felt welcome to or explicitly told to drop by anytime with questions or suggestions for the school administration or teachers.



This sentiment was also reported by teachers and/or administrators at these schools. The remaining schools in our sample reported that parents could request meetings with the principal or teachers at any time, but that option was not widely known by parents and family members who frequently reported that they had to wait for conferences to talk to a child's teacher unless that teacher reached out first. This belief seemed especially true of parents who did not attend an American educational system themselves growing up, but was not exclusive to that group. Aside from in-person communication opportunities, a wide variety of communication platforms were used across schools and teachers to share information with and receive information from families. Discussed more thoroughly within the Communication section, these ranged from hand-written notes about students' behavior or upcoming schedules to texting apps used to communicate to individual parents or groups of family members. These communication vehicles provided parents with the opportunity to communicate their desires directly to teachers and to receive timely updates about the child's performance.

**Educational Information.** Parents, teachers, and administrators described a range of informational events intended to provide families with information about the school system, educational programs, or individual courses. These included school orientations, open houses, college tours, or back-to-school nights that gave families and students an overview of the school's culture, expectations, and opportunities. At the secondary school level, this also included elective fairs and opportunities to meet with counselors about course selection, scheduling, or college decisions. A smaller number of participants also described program-specific information nights – AVID, STEM, Special Education, TAG, Kindergarten – as opportunities for families to learn more about these programs prior to or just after enrolling. Participants described far fewer opportunities for parents to learn not just *about* these academic opportunities but *how* to support their children's academics, although this was a desire expressed by parents in every focus group.

Through the building walk-through observations, evaluation observers also found that the majority of sites did not have a resource room or area available to families, rarely had educational materials and books for families freely available on site, and hardly ever provided those materials in multiple languages; where such materials existed, they were in English and occasionally in Spanish. School administrators and some teachers noted that academic information (e.g., study tips, resources like fake money or plastic clocks, or educational games like Boggle Jr.) was frequently presented or distributed at events including Principal Coffees, math/literacy nights, or PTA meetings – all events with more limited attendance due to personal barriers or limitations. Finally, although a wealth of educational information was widely available through platforms like Canvas or PowerSchool, family members were often unaware of the full scope of information contained within these systems or altogether unaware of these systems' existence.

Overall, 90% of elementary school parents surveyed reported that their child's teacher helped them understand his or her academic progress. These percentages declined substantially among middle and high school parents with only 62% of middle school parents and 59% of high school parents agreeing that their child's teacher helped them understand their academic progress. This decline also coincided with more rigorous and complex coursework in middle and high school when parents may already need more rather than less support to understand their child's academic progress. A greater proportion of parents surveyed with children at Title I schools reported that teachers helped them understand their child's academic progress – 88% vs. 79% of parents with children at non-Title I schools.

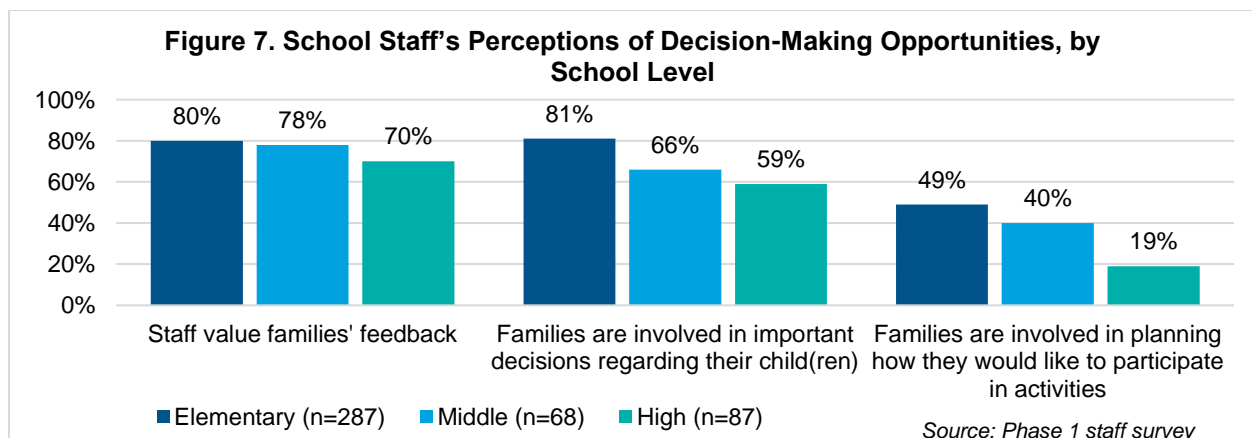
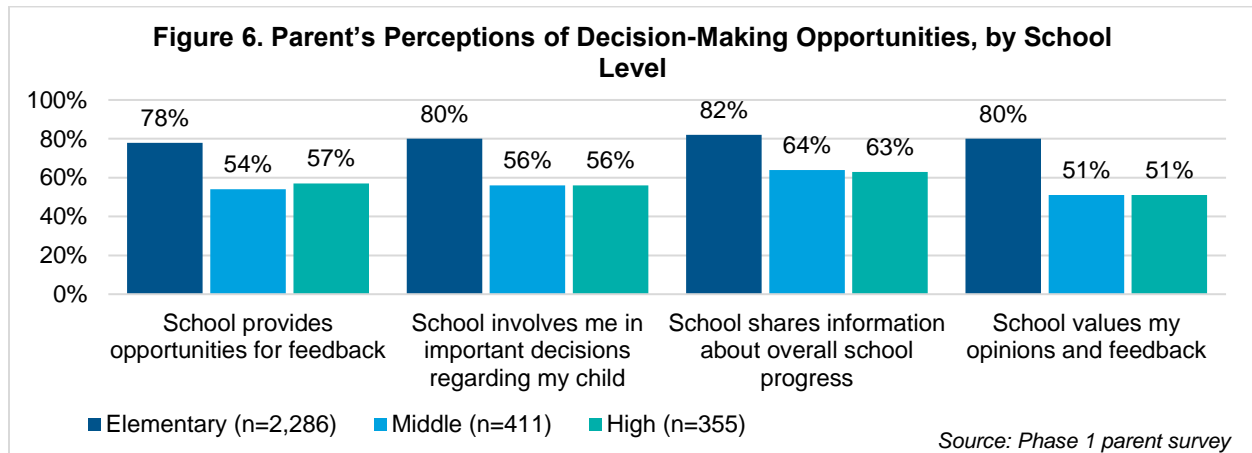


### INNOVATIVE PRACTICES: INCREASING RESOURCE ACCESSIBILITY

One elementary school pulled together resources commonly distributed at Principal Coffees or academic events and started an “activity room.” One teacher described this as a place “where the parents can go and get games and flashcards and puzzles, either math or reading, or on the alphabet. They can check them out for a few days, bring it home, and then bring it back and get different materials.” During parent-teacher conferences and open houses, parents were introduced to that room and the resources it contained. Some resources and books were available in multiple languages, and teachers reported that the presence of that room was a strength at that school.

## Major Theme: Parent and Staff Perceptions

Across all of these decision-making opportunities, 71% of school staff surveyed across all levels agreed or strongly agreed that families were involved in important decisions regarding their children, and 76% reported that staff valued families’ feedback. Families surveyed similarly indicated that they had opportunities to provide feedback (72% agreed or strongly agreed) and that they were involved in important decisions regarding their child (75% agreed or strongly agreed). Collectively, this led 72% of all parents and guardians surveyed to agree or strongly agree that, overall, their child’s school valued their opinions and feedback. However, among both staff and family members, these responses varied substantially by school level, with elementary school staff and parents offering notably higher ratings of decision-making opportunities than their middle school and high school counterparts (see Figures 6 and 7).



In examining perceptions of decision-making across Title I and non-Title I schools, Phase 1 survey respondents with children at Title I schools reported greater levels of agreement about decision-making opportunities than those with children at non-Title I schools, across numerous items. For example, 82% of Title I parents agreed or strongly agreed that their child’s school involved them in important decisions about their child, while only 67% of non-Title I parents reported the same (see Table 2).

Table 2. Parents’ Perceptions of Decision-Making Opportunities, by Title I Status		
	Title I Schools (n=1,496)	Non-Title I Schools (n=1,583)
School provides opportunities for feedback	79%	66%
School involves me in important decisions about my child	82%	67%
School shares information about overall school progress	83%	73%
School values my opinions and feedback	77%	67%

Source: Phase 1 parent survey

## Strengths, Challenges, and Stakeholder Feedback

### STRENGTHS

**PTA.** Some staff also identified a strong PTA as a critical resource for families in their community, primarily for the role they played in helping to provide funding for events or for individual children who may not have been able to afford to participate in some events.

**Events.** Although not as prevalent, events where parents had the opportunity to learn about what their child was doing in school were also regarded as strengths by school staff and parents. These events included elective fairs, literacy nights, science or math night, and AVID night. A participant in a teacher/staff secondary school focus group described the success of one of these events:

*When we do the [“rising grade”] night, the one we had recently seemed to work really well. We had a lot of parents that came out and we broke it into different groups or information sessions to give parents an opportunity to come to little workshops and ask questions about what the expectations were for each grade level and the particular courses that they were going into, so that was something that worked really well and had a good turnout.*

**Elementary and Title I Schools.** Parents with children in elementary schools and in Title I schools reported more positive perceptions about and greater opportunities for decision-making related to their child’s education. Based on findings from the Phase 1 survey, more than 80% of elementary school parents and school staff believed that families were involved in important decisions and that schools shared important information.

### CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

**Representation.** Teachers, parents, or administrators at nearly every school and staff at the Central Office reported that school- and division-wide committees and organizations such as PTAs or advisory groups lacked diversity. Staff reported that these committees tended to be majority-white and middle-class, with one staff member reporting:

*[Our advisory committees], they’re not representative. And then when we pull representatives from the advisory committees, they’re not representative.*

**Individual Needs.** Discussed in further detail within the *Communication* section of this report, parents reported a desire for greater information and resources to support their children’s learning at home, particularly among secondary school parents. This aligned with Phase 1 survey findings where only 62% of middle school parents and 59% of high school parents agreed that their child’s teacher helped them understand their child’s academic progress. Although substantial amounts

of educational information and resources were provided at Principal Coffees, PTA meetings, and through Canvas or PowerSchool, a combination of a general lack of resource rooms or areas as well as various personal limitations, language barriers, or access to technology restricted access to these materials for many families.

### STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK

Throughout our data collection, individual participants offered recommendations for ways to strengthen or improve opportunities for family-driven decision-making based on their understanding of current systems and practices. These recommendations included:

- Parents overwhelmingly wanted more information to better support their child’s learning at home, including access to course syllabi, more knowledge about how to navigate resources available in PowerSchool or Class DoJo, and full access to materials, resources, or information provided via the PTA, Principal Coffees, or special events.
- Families routinely noted that they would like teachers to be more proactive about communicating about their individual child’s academic needs.
- Participants from all categories of respondents recommended increasing the diversity and broadening the representation on PTAs, but very few offered recommendations to address this widely-acknowledged challenge.
- Particularly at the secondary school level, but also among a few elementary schools, parents felt strongly that the division had not responded to their significant concerns about overcrowded buses, the risks of bus transportation in poor weather, and late buses that causes their children to be marked tardy.
- A few parents suggested that the division rotate the location of school board meetings to allow families located across the division to attend more easily.

### COMMUNICATION

Communication, as operationalized within ACPS’ conceptual framework of family engagement, primarily includes tangible components of communication such as content, process, method, timeliness, and multilingual. But this domain also includes the more conceptual facets of family-friendly and two-way communication. As such, findings within this domain discuss both the methods of communication (encompassing the themes of process, timeliness, two-way communication, and elements of multilingual and family-friendly) and the content of communication (encompassing facets of multilingual and family friendly).

#### GUIDING RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

To what extent do ACPS’ communication practices meet the needs of families?

- How effective are communication efforts in reaching diverse families and their needs (e.g., interpreters, format information is provided, translation of vital documents)?
- What ACPS systems and practices are currently used for parents to provide feedback and communicate with ACPS staff members?

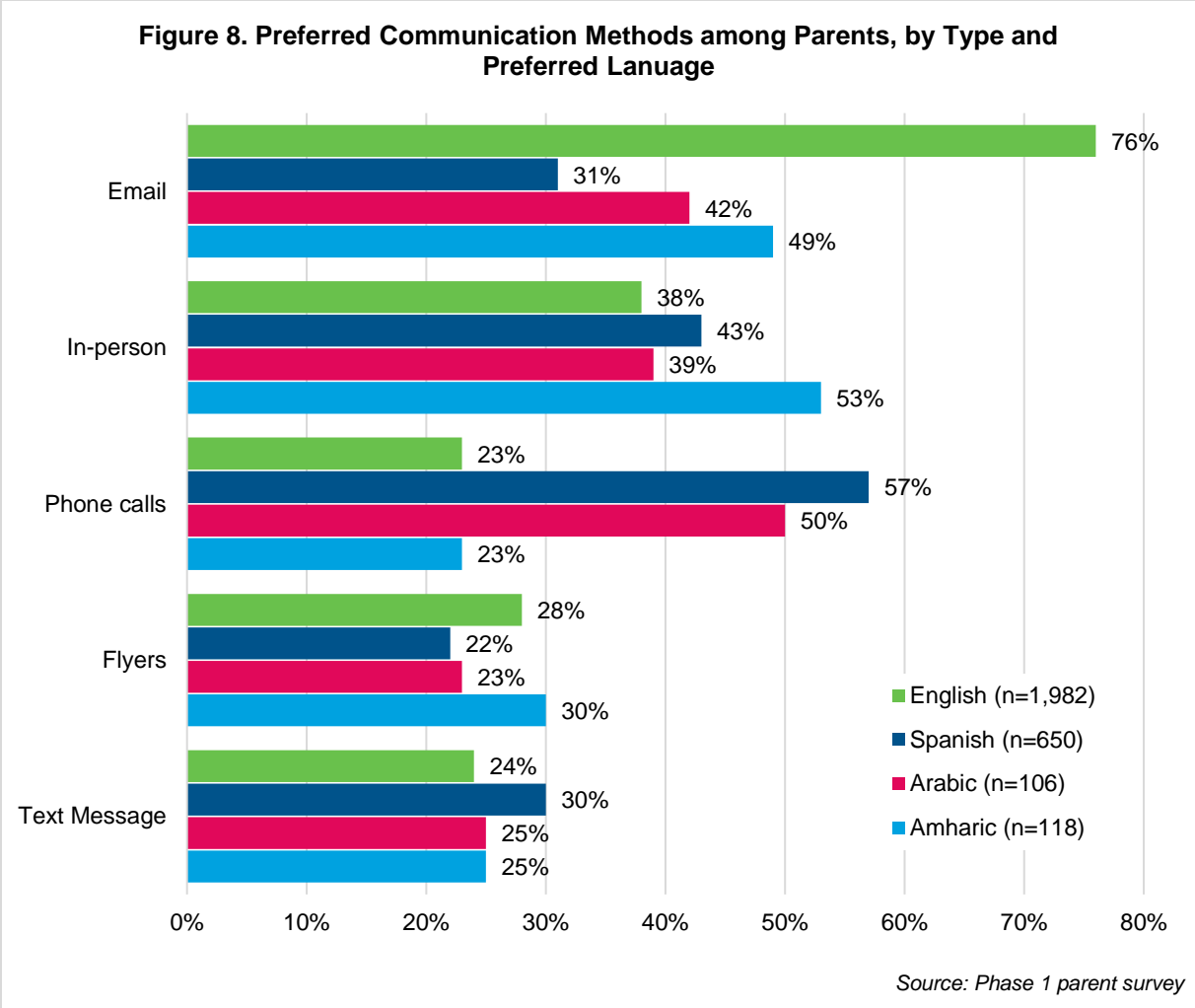
#### KEY FINDINGS:

- ACPS schools and individual teachers leveraged a wide range of communication platforms across and within the categories of printed materials, telephone communication, in-person communication, and digital outreach.
  - Families and staff participating in Phase 2 reported that in-person conferences and communication were essential and effective starting points for building relationships or beginning discussions.
  - Families and staff also reported that access to translation apps (e.g., Google Translate) and online engagement platforms (Dojo, Blackboard Connect, Remind) have proven to be a strength for family engagement, although communicating to non-English speaking families through these platforms was not without challenges.
- Although the majority of parents surveyed in Phase 1 expressed a preference for email communication, this varied by preferred language and was *not* the preferred communication form among non-English speaking groups who instead reported phone calls or in-person communication as the best way to communicate with them.
- ACPS used a variety of methods to effectively communicate with non-English speakers including interpreters, bilingual parent liaisons, translators, and the Language Line. With the exception of parent liaisons, each of these methods was less effective than designed due to varying on-the-ground implementation, particularly use of the Language Line.
- Overall, a majority of all parents surveyed in Phase 1 agreed that their child's school responded to concerns promptly and connected them to appropriate staff or resources to address their questions or concerns, although this agreement declined in middle and high school.

#### **Major Theme: Communication Methods**

Across ACPS schools and the division, participants reported different types of communications and numerous specific methods within these broader categories. In every interview and focus group, participants reported the availability of hard-copies, telephone conversations, in-person communication, and digital communication. Across the division, parents surveyed reported that the most common ways their child's school communicated with them was via email (31%) and flyers (22%), although this varied by school level. When asked about the *best* ways that the school could communicate with parents, preferences varied by language group (see Figure 8). Across all school types, English-speaking parents strongly preferred email communication (76%) followed by in-person communication at a much lower rate (38%). In contrast, Spanish-speaking families most preferred phone calls (57%) followed by in-person communication (43%). Communication preferences also varied by type of school, likely reflective of the varied demographic make-up of the schools. For example, 74% of parents with children at non-Title I schools preferred email communication compared to 51% of parents with children at Title I schools. In contrast, 39% of parents with children at Title I schools' preferred method of communication was phone calls compared with 25% of parents with children at non-Title I schools.





The majority of teachers and support staff were unclear on what method of communication was most effective at reaching most families, while school administrators most frequently described their whole-school newsletter as the most effective, although only two pointed to data to justify that belief. One secondary school teacher noted:

*I would say [effective communication] is very hard for us to measure because we don't spend enough time seeing how many parents log on to these sites, or measuring that kind of data to see if we're effective at all. So there's a lot of one-way push out, but I don't think there's a lot of study on whether or not the message is even reaching the party it's intended for.*

Many school staff felt that no one method of communication was the best at reaching all families, but that taken together, the volume of diverse communication reached everyone. However, some clear gaps in communication strategies emerged through this evaluation.

**Printed Documents and Materials.** Nearly all elementary school teachers reported using daily or weekly student folders, sent home with a variety of hard-copy pieces of information about the child, classroom, or school, while secondary school teachers and administrators reported only occasionally sending home hard-copy materials with students, which were nearly always about upcoming events. Some administrators at every level described creating newsletters that were distributed to families, but this too varied in dissemination; some administrators distributed these electronically via email, some posted them to their school’s website, some sent home hard-copies, and some used a combination of these methods to ensure that the information reached families. At the division and school level, a more limited number of hard-copy materials were mailed to students’ homes. Commonly reported documents that fit this category included information about registration or enrollment, students’ report cards, and, for some, information about parent-teacher conferences.



#### **INNOVATIVE PRACTICES: GETTING CREATIVE WITH PRINTED MATERIALS**

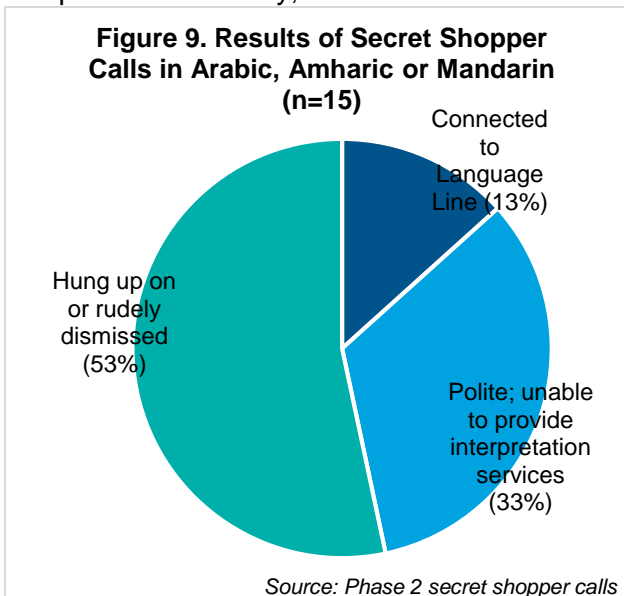
In advance of a math night at one elementary school, teachers brainstormed different ways to promote the event, knowing that *“a lot of flyers don’t necessarily get into the hands of our parents...they might fall off on the bus, or kids don’t bring them home.”* To combat this, in the week leading up to the event, teachers promoted the Minecraft- and amusement park-themes math tools that would be raffled off during the event so that students would get excited about attending. The

day of the event, teachers put the tools on a table outside the front office to further remind students about the event. To combat lost flyers, teachers printed stickers that said *“Math Night Tonight!”* and put them on students’ hands and t-shirts to ensure that the message made it home. Some teachers also stood outside at dismissal the day of the event and handed out flyers directly to caretakers as they picked students up at the end of the day. One teacher observed that by *“mov[ing] outside those barriers of what we usually do, to kind of get to all of our families, we had pretty high attendance.”*

**Effectiveness of Printed Documents.** At the elementary school level, student folders seemed to increase the likelihood that printed materials would reach families at home while secondary school families described student-carried materials as one of the least effective ways to communicate with them, due to their students’ unreliability in delivering these documents. Hard-copy materials pertaining to division-wide information were nearly always reported to be translated into the four key languages of ACPS, while school-based or classroom-based materials were most commonly not translated or translated only into Spanish. The notable exception to this was report cards, which all family members reported were delivered only in English (although the division has processes in place to support their translation). Although school-based staff were aware of the translation services available to them, they reported difficulties in having materials prepared enough in advance (10 school days) to allow for translation. During this study, the division employed one full-time Spanish translator and one part-time Amharic and one part-time Arabic translator, making it challenging to turn around some documentation even within this 10-day window. Instead of allowing for additional time and submitting materials through the division, school and teachers reported that they often relied on bilingual school staff to translate materials above and beyond their own job responsibilities or used Google Translate or other translation apps, particularly for one-to-one translation back and forth with individual families but sometimes also for broader dissemination. In addition, Arabic-speaking family members noted that documents translated into Arabic related to both division information and school information were often faulty. This may be related to the difference in Arabic dialects, staff using faulty translation tools, or staff transposing translations, since Arabic is read right to left rather than left to right like English. Whatever the cause, taken together, this limited the effectiveness of hard-copy communication to Arabic- and Amharic-speaking families.

**Telephone Communication.** All schools and the division’s central office used telephone communication to reach families, including relatively sparse robo calls for school closures or emergencies, or calls from teachers, support staff, administrators, or front office staff about more individual family concerns. Each of the schools employed front office staff who were responsible for answering the phones (along with a myriad of other duties), while the central office used an automated message to direct families to more specific staff who could address their concerns. The majority of participating schools employed at least one front office staff member who was fluent in Spanish and the central office recording had also been translated into Spanish. However, no school included in the Phase 2 study had front office staff fluent in Arabic or Amharic, and the central office automated message was not available in these languages either, although reviewed policy documents indicate that the Office of English Learner Services provided the Department of Communications with voice recordings in Arabic and Amharic, although it was not clear if these were recordings for the main Central Office phone line or for another service. The division contracts with the Language Line to provide interpretation services to accommodate the limitations of their own staff and the needs of their diverse families.

**Effectiveness of Telephone Communication.** The most commonly reported challenge to phone communication was transient families and outdated contact information. Although some schools had systems in place to try to systematically update contact information, no respondent felt that their method was particularly effective. In spite of that barrier, the increased number of robo calls or robo text messages for school-based emergencies was lauded as a recent improvement across the division by participants from every category of respondent. Similarly, all school staff and some parents reported that the language line was helpful in facilitating communication. Spanish-speaking family members had lower awareness of the Language Line compared with Arabic- or Amharic-speaking family members, as the majority of schools had Spanish speakers on staff who routinely provided interpretation or direct communication. At least one parent in each of our Arabic and Amharic focus groups as well as our staff conducting secret shopper phone calls all reported being hung up on at least once rather than connected to the language line (see Figure 9).<sup>6</sup> In contrast, all of our staff conducting secret shopper calls in Spanish were quickly directed to a school-based staff member who spoke Spanish. One of our staff described his interaction saying:



*The staff member seemed friendly and tried to find someone who spoke Arabic but couldn't. After four minutes on hold, someone else came back and said "English or Spanish?" When I said again that I needed Arabic, she apologized in English and told me to call the central office.*

<sup>6</sup> Secret shopper calls were conducted in English, Spanish, Arabic, Amharic, and Mandarin with each participating Phase 2 site receiving two calls in English and two calls in two separate non-English languages. A full description of the secret shopper calls can be found in Appendix A on page Appendix-3.

This aligned with reports from some school staff who expressed a lack of confidence in knowing how to use the Language Line. It should be noted, however, that “Quick Guides” on how to use the Language Line were available on the ACPS website, and that schools were provided with school-specific Language Line wallet cards that list step-by-step instructions on how to access a Language Line interpreter. However, no teachers or staff mentioned utilizing either of these resources during Phase 2 interviews or focus groups. Furthermore, some schools had only a few phones located in their main office that were capable of three-way calling needed to (or perceived as necessary to) use the Language Line, which may have limited teachers’ use of this service.

***In-person Communication.*** Perceived or real opportunities for in-person communication varied substantially by individual school. All schools provided opportunities for in-person parent-teacher conferences, although the volume of teachers that students had in secondary school made communication at these conferences more challenging, as discussed in the *Decision-Making Opportunities* section of this report. All schools also reported a version of back-to-school night or school-wide orientation open to families that fostered opportunities for in-person communication between family members, administrators, and teachers. Some schools, largely supported by the FACE Center, hosted Principal Coffees, which allowed for in-person interaction between family members and school staff. Some administrators, teachers, and family members at the elementary school level described open-door policies at their schools where family members could and were encouraged to drop by to talk with the school administrator, support staff, or teachers without an appointment. Other staff participants across elementary and secondary school explained that family members were always welcome to make appointments to talk with them, but the process for doing this was not widely known or understood by family members in this study. The majority of schools also reported conducting varying numbers of home visits, some led by teachers or administrators, but most led by support staff such as social workers or school counselors. These home visits were sometime initiated by staff and sometimes signed up for by families. They occurred in families’ homes or in more public spaces such as the lobbies of apartment buildings or cafes in families’ neighborhoods. None of the family members participating in our focus groups reported ever having received a home visit from a staff member at their child’s school.

***Effectiveness of In-Person Communication.*** School staff and non-English speaking family members were all aware of the availability of in-person interpreters provided by ACPS and reported that these individuals were indispensable in facilitating communication across languages. Interpreters were described as widely available for school events with a small and manageable amount of advance notice. However, some mentioned the challenge of having to fill one hour of interpreters’ time, but noted that the Language Line was a suitable, if less desirable, alternative to a live interpreter.<sup>7</sup> At one school, teachers and staff discussed using Google Translate to facilitate in-person communication rather than utilizing the Language Line:

*There’s also Google Translate. We use that actually a lot in the office.*

*We use that a lot in the classroom, too.*

*Well, the parents will come in with their phone and actually just type out what they want to ask us, and show us the phone and then we type back what we’re gonna say and we communicate that way. [And] so far it’s worked pretty well. With the office being as busy as it is, a lot of times we can’t, you know, step away and just go somewhere where it’s quiet for them to use the Language Line. And some parents prefer that, because they’re able to, you know, directly look at you and tell you this is what they want.*

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<sup>7</sup> Teachers and staff participating in two different focus groups reported that the minimum time required to hire an interpreter was two hours; however, reviewed policy documents indicate that the minimum required time is one hour.

Although the length of communication at parent-teacher conferences limited the depth of discussions, families and staff reported that these meetings were effective starting points for building relationships or beginning discussions. Family members also reported that Principal Coffees, back-to-school nights, and other school-based events were often good places to receive information about their child's school or classroom, but described a variety of barriers to attending these, including transportation, personal work schedules, and the need for childcare.

**Digital Communication.** A wide diversity of digital systems and platforms were used across schools, teachers, and levels. Platforms or apps named by teachers or staff to communicate with families included: personal email, the ACPS mobile app, Canvas, PowerSchool, Class DoJo, Naviance, Bloom, Talking Points, Remind, SeeSaw, and Blackboard. The majority of these platforms required family members to download an app or opt in to a service. School- or classroom-wide platforms including Class DoJo, Canvas, and PowerSchool held a wealth of information about students' attendance, behavior, and academic performance. Participants explained that each of these platforms had a parent portal where family members could log on to see reports of their child's progress or learn what their child was learning. Some teachers also reported that each of these platforms had built-in communication tools that could email individuals or groups of family members. However, although some training for school-wide platforms including Canvas and PowerSchool were available, many families and some teachers had not participated in these trainings or were unaware of them, limiting the effectiveness of these services. As one secondary school teacher explained:

*Our teachers are not trained enough to know how to access Canvas well, which means we can't then help parents figure out how to access Canvas well. Because it's more than just the access. It's navigating it. It's using it. It's responding, because they can comment and they can send us messages through that. Most of our parents do not know how to do that because most of our teachers don't know how to do that.*

**Effectiveness of Digital Communication.** On the one hand, the sheer volume of digital communication contributed to a perception that the majority of families were reached through these platforms. However, the range of systems and digital platforms were also cited as a challenge among parents with children in multiple schools and those transitioning to a teacher or school that used a different system. The majority of all respondent groups indicated that one or more of these platforms allowed them to communicate effectively and exchange information quickly. In spite of this, Amharic and Arabic family focus groups each had participants who were unaware of these platforms, potentially representing a non-trivial group of families whose opinions may be overlooked or unheard. In addition, some family members were aware of these services, but had lost their access password, were unaware that they needed to sign up to receive communication, or reported a lack of confidence in their ability to fully access all the information communicated through these platforms. Some of these apps (i.e., Remind, Talking Points) interfaced with Google Translate to provide translation services, which ranged in accuracy depending on the translated language and the complexity of the translated text. However, parents and teachers reported that the school-based platforms (e.g., Canvas, PowerSchool) were available only in English, which may have contributed to the lack of awareness of these systems among non-English speaking families.<sup>8</sup> Further limiting the benefits of these systems, teachers and staff noted that not all families had reliable internet access or the technological acumen to utilize these services.

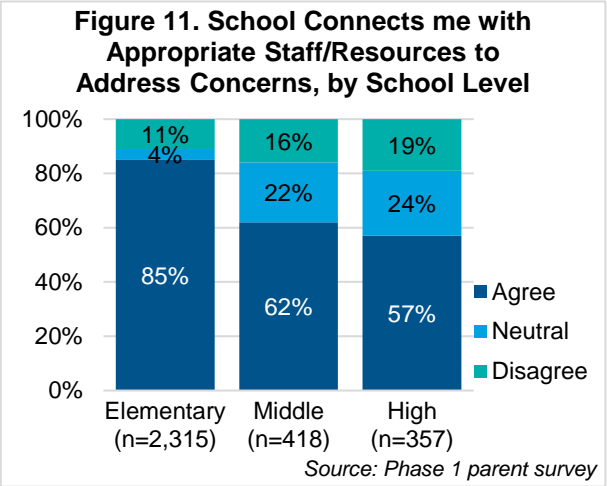
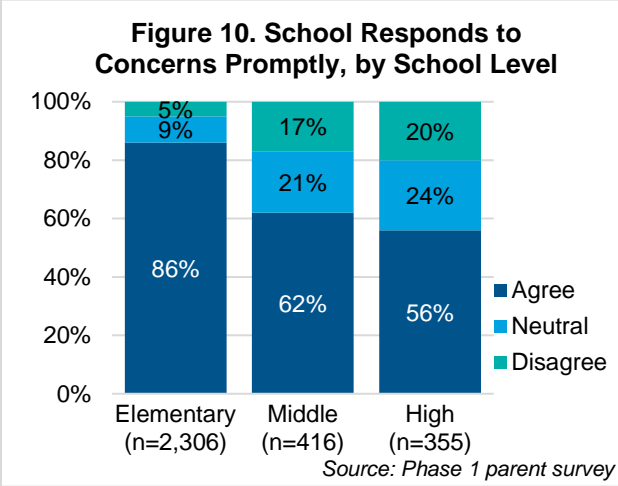
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<sup>8</sup> Within Canvas, users can adjust their profile settings to select their preferred language, which will translate much, but not all, of the site into that language. No Phase 2 participants were aware of this customization option. At the time of this study, PowerSchool was only available in English.



**Major Theme: Communication Processes**

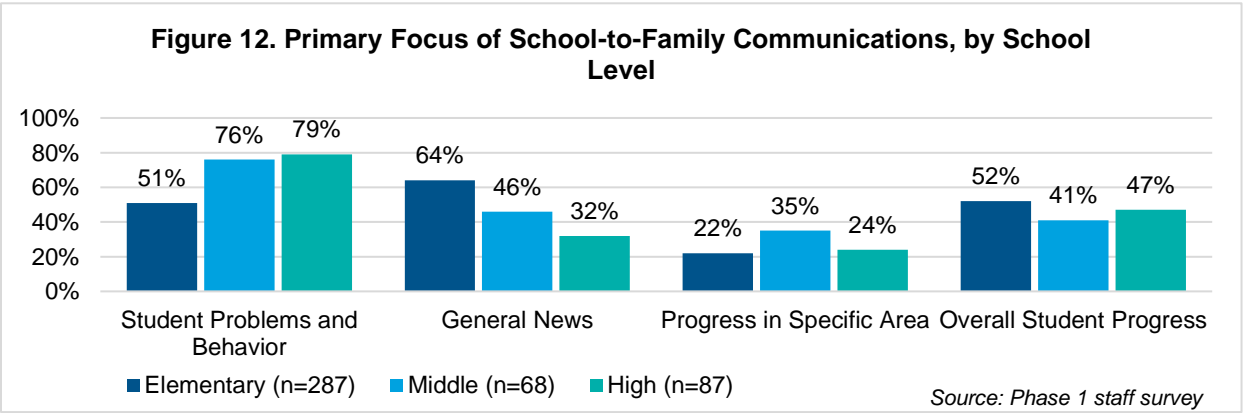
Parents who participated in ACPS’s survey were asked to respond to questions related to communication processes. As seen across other family engagement domains, parents of elementary school students offered higher ratings than parents of middle or high school students.



While a majority of all parents agreed that their child’s school responded to concerns promptly, this varied from 86% among elementary school parents to just 56% among high school parents (see Figure 10). Similarly, 85% of parents of elementary school students agreed that their child’s school connected them to appropriate staff or resources to address their questions or concerns, while only 57% of high school parents agreed with the same (see Figure 11).

**Major Theme: Communication Content**

School staff were asked to rank the top two areas of focus for school-to-family communication from a predefined list of four categories. At the elementary school level, school staff reported communicating the most about general news related to a class or the school (64%) while at the middle and high school levels, school staff reported communicating the most about student problems and behavior (76% and 79% respectively, see Figure 12).

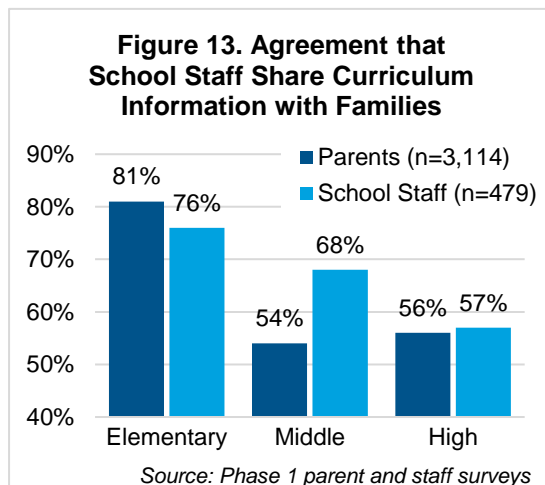


While individual schools and the broader division communicated to families about a vast range of subjects, including the four primary categories reported on through staff surveys, a few topic areas surfaced frequently in our interviews and focus groups. Across all respondent types and school levels, participants reported that communication about school- and classroom-based events was sufficient in reaching families and communicating key information, although this could be

strengthened if available in additional languages. This was echoed in survey findings where 79% of school staff reported that staff kept families informed about important issues and events, although this ranged from 88% among elementary school staff to 64% among high school staff.

Participants also reported that communication from the division and from individual schools about registration and enrollment was accessible and provided in a timely manner. Among parents of secondary school students, participants frequently reported confusing communication about attendance policies, most commonly reporting that their child was marked absent while on school field trips, or marked tardy if their school bus arrived late; parents struggled to navigate the various communication systems and platforms while trying to correct or better understand these decisions. Finally, the small subset of parents whose children had IEPs or 504s reported that these regularly occurring in-person meetings were helpful and informative, although many of these parents reported wanting more proactive communication about their individual needs.

**Academic Communication.** Across all family focus groups, nearly all participants reported that communication about their child’s academic progress and ways to support that progress was in need of improvement. Parents often described this shortcoming as starting with parent-teacher conferences, which were often described as too short to be meaningful, especially at the secondary school level, although some teachers noted that they were a useful launching point for future discussions. Many parents of secondary school students reported looking for class syllabi or asking for that documentation during conferences so that they could better help their children with their school work; no parents described success in obtaining that information across all of their child’s teachers or classes outside of elementary school. These sentiments were echoed by survey results. Only slightly more than half of middle school and high school parents (54% and 56% respectively, see Figure 13) reported an agreement that school staff shared information with families about the curriculum, although this could be broader than sharing course syllabi, limiting the strength of this comparison.



Although individualized academic information was often communicated during conferences, some academic information (e.g., how to help children prepare for SOLs, math study tools or worksheets, presentations from literacy coaches) seemed to be communicated in person to smaller, limited groups like Principal Coffees and PTA meetings. Parents who worked during the day, had childcare needs, lived further away from the school, or had other personal or professional barriers may not have received this information at similar rates to those who were able to attend such events.

Another frequently mentioned area for improvement centered on report cards. Although the division had processes in place to translate report cards, it was unclear if teachers were aware of this; all teachers and non-English speaking parents participating in Phase 2 reported that report cards were distributed only in English. Non-English speaking parents described having their children read their report cards to them, or asking neighbors or friends to translate. Parents often reported learning about failing grades only through report cards, with parents then reaching out to see what could be done to help their child, rather than proactive communication from teachers when grades started to slip. Although the diverse communication platforms (mainly Canvas,

PowerSchool and classroom DoJos) often have an abundance of available information, both teachers/staff and parents reported that they do not know how to fully (or in some cases at all) utilize those tools.

Teachers and administrators were often aware of these shortcomings, but also reflected on the challenges of meeting families' desires for more individualized communication. One elementary school administrator explained:

*With technology and cell phones, our information-rich society, there's just this sense that the level at which parents want insight into the educational lives of their children, it's just more and more challenging to meet logistically. So for example, at a parent meeting recently, parents expressed, "I would like to get a weekly newsletter from my teacher that talks about the nuances and detailed level of what our kids are learning this week in reading, and how I can help them at home. And, that's reflecting a valid request, but one that logistically...that's just a challenging demand.*

## **Strengths, Challenges, and Stakeholder Feedback**

### **STRENGTHS**

**Elementary School Communication Practices.** Across Phase 2 data collection, elementary school teachers, staff, and families reported a variety of strong practices related to teacher-parent communication including weekly folders, a variety of digital texting-based apps, and open door policies that strengthened in-person communication. In addition, elementary Phase 1 survey participants reported higher rates of agreement related to communication domains including prompt response to concerns, connections to appropriate staff or resources to address concerns, and communication related to the curriculum.

**Teachers and Staff.** Bilingual staff (including parent liaisons, front office staff, counselors, and classroom teachers) were particularly highlighted as an important resource to their schools. Several people shared that while they were aware of the Language Line, they preferred relying on bilingual staff because it made the experience faster, easier, and more personal.

**Division-wide Communication Resources.** Other division-wide communication supports including the Language Line, contracted interpreters, and translators were frequently described as resources that strengthened family engagement. Some staff also described division-level supports as enabling parents to attend events, including childcare, available food, materials distributed in a timely manner, and a variety of language supports. One elementary school teacher explained:

*Having been here before we had all the translation services, getting in parents to conferences who didn't speak English was very difficult. But now, I feel like we have a much larger majority of parents coming for conferences, way more than we used to.... We get many more parents coming now. And I think it's due to the translational services available.*

**Division Availability and Utilization of Technology.** Teachers and staff also reported that access to translation apps (e.g., Google Translate) and online engagement platforms (Dojo, Blackboard Connect, Remind) have proven to be a strength for family engagement. Staff at one school spoke highly of their technology integration specialists, who teach teachers and parents how to use technology. One elementary school principal noted that technology has also changed expectations around communicating with parents, making it easier to keep families in the loop, either through photos, emails, or in-app updates.

## CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

**Family Technology Access.** Although the Division utilized several platforms to facilitate communication, Phase 2 participants reported that access to Canvas, email newsletters, app-based communication may require a computer and/or smartphone, and some families did not have access to these devices, or had restrictions on their monthly internet/data usage. Eighteen percent of parents surveyed reported that access to technology was at least “small problem” in becoming involved with their child’s school. In addition, ACPS staff found that some families’ phone numbers changed often, and it was difficult to reach families who periodically had new contact information.

**Language Barriers.** Despite the availability of ACPS resources for translation and interpretation, language also posed a challenge to many non-English speaking families. Across all of ACPS, one-fifth of parents surveyed (20%) reported that language barriers posed at least a “small problem” to engagement at their child’s school with 5% reporting that this was a “very large problem.” Bilingual English speakers reported that interpreters sometimes used incorrect vocabulary or awkward phrasing, either due to a dialect difference between the interpreter and the parent, or due to a lack of knowledge about the school context or educational vocabulary. ACPS’s Office of English Learner Services asks that staff or families specify dialect needs and provide pertinent contextual information when requesting interpretation services, but reviewed policy documents indicate that this detail frequently goes unspecified, potentially contributing to reports of misaligned interpretation. Some respondents reported that even with all the language assistance available to them, it was sometimes awkward for parents to come to the school knowing that they don’t speak the primary language of their child’s school, with some non-English speaking parents reporting a sense of shame about not speaking English at the school, and noting that having to wait for interpretation made them feel less welcome. Because of some of the limitations already described, some parents still chose to have a friend, neighbor, or child translate materials or interpret for them, rather than rely on the ACPS-provided translations or contracted interpreters.

**Limitations of Communication Tools and Resources.** Although teachers and staff across all Phase 2 schools were aware of a variety of communication tools and resources available to them, some participants reported limitations of these resources and platforms. For example, some staff and families reported that when they received translated materials, the translation received was not always completely accurate, particularly when translating into Arabic, although this may be due to the number of Arabic dialects. In addition, participants were often not clear whether translated documents came from the division’s Translation Services or from staff utilizing Google Translate or other programs. Others stated that using the Language Line took a lot of time or was awkward to use and that they lacked confidence in navigating that system. One elementary school principal stated that not all of their teachers could easily use the Language Line because they needed to use an administrative phone to access it, which was not available in individual classrooms. Furthermore, a few participants discussed the language or translation limitations of some of the platforms used to track student data such as Canvas and PowerSchool.

## STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK

Throughout interviews and focus groups, individual participants offered recommendations for improvement based on their understanding of current communication systems and practices. These recommendations included:

- Continue partnership with the Language Line and with in-person interpreters, combined with increased training on how to best utilize these services.
  - Increase the number of phones that can accommodate three-way calling for the Language Line in individual classrooms.

- If possible, hire more school-based bilingual staff, specifically tasked with supporting translation and interpretation services.
- Decrease the amount of time required for document translation, likely through the hiring of additional staff to support translations.
- Strengthen the accuracy of written Arabic translations.
- Provide more training or increased information for families and teachers about school-wide platforms including Canvas and PowerSchool.
  - Within or outside of these systems, provide families with greater consistent accessibility of information about academics, including access to class syllabi at the secondary school level.
- Provide trainings on and incentives for home visits.

## ACTIVITIES AND FUTURE DESIRES

The final dimension of the family engagement conceptual framework is **activities and future desires**, comprising events, professional development, opportunities for ongoing learning, and opportunities or strategies for engagement.

### GUIDING RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

To what extent do current ACPS family engagement initiatives and activities meet the needs of families?

- What activities are most valued by stakeholders in increasing family engagement?
- How does ACPS link family engagement to learning?
- To what extent does ACPS provide families with volunteer opportunities?
- To what extent do current processes and procedures provide an opportunity for families to be engaged?
- To what extent is family engagement professional development opportunities offered to ACPS staff members? How are these opportunities perceived by staff?

### KEY FINDINGS:

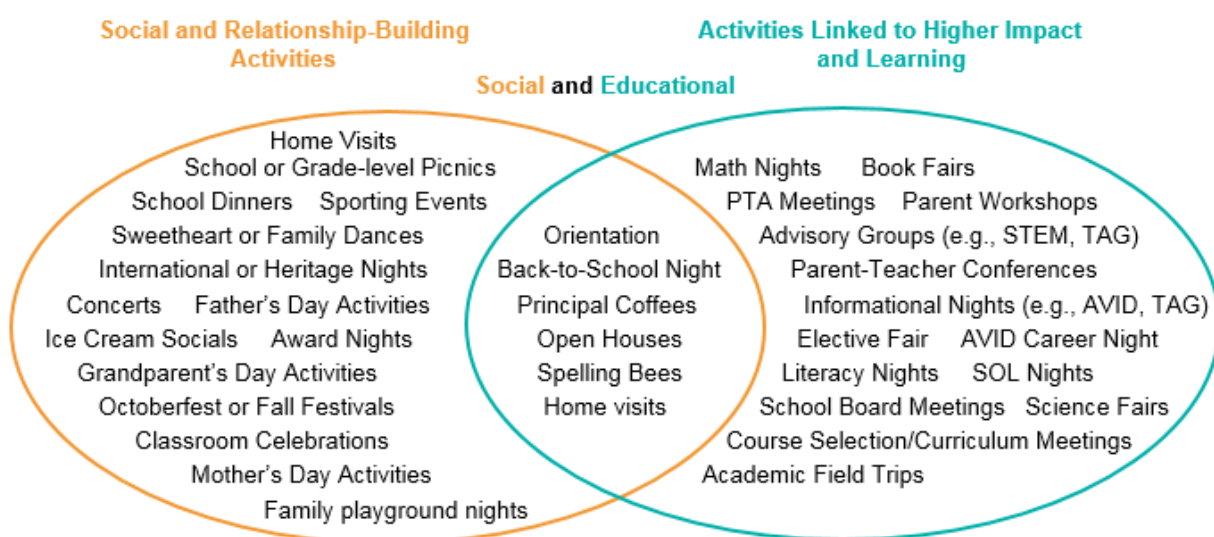
- Elementary schools reported hosting a larger number of social events for families, while all school levels reported relatively equal levels of educational activities, tailored in substance and format to the age of students.
  - The volume of available programs and events was frequently cited as a strength of the division's family engagement efforts.
  - A substantially greater percentage of elementary school and Title I parents surveyed reported that their child's school provided them with opportunities to better understand how to support their child's learning at home compared with middle and high school parents.
- The Phase 1 parent survey found that across the division, 87% of parents surveyed that they had opportunities to participate in school events, and 69% reported attending activities at their child's school over the past year; however, these percentages decreased among middle and high school parents.
- Parents across all schools reported opportunities to volunteer, although some parents and staff reported that the necessary background checks were often overly burdensome for some families.
- FACE-sponsored activities that provided childcare and interpretation services were positively perceived and described as facilitators to participation.
- Less than half of all staff who participated in the Phase 1 agreed that all staff had been trained on effective approaches to working with families of diverse cultural backgrounds.
  - Teachers and staff at every school in Phase 2 reported multiple areas for additional needed professional development related to family engagement.



## Major Theme: Family-Facing Activities and Opportunities

Family-facing events and activities were largely divided into social functions and educational opportunities, although some events fell into both categories (see Figure 14). Elementary school respondents reported an overwhelmingly larger number of events and activities that were tailored to families compared with secondary schools, with the majority of these activities serving a primarily social or relationship-building function. Educational activities differed in substance and format across school levels but were offered in relatively equal numbers across elementary and secondary school. Across the division, 69% of parents surveyed reported attending activities at their child’s school over the past year (results not presented). Family members across school levels reported that attending events was easier if food, childcare, interpretation services, and transportation were provided.

**Figure 14. Sample of Family-Engagement Activities Described by Participants**



Source: Phase 2 interviews and focus groups

Modeled after the Flamboyant Foundation’s Relative Impact of Family Engagement Strategies on Student Learning

**Relationship-Building Social Events and Activities.** Across every school level, teachers and staff reported that the events that drew the greatest number of attendees were social in nature and designed to include the whole school. International nights, ice cream socials, and back-to-school nights were frequently described as the most valued events, although teachers and staff reported that international nights and ice cream socials only occurred at the elementary school level. One elementary school administrator summarized a common feeling by saying:

*The best [event] is International Night. It was like, my happiest day as a principal. I loved it. Tons of parents and families were here, just celebrating each other. It was wonderful.*

Across elementary schools, school staff and family members were able to list a variety of classroom- and school-based activities geared towards family engagement. On the other hand, secondary school staff struggled to name valuable social events that helped to engage families. Interestingly, when secondary school teachers were asked to reflect on the social events or activities that most engaged families, many described events that no longer occur or that never materialized. One secondary school teacher responded:

*We used to do a thing called the Titan Expo...and it was a huge carnival. People came and bought tickets but at this carnival, we had a huge information area and people were*

*thrilled and they came out and they learned, you know, what is Canvas, what is in Google classroom. But it was really a neighborhood thing.*

Secondary school staff also discussed how plans to host a community movie night on the football field as a fundraiser were thwarted by administrators over logistical concerns. Each of these current and former events were structured for full-family participation, enabling families with children of varied ages to participate, and, at most schools, dinner or food was provided at the event.

Home visits were also frequently described as highly valuable, although these impacted substantially fewer numbers of families. School administrators and teachers frequently noted the lack of training on how to conduct these effectively and the lack of incentives to conduct these visits after school hours as limitations on the reach of home visits. One secondary school support staff member further explained:

*We do home visits and it's wonderful. It's amazing, [but] if you're not ready for it, your affect towards them could really just destroy the whole thing.*

**Educational Events and Activities.** Across the division, school-based staff and some family members described the work of the FACE Center as critical in sponsoring or supporting educational opportunities. Some of these activities, like Principal Coffees, occurred at most of the schools in our study, but were only supported by the FACE Center at Title I schools. Other events such as curriculum nights and parent workshops were hosted at individual schools or community locations and often had more targeted audiences than whole-school events.

Individual schools also hosted a variety of educational events, with math nights, literacy nights, and Principal Coffees named most frequently across elementary schools, and program informational nights (e.g., TAG, AVID, STEM), curriculum or course selection meetings, and an elective fair mentioned most often by secondary school teachers and staff. At the elementary school level, these events tended to focus on providing training or resources to parents to support their child's study habits or classroom learning. One elementary school principal described this:

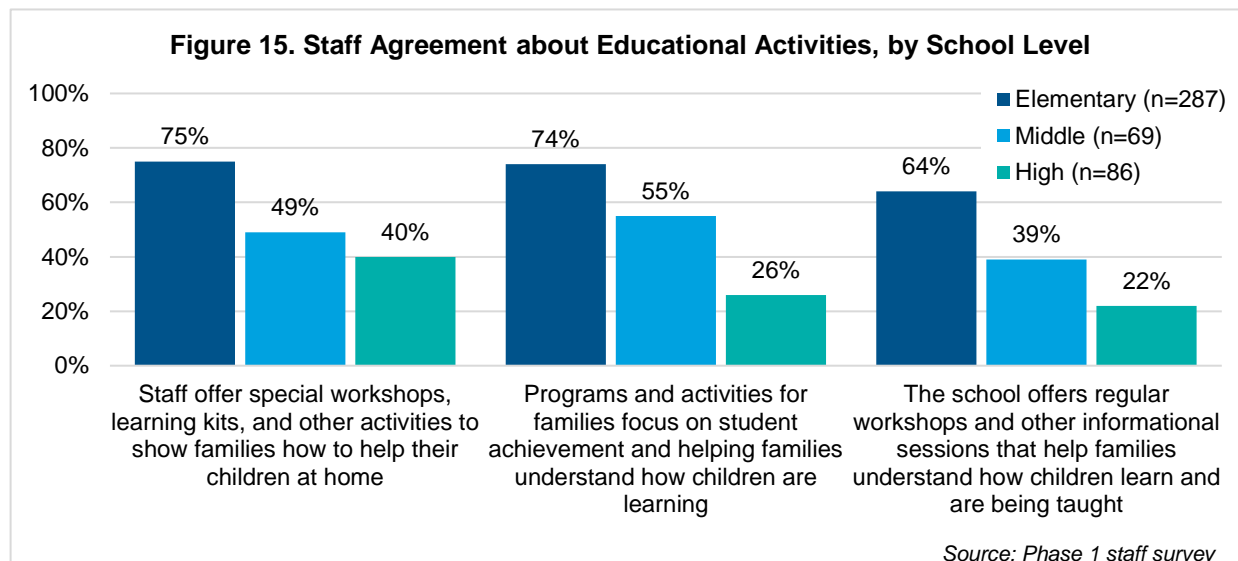
*At Principal Coffees...we talk to [parents] about the questions that they can ask their children when their children are reading to them. And we give them questions that they can ask, that they can pose to their children and try to get them to understand that they can tell when their child is engaged by their ability to answer those questions.*

At the secondary school levels, educational events focused more on equipping parents with the information needed to help their children select courses or enroll in specialized programs. Across school levels, school-wide orientations or back-to-school nights were described as opportunities for families to meet teachers, learn about school culture, and hear about various academic or extracurricular opportunities.

Among surveyed parents, 83% of elementary school parents, 52% of middle school parents, and just 46% of high school parents reported that their child's school provided them with opportunities to better understand how to support their child's learning at home. This also varied by race/ethnicity and preferred language, with parents who identified as white and those who spoke English *least* likely to report that their child's school provided them with opportunities to better understand how to support their child's learning at home.

School staff were also asked to respond to three similar questions related to educational activities that showed families how to: help their children at home, help understand how children were learning, and help understand how children learn and were being taught. The precise levels of agreement varied for each question, but a clear decline in agreement about the availability of such

opportunities was seen from elementary to middle school and again from middle school to high school (see Figure 15).



Although educational events occurred nearly as frequently as social events, school-based staff described nearly universally lower attendance at these events, in spite of similar communication and promotional efforts. This may be due to structural differences; most social events were designed to include the whole family, while academic events were sometimes more didactic and geared more directly to adults. Educational events without childcare may therefore be prohibitive for some families in ways that more social events were not. In addition, some non-English speaking family members noted that interpreters were not always made available for educational events (with the notable exception of FACE-sponsored events), which also acted as a deterrent to participation.

Furthermore, throughout focus group discussions, parents placed less emphasis on wanting more educational events like math night or literacy nights and instead described wanting more individual resources or tools to be provided at conferences or back-to-school nights, or more broadly available in classrooms or libraries. Individual family members described most valuing opportunities to learn how to better support their children’s education and mentioned SOL study tools, receiving course syllabi, attending informational sessions for special programs, or receiving educational games or activities to use at home as resources that enabled their support.



**INNOVATIVE PRACTICES: SETTING THE STAGE FOR ACADEMIC SUPPORT**

At one elementary school, grade-level teachers partnered together to sponsor a family dinner night. The dinner, catered by a local restaurant, featured teachers as the waiters and served as a structured opportunity for parents to support their child’s learning. Teachers had prepared interactive educational activities for parents to do alongside their child, serving as a model for how families could transform their own dinner tables into learning opportunities. One teacher reflected,

*“I had a lot of parents say, ‘This was really fun doing some with my child. I want to go home and sit down and do more work with them.’”*

**Volunteer Opportunities.** Across all schools, family members had opportunities to volunteer in classrooms or at events. These opportunities were substantially more prevalent at elementary schools, which sponsored greater numbers of field trips and where students were more likely to want their parents to chaperone or to participate. As one secondary school parent noted:

*I don't know if in [secondary] school we're invited. Our kids, and I mean, typical kids, they don't want to be around you. [Secondary] school kids don't usually want to be seen with their parents.*

Parents, teachers, and staff all reported that ACPS had division-level policies that guided volunteering, although these participants were unclear if this pertained only to chaperoning or also applied to classroom- or school-based volunteering. Participants reported a multistep process for volunteering to chaperone field trips that included signing up to volunteer at the school or classroom level, complete an online volunteer application and background check, and going to ACPS's Central Office or a school with a parent liaison on staff to complete the verification process. This process was described as cumbersome for those who lacked personal transportation, who worked during normal business hours, or who were undocumented.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, this process was not well understood by many parents; across all focus groups with parents during Phase 2, some parents were entirely unaware of this process, unclear about whether this process had to be completed for each volunteer opportunity, or unsure if the full process needed to be repeated each year or for each child. In each parent focus group, some parents were unaware of *any* opportunities to volunteer and there was a perception among some families that the same parents were routinely selected to volunteer. The latter may be the result of a narrow pool of family members who had completed all the steps needed to volunteer, or the result of other factors. One English-speaking parent of an elementary school student commented on this perception:

*Sometimes they were picking the same volunteers. Like, they have the clique appearance. Like stay-at-home moms or whatever, because they're always there and they pick them for everything.*

Teachers and family members offered conflicting reports about whether or not parents needed to complete the full multistep volunteering process to volunteer in individual schools or classrooms; some teachers seemed to have less structured processes for participating in classroom events, relying on sign-up sheets or email requests for classroom volunteers. In addition to chaperoning, volunteer opportunities mentioned by school staff or parents included volunteering to participate in elementary classroom-based events like story time or morning meetings, volunteering to provide general support to front office staff or classrooms as a room parent, or on rare occasions, volunteering to lead a lesson or present on an experience or vocation. Some family members also described volunteering as part of athletic or music boosters, primarily by helping to support fundraising or helping to maintain uniforms or costumes.

### **Major Theme: Processes and Procedures for Engagement**

Each individual school had slightly different mechanisms in place to plan, support, communicate, and structure events and activities. However, a few key themes emerged across schools related to the processes and procedures in place to facilitate such events.

**Structural Patterns.** FACE Center-sponsored activities were routinely described as providing childcare and interpretation services that were perceived as facilitators to attendance and

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<sup>9</sup> As of January 1, 2017, a social security number was no longer required to volunteer with ACPS.

participation. In contrast, few school-sponsored events provided the same services, which may limit some families' participation. In reflecting on opportunities for family engagement, many school-level staff reported that the preponderance of events were held during the first half of the school year – back-to-school nights, ice cream socials, fall festivals, school picnics, even the majority of parent-teacher conferences occurred during the fall semester – which limited the opportunities for continued engagement. One additional structural concern, discussed in more detail under the *Communication* section, was that some communication about events or opportunities was distributed only or primarily through the PTA or at Principal Coffees. These events tended to have lower attendance and, in the case of PTA meetings, be more homogenous than the broader school community, potentially limiting the reach of those opportunities.

**Community Partnerships.** A few study sites and participants described key partnerships with community organizations that helped to facilitate family engagement. These included joint programs sponsored by individual schools or the FACE Center and Casa Chirilagua, working with Hispanic families; an after school program (LINK) for residents of Brent Place Apartments; and a partnership between ACPS and the Ethiopian and Eritrean Alliance for Education, working with Amharic-speaking families. Through these and other community partnerships, school staff, like this secondary school administrator, described how the FACE Center leverages connections to strengthen school communities:

*[The FACE Center] can help with trying to get parents to come to events. And more specifically, just...they know who in the community to reach out to, to kind of spread the word. It's also who you're talking to, not just translating the materials, although the FACE Center makes sure that the events we have are put out in multiple languages.*

**School-Level Differences.** Within and across schools, teachers also differed substantially in the ways in which they allowed or encouraged parents to participate in classroom events. One elementary school teacher noted:

*I have a few parents who've expressed an interest in being more involved in the classroom but a fear of not knowing what to do...they would love to do something in the classroom but they just don't really – they're insecure in their own education or lack thereof and they're not sure how they can be involved in a way that would make them feel confident.*

In contrast, a teacher at a different elementary school had existing processes in place to facilitate classroom engagement from non-English speaking families. She explained:

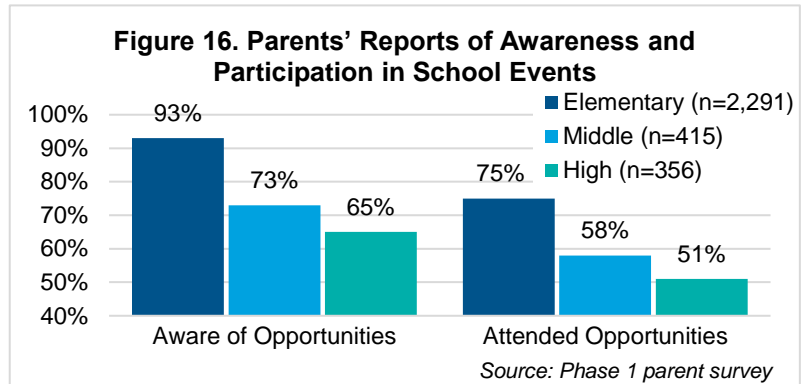
*I have a family from France. They read in French [during story time]. Some of my Hispanic families, they've read in Spanish. I ask them to choose shorter books for attention, but the pictures are great support. And some bring a translator [sic]. Their own personal translator and they sat with them and translated the book.*

More specific challenges persisted across secondary schools. Parent-teacher conferences were reported to be uniquely challenging at the middle school level. Family members reported that they did not have enough advance notice of conferences, that teachers did not have enough slots to meet with all of the families, and that the times provided did not work for the families. At the high school level, teachers and family members struggled to list any current social events specifically designed to foster family engagement, referring instead to events that no longer take place. (Sporting events and concerts were the most frequently cited, although family engagement is an ancillary product of these events, not their primary purpose.)

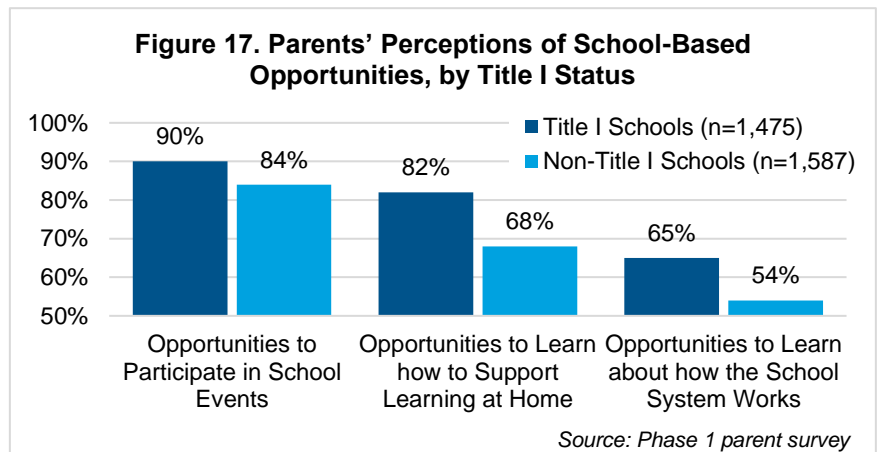
Parents who participated in the survey reported similar differences across school levels. The vast majority of elementary school parents (93%) were aware of opportunities to participate in school events and three-fourths (75%) reported attending activities at their child's school during the past



year. These rates dropped in middle school (73% aware, 58% attended) and continued to decline in high school where only two-thirds of parents surveyed (65%) were aware of opportunities to participate in school events and only half of parents had attended an activity at their child's school (51%, see Figure 16).



Across the division, parents of children at Title I schools reported higher levels of awareness of opportunities and greater rates of participation than those with children at non-Title I schools (see Figure 17). For example, 82% of survey respondents with children at Title I schools agreed or strongly agreed that their child's school provided them with opportunities to learn how to better support their child's learning at home compared with 68% of parents with children at non-Title I schools. These findings paralleled the feelings of parents with children at non-Title I schools who participated in Phase 2 focus groups and often reported fewer opportunities to participate in things like Principal Coffees, which were supported by the FACE Center only across Title I elementary schools and the two middle schools included in Phase 2. In addition, with the exception of three part-time division-wide parent liaisons and parent liaisons employed at one middle and one high school included in the Phase 2 sample, only Title I elementary schools employed these staff members, who were consistently reported to be critical to advancing family engagement efforts.



**Major Theme: Staff Professional Development**

**Teachers.** In teacher and staff focus groups, participants were asked to reflect on opportunities for professional development related to family engagement or cultural competency. The majority of teachers reported that they had participated in some sort of training that touched on these topics, but many struggled to recall the content of these opportunities. One elementary school teacher succinctly described a common response:

*Everyone does cultural competency training. I can't remember exactly what it was. I think it was customer-service related.*

Among survey respondents, 39% of elementary school staff, 42% of middle school staff, and just 17% of high school staff agreed that all staff had been trained on effective approaches to working with families of diverse cultural backgrounds. The most commonly reported training opportunities related to family engagement were a portion of new teacher orientation, some targeted training for English Learning teachers, and some training provided by ACPS's equity team. A few

elementary school teachers also reported participating in a training related to multicultural literature. Overall, elementary school teachers reported participating in relevant trainings either at their school or through the division at higher rates than secondary school teachers. There was a general consensus across these focus groups that teachers would value greater training in family engagement, particularly around cultural competency and awareness, best practices for cross-cultural or cross-lingual communication, and support in building the language skills of teachers. A few participants also highlighted the need for training on available resources to promote family engagement, including one secondary school administrator who said:

*We're not lacking in resources. [But] I think we do need to have reviews on how to use the language line. I think it's really internal trainings on how to use some of the resources we have like the language line, like social workers, like the counselors, because we have a lot of resources there. And I don't think that we take advantage of those resources as frequently as we should. And so it's retraining them.*

**Staff.** School staff (front office staff or other support staff members) were largely unable to cite any training that they had received related to family engagement. A few support staff members discussed webinars or graduate school work that related to family engagement topics, but no front office staff members reported participating in related training. Teachers and staff noted that paraprofessionals were often not invited to participate in district- or school-wide professional development, or that if they were invited, they would not be compensated for their time, so often chose not to attend. However, there was a perceived need for more training for front office staff at all levels around cultural competency, community engagement, and customer service.

### **Strengths, Challenges and Stakeholder Feedback**

#### **STRENGTHS**

**Elementary and Title I Schools.** Parents with children in elementary schools or at Title I schools reported substantially higher rates of awareness of and attendance at events and activities compared with parents of children in other schools. Similarly, these parents reported higher levels of agreement that their child's school provided them with opportunities to learn how to support their child's learning at home or to learn about how the school system works. Elementary school teachers reported similarly high levels of agreement that programs and activities focused on helping parents understand how children were learning, and that the school offered workshops or other sessions to help families understand how children were being taught.

**Available Programs.** The events most commonly described by teachers or staff as strengthening family engagement were social or community events that included families. International or multicultural nights were reported the most often, with other events including start-of-school events (e.g., Popsicles on the Playground, back-to-school night, orientation), and events held in the communities of harder to reach groups, such as at apartment complexes or community centers also mentioned. One elementary school principal described the benefits of these social events:

*The other piece of family engagement that I'm very pleased with is that we recognize, as a school, that people don't like to come to meetings.... Things that involve children, their children, we're more likely to have people show up. So we capitalize on those moments and we try to build as many of those into the school year as possible. Where families are just coming in to be part of our community with no expectation other than to come in and enjoy...enjoy the school, see what your children are doing, and no pressure...Just come and celebrate with us.*

A few participants also described educational opportunities for families as strengths such as parenting classes (offered in Spanish and English) or English classes for non-English speaking parents.

## CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

**Work Schedules.** The biggest logistical concern reported in interviews and focus groups was parent work schedules, which was also mirrored in survey findings where 42% of parents reported that their work obligations posed a “medium” to “very large” problem in becoming involved in their child’s school. Respondents noted that parents they perceived to be lower-income most often had work schedules that impact their school engagement, either because they worked multiple jobs, or because they could not take time off without losing wages. Yet, teachers reported that parents they perceived to be affluent, often with high-stress jobs (e.g., on Capitol Hill) were also under-engaged. Respondents indicated that no matter what time school events were held, some parents would be unable to attend due to their work schedule, or because they were tired after work. In addition, parent work schedules presented a barrier to family engagement because many parents were unavailable to talk on the phone or meet in person during the days/hours that teachers were typically working.

**Transportation and Proximity.** Another structural barrier that families described related to the transit infrastructure in relationship to how individual schools were districted. At some schools, a major road or dangerous intersection lay between the school and the neighborhoods that school served. Many families didn’t live in the immediate neighborhood of the school and reported not having cars. Therefore, their only option to get to evening events at the school was to walk or to rely on public transportation. These family members reported that Metro or DASH buses rarely had direct routes from their neighborhoods to the schools, requiring families to build in additional time to get to and from events. School staff reported that the FACE Center sometimes provided division buses for evening events, but that that was not an option for all school events. School staff also echoed parents’ reports that the local bus routes from the neighborhood to the school was often very roundabout.

Furthermore, some families reported not attending events because they lacked access to a car or because bus service between their home and school was inconvenient or prohibitively expensive. Indeed, nearly one-quarter of parents surveyed (24%) reported that transportation challenges were at least a “small problem” in allowing them to be engaged in their child’s school.

**Barriers to Volunteering.** As already discussed, the processes for volunteering were not well understood by all school staff or families and were particularly challenging for those who worked during the day and may be unable to get to the Central Office or a school with a parent liaison during business hours, undocumented families, and those who did not speak English. However, ACPS’ volunteer handbook was available online in multiple languages and with school-based volunteer coordinators, although no participant in Phase 2 reported an awareness of this handbook when describing volunteer opportunities. One elementary school teacher highlighted these challenges, saying:

*We’ve had a couple of times where a parent wanted to come on a field trip. And because of the language and transportation and a number of other barriers, it was difficult for them to navigate that process of becoming FACE Center certified, prior to the field trip taking place. So families that wanted to become engaged, there were institutional issues that were kind of preventing them.*

Furthermore, school staff reported that volunteer opportunities are routinely sent home in English and Spanish. This aligned with parent groups in Arabic and Amharic who were much less likely

to be aware of volunteer opportunities at every school level. One participant in an Amharic-speaking focus group plainly stated:

*| We don't have opportunities [to volunteer]. Nobody invites us.*

### STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK

Recommendations for ways to improve family-facing activities and events and opportunities for family engagement varied tremendously across participants, reflecting the diversity of existing events and opportunities across grade-levels and schools. A few cross-cutting recommendations arose across multiple interviews or focus groups and included:

- Host a volunteer fair or more prominently display volunteer information at back-to-school nights to better explain the volunteering process and opportunities.
- One secondary school focus group discussed the idea of having a “back-to-the neighborhood” night instead of back-to-school night to bring teachers into the neighborhoods prior to the start of the school year.
- Also at a secondary school focus group, participants discussed holding an art festival on the sidewalks outside of the school to engage families and the community.
- At every level, parents recommended hosting some Principal Coffees in the late afternoon or evening to allow different parents to attend. This was particularly recommended for Principal Coffees that discuss critical school-wide issues like SOLs or school safety.
- Teachers recommended redistributing some of the more social events sponsored by the school to be more evenly distributed across the school year rather than concentrated in the fall to facilitate ongoing relationship building.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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Over the last decade, ACPS has worked to establish a framework of 360° engagement that involves families, classroom teachers, support staff, administrators, division-wide support, and community partners. Although the depth of and opportunities for engagement across each of these groups varied by individual school and by school level, the underlying structure was seen at every school included in this study and provides a solid foundation to build upon. Across ACPS, family engagement practices and attitudes were observed to be integrated into educational programming and systems rather than implemented as piecemeal add-on components.<sup>10</sup> This structure helps to promote the sustainability of ACPS’s family engagement initiative and improve outcomes for children and families (see U.S. HHS, 2018). Where additional pieces, described throughout the following recommendations, can continue to be integrated and systematized, this would further strengthen the work that the division has begun.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Many of the challenges faced across the division and at individual schools reflect broader struggles with full family engagement across the country, and, as such, ACPS is well-positioned to benefit from the efforts of others in mitigating or overcoming these challenges. Across all levels, leaders and administrators should continually assess and identify ways to elevate their family engagement practices through expansion, deeper engagement, and institutionalization of practices and processes. The following are targeted recommendations for continual improvement that draw upon the research literature and best practices and are aligned with the family engagement concept map that guided this study. Within each family engagement domain,

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<sup>10</sup> This aligns with the Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013), the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework (U.S. HHS 2018), and others, which are built around organization conditions that view family engagement as systemic, integrated, and comprehensive.

recommendations are prioritized based on the amount of supporting research. Where recommendations align with theoretical or conceptual frameworks for family engagement, those have been noted in footnotes.

## ***Environment/Culture***

This study's concept map for family engagement framework operationalized the domain of *environment/culture* to include a welcoming school environment, accessibility, supportive community partnerships, and positive interaction with staff.

***Positive Interactions with Staff.*** Across the division, the majority of parents surveyed reported that their child's school was a friendly environment for families and that they felt welcome at their child's school. However, these results declined as children got older, with at least one-third of parents of high school students reporting in the Phase 1 survey that the school was not a friendly environment or that they did not feel welcome. This suggests additional areas for potential improvement that may uniquely benefit families at the secondary school level, which could include:

- increased comfort among staff with language services, and awareness of procedures for using language services including the Language Line and requested translated materials;
- additional support/training for front office staff (potential topics include cultural competency or equity training, the role of these staff in fostering a supportive organizational culture that facilitates family engagement [e.g., Douglass & Klerman, 2012], and what principals in Phase 2 referred to as "customer service" [i.e. making visitors feel valued and respected]); and
- resources for parents with children transitioning into secondary school (DeSpain, Conderman, & Gerzel-Short, 2018), such as:
  - a guide for whom to contact about various topics, and their contact information (e.g., front office, grade-level or institute offices, counselors, team teachers); and
  - information about how elementary, middle, and high school expectations and processes differ (see the "Relationships" recommendations for more on transitional events).

***Supportive Community Partnerships.*** Various partnerships reported across the division included academic partnerships with organizations like Mathnasium, partnerships with grant programs such as the 21st Century Grant benefiting Brent Place Apartments, and partnerships with community organizations including Casa Chirilagua and the Ethiopian and Eritrean Alliance for Education.

- ACPS should work to sustain and deepen these partnerships, leveraging their connections to the community to increase the credibility of ACPS and promote trust and meaningful relationships among the populations these organizations serve.<sup>7</sup>
- Division staff also reported a burgeoning partnership with a local mosque; continuing to explore partnerships with faith-based organizations as well as with existing partners could be a strong resource in identifying a more diverse and representative range of community leaders to support individual schools and division-wide efforts (discussed more under the "Decision-Making" recommendations).<sup>11</sup>

***Physical Environment and Accessibility.*** Through this evaluation, research staff observed a large amount of displays and artwork across every school level that represented the diversity of the division and of individual schools. Likewise, school sites in this evaluation were observed to be clean and kept in conditions ranging from good to the best possible conditions. With limited

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<sup>11</sup> This is aligned with the "collaborating with the community" type of involvement on Epstein's framework (Epstein et al., 2002).



exceptions, front offices were set up to foster welcoming environments, with no barriers between families and staff and comfortable furniture available should parents need to wait. There are, however, a few targeted improvements that could increase the accessibility of the physical school environment, allowing parents to be more fully engaged:

- Directional and explanatory signs observed throughout school buildings were predominately available only in English. The addition of signage in multiple languages inside schools (e.g., directing to/identifying front office, auditorium, gym, security office, restrooms) could increase the comfort level of a diverse range of families and allow them to navigate school buildings with greater ease.
- Very few observed sites had fully handicapped-accessible front entrances or main office entrances. Some had ramps or did not have stairs up to the front doors, but only a small few had automatic door openers at the front door or at the front office, presenting a potential limitation to parents or children with physical limitations. Where possible, installing these doors could reduce accessibility barriers.

## **Relationships**

The concept map's domain of *relationships* includes elements of mutual respect, building trust, relational barriers, and cultural competency.

**Mutual Respect and Trust.** A wide variety of family engagement literature has found that high-quality family engagement practices are achieved when school leaders model professional, caring relationships (e.g., Douglass, 2011), and establish relational trust and accountability (e.g., Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Thus, leveraging the knowledge, expertise, life experiences, and cultures of families through meaningful relationships can enrich educational programs and services and build stronger families, school staff, and community. At many schools, school staff and parents reported positive interactions and relationships that were built on respect and trust, while a more limited number of teachers and families described distrustful relationships, particularly with front office staff. ACPS families reported a high sense of trust for elementary school staff, but this trust declined sharply for middle school staff and continued to decline in high school.

- ACPS could work to capitalize on the strong relationships at elementary schools by adopting similar best practices and programs across school levels. This could include:
  - providing greater opportunities for conferences in secondary school,<sup>12</sup> and/or
  - hosting Principal Coffees at a variety of times of day for parents of rising sixth and ninth grade students jointly hosted by elementary and middle or middle and high school administrators to help facilitate parents' transition to a new school.
- Principals and school administrators play a critical role in setting a positive school climate and organizational culture, which in turn sets a foundation for family engagement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Hemmelgarn, Glisson, & James, 2006). As such, ACPS could provide principals and/or school leadership with targeted, practice-driven training on how to model positive school-family relationships and how to create a broader school culture that is welcoming and respectful to both staff and families (Douglass & Klerman, 2012).
  - Aligned with establishing an organizational culture that supports family engagement, ACPS could explicitly add family engagement to job descriptions for front office staff and administrators to more clearly define the importance of these staff in establishing environments that foster family engagement.

**Overcoming Relational Barriers.** Complex and varied relational dynamics were reported within and across classrooms, schools, and levels, suggesting that there is not a one-size-fits-all

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<sup>12</sup> Epstein's "Communicating" type of involvement recommends conferences with every parent.

approach to building relational capital to overcome barriers. However, three recommendations may address the largest themes:

- Wherever possible, employing parent liaisons at every ACPS school and full-time language-specific division-wide parent liaisons could help support a range of relationships across the division.
- In some neighborhoods, older, more established subgroups reported feeling the pains and confusion of gentrification. Leveraging Principal Coffees to facilitate discussions about gentrification or equity, or incorporating leadership opportunities at these meetings for families from among the historic communities could help foster understanding and elevate voices at risk of marginalization. In addition, the work of parent liaisons and the FACE center can help facilitate relationships within and across both new and historic communities. Proactively reaching across socioeconomic and racial lines through these efforts to build relationships may help overcome real and perceived barriers to engagement.
- Across ACPS, many transient and new families cycle into the schools each year. Building upon existing school orientations and back-to-school nights, ACPS could work to design a buddy system for new families, which could support parent liaisons and school staff in making more personal connections (Flamboyant Foundation, 2011; Smith, Kuzin, De Pedro, & Wohlstetter, 2009). These buddies could be families from the same home country as new families, families well-connected in the community, or families who live near new families. These buddies could help facilitate relationships, provide more personal orientation to the school system, and could also be a pipeline for school leadership. This effort could be championed by local PTAs or by the division as a whole, both of which would be well positioned to benefit from the identification of additional leaders.<sup>13</sup>

**Cultural Competency.** Although the division and school-based administrators including principals and assistant principals have participated in quarterly equity trainings, across schools, staff and teachers reported desires for additional training and supports to effectively relate to all families. Bilingual and diverse staff including parent liaisons helped provide some degree of organic cultural competency, but further steps could be taken, including:

- Division and school staff could conduct division-wide individual self-assessments of cultural competency and implicit bias. This could be followed by training on cultural competency or racial equity trainings, which can help identify unspoken and hidden obstacles to engaging families, address difficult or changing community dynamics, and broaden and strengthen staff perspectives about the families they work alongside.
- Discussed further under the “Communication” recommendation, the division could work to hire additional bilingual staff or bilingual parent liaisons, particularly to support Arabic- and Amharic-speaking families.

### **Decision-Making**

The conceptual domain of *decision-making* includes awareness, families’ feeling heard, responsiveness, having a voice, being able to share opinions, collaboration, and inclusive voice.

**Collaboration, Having a Voice and Inclusive Voice, Sharing Opinions.** Among principals and teachers, the most commonly cited platforms for sharing opinions and collaboration were Principal

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<sup>13</sup> Many K-12 schools across the county have implemented or recommend similar programs including some New York City Public Schools, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, and the Oregon Department of Education along with Head Start and Charter school programs across the country. This aligns most closely with the “volunteering” type of involvement within Epstein’s framework, fits into the Family and Staff Capacity Outcomes section of the Dual-Capacity Building Framework for Family–School Partnerships, and maps directly onto the “Family Connections to Peers and Community” indicator of Family Outcomes within the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework.

Coffees and school-based PTAs. However, each of these platforms could do more to promote fuller collaboration.

- At almost every school, principals, staff, and/or parents reported a lack of diversity or representativeness of their local PTA. This is a compounding challenge as many principals and teachers described presenting reports, resources, or information directly to the PTA, or relying on the PTA as the sole provider of family input on school decisions. ACPS is certainly not the only school district to struggle with this, and can benefit from resources developed by the national PTA and practices utilized by other schools, including seeking recommendations from school leadership for parent leaders from diverse backgrounds who may not be a part of the PTA and intentionally inviting their participation, or by offering training on equity and inclusion to PTA leaders across the division (National PTA, 2016).
- Given these limitations of many PTAs across ACPS, principals and school leadership could look for other opportunities and platforms to disseminate information (such as school-home compact, school improvement plans, and presentations on academic programs) and provide platforms for decision-making, focusing instead on leveraging Principal Coffees – which comprised relatively small, but diverse groups of parents – advisory meetings, or meetings called to discuss specific topics and designed according to best practices in equity and inclusion.
  - Work done by Teaching for Change through their Parent Organization Equity and Inclusion Tool may also be a helpful resource in thinking through meeting structure, communication, participation, group and power dynamics, and fundraising. As a division, ACPS could work to model these practices in Principal Coffees and across advisory committees, which were also frequently cited as unrepresentative and lacking in racial/ethnic diversity (Teaching for Change, 2017).
  - In addition, principals could encourage PTA presidents to attend all Principal Coffees with the expressed goal of building relationships with families there to help demystify the PTA and encourage participation.
- Principal Coffees often provided opportunities for interaction between individual families and between families and staff, with the Principal Coffees observed during Phase 2 including diverse families who spoke a range of languages. However, more could be done to encourage parental feedback, solicit parental opinions, and create space to hear from a range of perspectives (Teaching for Change, 2017). For example, many people prefer not to offer opinions in front of a large group of people; this can be related to cultural upbringing, English proficiency, or just personality. To combat this in the division:
  - principals could be encouraged to provide comment cards to solicit targeted or open-ended feedback about upcoming decisions or general concerns;
  - Principal Coffees could include a 10-15 minute open forum where parents could mill around and write or report suggestions to individuals at targeted stations representing varying subjects of concern (e.g., busing, classroom management, SOLs, attendance policy); or
  - teachers or staff could facilitate small group discussions responding to specific prompts that vary based on the topic of the meeting.

**Awareness.** Staff were aware of the needs of their varied populations, even if they were lacking in specific strategies for addressing all of those needs. Furthermore, parents reported high levels of awareness of opportunities for their engagement, although these declined across school levels. In addition, participants at every level in Phase 2 described far fewer opportunities for parents to learn not just *about* academic opportunities but to learn *how* to support their children’s academics. To further support awareness and access, ACPS could work to build on the large amounts of information and materials already produced by schools and teachers for a variety of events and programs by broadening their dissemination or availability.

- Individual schools could curate these materials and provide access to them in designated resource rooms.<sup>14</sup> These spaces could also include information on community programs and resources, a calendar of school events, and access to computers for families to track students' academic progress in school-based digital platforms.
- ACPS has several robust communication and information systems that were not fully utilized by families in this study. The division could build on existing trainings and materials to increase awareness of these digital platforms and related trainings by making them available or easily identifiable via computers in a parent resource room and by promoting these trainings through additional communication channels to make sure that families are fully leveraging all available resources. In addition, the division could work towards greater translation of these trainings and platforms to allow for broader understanding and access.

**Families Feeling Heard, Responsiveness.** Families reported only a few instances where their concerns were not being addressed.

- Within middle schools, administrators could work to allocate additional slots for parent-teacher conferences, particularly among sixth grade teachers to help parents adjust to the transition from elementary school.<sup>15</sup>
  - This is a common challenge among secondary schools, and secondary school teachers could build on the promising work of others to promote academic socialization through conferences, equipping families to communicate with their children about their educational and vocational aspirations, discussing learning strategies, and providing families with enough information to empower them to link material discussed in school with their child's interests and goals. (See, for example, Hill & Tyson, 2009; Wang, Hill, & Hofkens, 2014; Wigfield, Byrnes, & Eccles, 2006).
  - Other promising practices including Academic Parent-Teacher Teams or grade level dialogues reduce the traditional parent-teacher conferences in favor of more frequent group discussions with families across an entire grade, teaching team, or individual teacher (WestEd, 2017; Teaching for Change, 2016). These meetings provide a platform to exchange more detailed information about course or curriculum expectations, discuss effective practices for home learning, and provide families with an opportunity to foster relationships with other families.
- ACPS could continue to advance improvements in the receptiveness of the division's transportation office to best meet the needs of families and the safety of students, particularly across secondary schools.

### **Communication**

The communication domain of the study's concept map includes two-way communication, communication's content, process, and method, as well as timeliness, multilingual, and family-friendly. As such, findings within this domain discuss both the methods of communication (encompassing the themes of process, timeliness, two-way communication, and elements of multilingual and family-friendly) and the content of communication (encompassing facets of multilingual and family friendly).

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<sup>14</sup> The concept of a resource room supports the "Learning at Home" involvement type within Epstein's Framework and is also directly cited as a potential practice within the "Volunteering" type of involvement within this Framework.

<sup>15</sup> Epstein's "Communicating" type of involvement recommends conferences with every parent.

**Communication Systems.** ACPS brings a variety of strengths to their communications systems that already reflect best practices in family engagement. The division should continue to build upon these strengths and more fully leverage communication systems for family engagement.<sup>16</sup>

- ACPS should continue building off the strengths of the Language Line, translators, and contracted interpreters to serve the diverse families across Alexandria. Where feasible, additional supports to these areas could include:
  - supplemental training for teachers and staff on the process of using and connecting families with the Language Line;<sup>17</sup>
  - additional phones with the ability to make three-way calls or link in the Language Line without needing to disconnect and call back families;
  - continued promotion of English-based family-friendly communication that focuses on accessibility and readability prior to document translation to support clear and concise translation;
  - strengthened Arabic translations;
  - hiring additional translators or elevating part-time translators, particularly in Arabic and Amharic to full-time;
  - guidelines for interpreters about ACPS's context and educational system to support accurate interpretation and requiring requestors to provide pertinent information;
  - utilizing Arabic- and Amharic-speaking staff members or contracted interpreters to record ACPS Central Office's automated options (currently these were available only in English and Spanish);
  - extending the work of the existing Arabic- and Amharic-speaking division-level parent liaisons by bringing them on in a full-time capacity; and
  - hiring additional bilingual staff at the school level, particularly bilingual Arabic or Amharic staff.
- Teachers and staff frequently reported relying on bilingual school staff to translate school-based materials or notes exchanged between teachers and families, above and beyond these staff members' own job responsibilities. The division should continue to encourage all staff to use the pre-established resources and systems available for translation and interpretation, to ensure greater accuracy of language supports. However, in acknowledgment that informal translation and interpretation will likely persist, the division could consider offering stipends to bilingual staff who support these language services, to reduce burnout and compensate these staff for this additional work.<sup>18</sup>
- ACPS and school administrators could continue to encourage teachers and school leaders to proactively plan to have recurring forms translated (e.g., "get to know you" surveys sent out by many elementary school teachers, boilerplate templates for field trip volunteers) so that they can be available as needed.

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<sup>16</sup> Each of these recommendations is in service of Epstein's "Communicating" type of involvement, seeking to further ACPS's effective school-to-home and home-to-school communication.

<sup>17</sup> Based on reviewed policy document, parent liaisons were trained on how to use the Language Line and basic information on how this service works is available on the ACPS webpage, but the vast majority of staff did not seem to be aware of these resources.

<sup>18</sup> ACPS may consider looking at similar programs that have been set up by the California School Employees Association ([https://www.csea.com/web/Portals/400/adam/Content/gMXn5Gdj2U-Q58\\_O7GjJRg/Column1Info/MOU%20Bilingual%20Nov17.pdf](https://www.csea.com/web/Portals/400/adam/Content/gMXn5Gdj2U-Q58_O7GjJRg/Column1Info/MOU%20Bilingual%20Nov17.pdf)), Pasadena Unified School District (<https://www.pusd.us/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=334&dataid=414&FileName=Selective%20Certification%20and%20Bilingual%20Stipend%20Request.pdf>), or Austin Independent School District ([https://www.austinisd.org/sites/default/files/dre-reports/rb/12.29\\_RB\\_Bilingual\\_Stipend\\_Payments\\_Allocation\\_Analysis.pdf](https://www.austinisd.org/sites/default/files/dre-reports/rb/12.29_RB_Bilingual_Stipend_Payments_Allocation_Analysis.pdf)).



- ACPS could consider recommending or sponsoring digital apps for use across the division. This could streamline the number of platforms that parents have to learn and would minimize the number of platforms currently relied upon for translated communication.
  - Although the majority of non-English speaking parents reported that email was only their second or third most preferred communication method, this may be due at least in part to preponderance of email communication reported by school staff to be delivered in English as well as a reliance on Google Translate by these staff. ACPS would benefit from the development of guidelines for the translation of written digital communication to ensure that this communication is delivered accurately to all families.
  - In addition, as more communication moves digital, ACPS should be mindful not to leave behind families who don't speak English, have limited technology access, or low literacy. This could be countered, in part, by the availability of computers in a parent resource room, for use by families, by broader digital translation options, or by providing a limited number of printed materials available for families.

**Communication Content and Timeliness.** Families generally felt well-communicated to division- and school-wide processes and events like registration, course selection, and orientation, but requested refinements in communication about safety concerns and academics.

- Across the majority of parent focus groups, respondents described communication about lock-downs, building heat/AC, power outages, and other safety issues as not up to their standards and affecting their perceptions of the school. Based on reviewed policy documents, ACPS sends emergency communication to individual schools if the impact is localized and to multiple schools if the impact is broader. Although mentioned by only a subset of parents in focus groups, where present, these represented an outsized concern, hindering their broader engagement and shaping their perceptions of ACPS.
  - For events that result in a significant disruption to education – including but not limited to school safety and building functionality – parents appreciated recent improvements in texted alerts and notifications but requested more follow-up on what was being done to fix the underlying problem after the initial incident had been resolved.
- Parents also reported a variety of targeted concerns related to academic communication and offered a few actionable recommendations for improvement that align with best practices, including:
  - Greater use of the available translated report cards by schools would be a benefit, even if translating specific comments or individual feedback would not be feasible.
  - Increasing access to or awareness of access to course syllabi, particularly at the secondary school level could help parents provide greater support for their children's education and allow parents to bring more targeted questions or feedback to teachers and administrators. Although other school districts have many ways to do this, some best practices include making these broadly available in a parent resource room, distributing them at orientations, or providing them at the first parent-teacher conference.

### **Activities and Future Desires**

The final dimension of the study's family engagement concept map is activities and future desires, comprising events, professional development, opportunities for ongoing learning, and opportunities or strategies for engagement.

**Events and Opportunities for Engagement.** Schools across ACPS reported a large number of social and educational events and opportunities, both supported by the FACE Center and

independent of them. Elementary schools reported the greater overall numbers of events while secondary schools reported primarily academic opportunities.

- Grassroots organizing and community decision-making are critical principles of family engagement, allowing community stakeholders to have a voice in both policy and practice (see, for example, Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Teaching Tolerance, 2009; Teaching for Change, 2016). As ACPS continues to design and refine family engagement events and activities, building off of the promising ideas of teachers and families from across the division can generate buy-in and enthusiasm. Some promising participant suggestions from Phase 2 included:
  - hosting a community movie night at a secondary school, in the gym or on the football field;
  - holding a sidewalk art-show showcasing students' work in front of the secondary schools; and
  - piloting a few "back-to-the-neighborhood" nights instead of back-to-school night to bring teachers into the neighborhoods prior to the start of the school year and assess the benefits to engagement.
- Home visits can serve both social and educational functions and have been shown to make families feel more like partners in their child's academics, have a positive impact on student learning, and can help teachers bridge cultural gaps that might exist and challenge their own assumptions about their students (Flamboyant Foundation, 2018; McKnight, Venkateswaran, Laird, Robles, & Shalev, 2017; Middleton, 2008; Sheldon & Jung, 2015; Venkateswaran, Laird, Robles & Jeffries, 2018). After providing professional development to teachers on effective home visit strategies (as described later in this section), ACPS could gradually increase the number of home visits by first concentrating on the entry grades of kindergarten, sixth grade, and ninth grade as well as new students, then building toward a goal of visiting all families in their homes.<sup>19</sup>
  - Some families may not be comfortable inviting teachers into their homes, so offering alternatives like apartment lobbies, libraries, or neighborhood coffee shops may help increase families' comfort levels.
- A few structural changes may also support broader engagement:
  - Although 18% of families reported that technology was at least a "small problem" in becoming engaged with their child's school, 42% reported that their work obligations posed a "medium" to "very large" problem. Hosting Principal Coffee webinars or Principal Coffees later in the evening may allow a different range of families to benefit from critical information presented at Principal Coffees.
  - Periodically, the division could hold school board meetings at schools across ACPS, particularly those on the west side of Alexandria, to encourage families local to those areas to participate. This would help level the playing field of participation by reducing the barrier of transportation for those who do not live close to the Central Office and promise a diversity of voices and perspectives at those meetings.
  - To minimize the burden on families to participate, schools and the division could work to set aside a budget for childcare at a broader array of events. In addition, where possible, ACPS could provide free targeted transportation to events through ACPS buses or DASH vouchers.
- In addition, to facilitate deeper connections, particularly at the elementary school level, school staff could work to reschedule some existing social events to be held later in the year, to build upon relationships established at the beginning of the year.

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<sup>19</sup> Home visits align with Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's Level 1 "Parent's Perceptions of Invitations to be Involved" and Level 1.5 "Parent Involvement Forms" and can also support Mapp & Kuttner's Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships.

**Volunteering.** Many parents and staff found the process for volunteering for field trips to be burdensome or complicated, reporting that it limited participation of some families. Although the process may be necessary to ensure student safety, other steps could be taken to streamlining the process or broadening volunteering opportunities.

- Individual schools, particularly at the secondary level, could generate school-specific lists of “skilled” volunteers as a way to promote more engagement not tied to language, education level, or work schedule. This could be used to solicit volunteers for activities that could be done during after-school hours or during the summer, possibly without background checks if students aren’t in the building. This could include: skilled craftsmen to help paint, garden, or construct theater sets; people with sewing skills to support band/orchestra/choir boosters adjust uniforms; web-designers to help build or support classroom webpages; event planners to support school-based events; or communications and design professionals to help with graphic design and to advise on communications for the school or the PTA.<sup>20</sup>
- Within elementary schools, teachers and principals could work to create broader opportunities for family members to read in the classrooms. This could include: parents reading a book on their child’s birthday, inviting a diverse range of families to read stories that celebrate various cultures and backgrounds, or creating a schedule of classroom reading where parents could sign up based on their availability. Parents could be encouraged to read in the language of their home country; picture books can help bridge the language divide and provide cross-language connections.

**Professional Development and Opportunities for Ongoing Learning.** ACPS could work to create opportunities for all staff, specifically front office staff, to participate in professional development related to family engagement and cultural competency. Among survey respondents, 39% of elementary school staff, 42% of middle school staff, and just 17% of high school staff agreed that all staff had been trained on effective approaches to working with families of diverse cultural backgrounds, representing a clear need across the division.

- Home visits were being conducted at a limited number of schools already, although staff at these schools reported limited training outside of shadowing opportunities prior to conducting home visits. If the division would like to broaden their use of home visits, professional development and practical guidance would greatly support the success of this effort. The division could benefit from the decades of work done by the Head Start program and other early childhood programs and school districts in conducting home visits (e.g., OPRE, 2019; San Francisco Unified School District, 2019).
  - ACPS could also follow the model of many school districts and provide gas stipends or other incentives to encourage home visits and reduce the burden of teacher participation (Middleton, 2008).
- The division could support broader staff participation in self-assessments of cultural competency and implicit bias, followed by trainings on cultural competency, racial equity, or anti-bias education as described under the “Relationships” recommendations (see Hanover Research, 2015; Scharf, 2014).<sup>21</sup>
- Parent liaisons and parent leaders could help facilitate trainings to offer real-life examples and illustrations based on their experiences and interactions. These first-hand accounts may resonate more with teachers and staff than reports from third-party trainers.

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<sup>20</sup> Volunteering is the fourth type of involvement in Epstein’s framework. These volunteers could also link schools to local landscaping businesses, event planning companies, or communications firms and deeper connections across the community, aligned with the “collaborating with the community” type of involvement on Epstein’s framework.

<sup>21</sup> Hanover Research examined best practices in cultural competency training and included ACPS as a case study, alongside other Virginia school districts.

## CONCLUSIONS

This formative evaluation of family engagement across ACPS involved a two-phase mixed-methods study of teachers, school and division staff, and family members across ACPS. This study explored five key research questions: (1) To what extent do ACPS schools and Central Office departments foster a welcoming and supportive **environment** for families? (2) To what extent is ACPS developing mutual **relationships** with families? (3) To what extent does ACPS include families in educational **decision-making** of their children? (4) To what extent do ACPS' **communication** practices meet the needs of families? And (5) To what extent do current ACPS family engagement initiatives and **activities** meet the needs of families?

In examining these five domains of family engagement, this evaluation found that the division's primary strengths related to the elementary and Title I schools, the dedication of teachers and staff, school- and division-specific resources, and available school programs and online engagement platforms. Key school- or community-related challenges to family engagement that were reported throughout this evaluation included staff limitation to engage families, cultural challenges, community changes, communication limitations, and representation on committees and advisory groups. Individual barriers also affected family engagement including logistical challenges, technology access, language barriers, and structural community barriers.

ACPS invested considerable resources to develop, fund, and execute this evaluation, which has produced numerous recommendations for ways that the division can build on its existing strengths and unique context to more holistically improve family engagement. To support the utilization of this evaluation (Patton, 2008), this report concludes with two, high-level recommendations that cut across several family engagement domains and could be prioritized for systematic improvement across the division.

### **Priority Recommendation: Relationship Building**

Relationships are at the heart of family engagement and cut across the concept maps' domains of environment, communication, and relationships. A key investment that ACPS could make to support relationship building is more comprehensive family engagement-related training for all staff, with a focus on front office staff and secondary school teachers and staff. This could incorporate principles of cultural sensitivity, equity training, and customer service training that ACPS already has in place for various subgroups like school administrators or front office support staff. In addition to drawing upon these existing trainings, a more comprehensive family engagement training could also address best practices in school-to-home communication, community building, anti-bias education, parent outreach, and more.<sup>22</sup>

Investing in additional key staff can also help support the division's family engagement efforts in relationship building. In particular, ACPS could work to find funds to increase the number of parent liaisons to include a full-time parent liaison at each school as well as full-time Arabic-, Amharic-, and Spanish-speaking parent liaisons who serve the whole division. In addition, increasing the number of bilingual school-based staff, particularly Arabic- and Amharic-speaking staff, could increase the comfort level of a broader range of in engaging directly with the school. (Bilingual Spanish-speaking staff were already in place in almost all schools in the Phase 2 sample, but there may be places where increasing the number of these staff would also be a benefit to families.)

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<sup>22</sup> For more examples of family engagement professional development, see resources available through Teaching for Change; Teaching Tolerance; the National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement; or the BUILD Initiative.

Finally, in-person interaction between families and schools decreased substantially from elementary to secondary school. The division could work to expand opportunities for face-to-face interactions between school staff and parents across middle and high schools through increased parent-teacher conferences or the introduction of Academic Parent-Teacher Teams or grade-level dialogues in secondary schools. This could also include additional school-specific programs focused on relationship-building, particularly during the second semester to allow for sustained interactions. Finally, Principal Coffees could be hosted at all secondary schools at varied times throughout the school year to allow for greater opportunities for parents to interface with school leadership.

### ***Priority Recommendation: Expanded Resource Utilization***

The division has already made numerous investments in communication and technology platforms and in the development of guidance related to family engagement that cuts across the concept map's domains of communication, decision-making, and activities and future desires. Yet this evaluation found that many of these resources were reported to be un- or under-utilized with pockets of participants who were unaware of processes or procedures the division had in place to facilitate engagement. This included resources like the Language Line, translation services, PowerSchool and Canvas, the volunteering process, translated report cards, and activities at secondary schools. As a first step, ACPS could engage in a more systematic internal assessment to determine why these resources were being under-utilized. Then, aligned with those findings, ACPS should move to increase awareness of or effective utilization of those existing resources. This could have a far-reaching benefit to family engagement across the division without adding significant cost, since the division already has these resources and processes in place.

### ***Acknowledgements***

ICF is grateful to the school and division staff and families who shared their time and experiences with us to inform this report. We would also like to thank the parent liaisons, administrative staff, and community partners who helped to coordinate Phase 2 data collection and/or ensure the availability of hard copy Phase 1 surveys to parents who may not have had access to the digital survey. Outreach assistants who made personal phone calls in multiple languages to encourage parents to complete the Phase 1 survey or who facilitated survey completion for parents with low-literacy also greatly contributed to this study. Finally, we would like to acknowledge the work of Christina Constantine, Jennifer Mursaloglu, Clinton Page, Taneika Tukan, and Jennifer Whitson for their efforts in designing and analyzing the Phase 1 survey data and guiding the overall evaluation.



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# APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY

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## OVERVIEW OF THE METHODOLOGY

Together with ACPS, ICF designed a flexible approach to evaluate family engagement from a broad perspective that built upon ACPS's Family Engagement Conceptual Framework. The evaluation methodology described here included a comprehensive, culturally-responsive formative evaluation designed to generate timely, credible, and actionable information intended to be used to support program improvement and decision-making.

During Phase 1, ACPS staff conducted two parallel surveys of staff and families focused on the five key areas of their family engagement conceptual framework. For Phase 2, ICF used rigorous qualitative data collection and analysis techniques to broadly examine family engagement practices, services, and perspectives through interviews, focus groups, observations, and secret shopper phone calls. The Phase 1 survey design was used to inform Phase 2 instrument development and findings from the Phase 1 surveys were used to contextualize and enrich findings that emerged through the Phase 2 data collection.

### Research Questions

The focus of the study explores key elements of family engagement across ACPS including: relationships, opportunities, decision-making, environment/climate, and communication. Key research questions are aligned to each of these dimensions:

1. To what extent do ACPS schools and central office departments foster a welcoming and supportive **environment** for families?
  - a. How do parents and staff perceive ACPS creates a welcoming environment for families (e.g., phone conversations, face-to-face greetings, signage, parking accessibility, emails)?
2. To what extent is ACPS developing mutual **relationships** with families?
  - a. How, when, and by whom are these mutual relationships developed with families?
  - b. How do families and staff describe their role in being engaged and supporting the education of ACPS students?
  - c. What are the needs and barriers of family engagements as described by families and staff?
  - d. To what extent are culturally relevant and respectful relationships cultivated with ACPS families?
  - e. What are the attitudes and beliefs of families and staff about parental engagement?
3. To what extent does ACPS include families in the **decision-making** of the education of their children?
  - a. How are these experiences described by families and staff?
  - b. What decisions do parents report being involved?
4. To what extent do ACPS' **communication** practices meet the needs of families?
  - a. How effective are communication efforts in reaching diverse families and their needs (e.g., interpreters, format information is provided, translation of vital documents)?
  - b. To what extent do families feel like their opinions, ideas, and concerns are heard and valued among ACPS staff?
  - c. What ACPS systems and practices are currently used for parents to provide feedback and communicate with ACPS staff members?



5. To what extent do current ACPS family engagement initiatives and **activities** meet the needs of families?
  - a. What activities are most valued by stakeholders in increasing family engagement?
  - b. To what extent do current processes and procedures provide an opportunity for families to be engaged?
  - c. To what extent does ACPS provide families with the information and resources needed to support their child’s learning?
  - d. To what extent does ACPS provide families with volunteer opportunities?
  - e. How does ACPS link family engagement to learning?
  - f. To what extent is family engagement professional development opportunities offered to ACPS staff members? How are these opportunities perceived by staff?

### **Instrument Design**

Phase 1 surveys were designed by ACPS staff while Phase 2 instruments were designed by ICF staff. Each set of instruments were informed by the ACPS conceptual framework for family engagement. The walk-through observation checklist also drew upon the Family Friendly Walkthrough Tool.<sup>23</sup> All Phase 2 instruments were reviewed by ACPS prior to use in this study. In addition, all instruments and consent forms used in Phase 2 were reviewed by ICF’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure adequate protection of human subjects. See Appendix B for full study instrumentation.

### **Data Collection**

**Phase 1 Data Collection.** The Family Engagement parent survey was available from March 11 through March 29, 2019 and was accessible online in English, Spanish, and Arabic. All parents with a valid e-mail address on file received an electronic invitation to participate in the survey. The parent survey was available online in English, Spanish and Arabic and available via paper-pencil in English, Spanish, Arabic, and Amharic. In an effort to increase the parent response rate, paper versions of the survey were sent home to all elementary school families in English, Spanish, Arabic and Amharic. Arabic and Amharic speaking middle school families also received mailed paper versions of the survey in English and their respective home language. Paper copies of the parent survey were made available in all four languages at T.C. Williams high school. As a result of these efforts, 1,281 of 3,168 respondents for the parent survey were completed via paper-pencil, yielding the largest number of total parent responses to any ACPS survey effort within the past decade. The majority of respondents to the parent survey were white and spoke English (see Table A-1).

<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	
White	38%
Black or African American	21%
Hispanic	29%
Asian	7%
Multi-Racial	5%
<b>Preferred Language</b>	
English	66%
Spanish	23%
Arabic	4%
Amharic	4%
Other	3%

The Family and Community Engagement (FACE) Center enlisted help from parent liaisons and community partners to increase parent survey participation. FACE also distributed paper versions of the survey during parent coffee events, community meetings, and division-wide FACE events. Parents also received various reminders throughout the survey administration window including:

<sup>23</sup> Adapted from the New Jersey PIRC Family Friendly Walkthrough Checklist ([www.njpirc.org](http://www.njpirc.org)), the Alaska PIRC Family Friendly Walkthrough ([www.apirc.org](http://www.apirc.org)), and City of Eugene Inclusive Environmental Self-Assessment tool (<http://www.eugene-or.gov/diversity>)

emails, text messages, multilingual phone-banking, school newsletter reminders, ACPS Express postings, and reminders posted to the ACPS website.

The Family Engagement staff survey was likewise available from March 11 through March 29, 2019. An e-mail invitation was sent to all ACPS staff to participate in the survey and a total of 480 surveys were completed, representing an approximately 22% response rate. Sixty percent of respondents identified as elementary staff followed by 18% high school staff, 14% middle school staff, and 8% central office staff. With regard to role, 68% of staff identified as teachers, followed by student support staff (8%), central office staff (8%), paraprofessionals (6%), and school-based administrators (6%).

**Phase 2 Data Collection.** Phase 2 data collection occurred at a subset of ACPS schools from March 2019 to May 2019. Individual schools were selected for inclusion to ensure a range of perspectives and experiences including Title I status, EL percentage, school diversity, geographic variation, and school-based factors. The selected sites included six elementary schools, two middle schools, three high school campuses, and the central office. Phase 2 data collection was comprised of interviews, focus groups, observations, “secret shopper” calls, and a limited document review:

- **Interviews** with school principals or administrators (n=11).
- **Focus groups** with teachers and staff at all selected schools and the central office (n=15; two schools help multiple smaller focus groups to accommodate participants’ schedules.) A total of 102 individuals participated in all staff focus groups, with an average of 9 participants per group. Approximately two-thirds (64%) were teachers (classroom, ELL, or SPED), 27% were support staff (e.g., counselors, math/reaching coaches, nurses, library staff, parent liaisons etc.), and 9% were front office staff.<sup>24</sup>
- Four **focus groups** with parents of elementary school students, of middle school students, and of high school students conducted in English, Spanish, Arabic, and Amharic (n=16).
- Building **walk-through observations** at all sites (n=12) included observations of building exteriors, front offices, hallways, cafeterias, and libraries and used a rubric to measure the welcoming school environment and communication elements. At 8 sites, these walk-throughs also included observations of a parent-facing event, mostly commonly a Principal Coffee (n=6).
- Anonymous “**secret shopper**” calls to the front offices of all sites, asking basic questions about the timing of upcoming events or programs available at that site. Calls were conducted in English, Spanish, Arabic, Amharic or Mandarin by ICF staff who were native speakers of these languages (n=48)<sup>25</sup> with each site receiving two phone calls in English and two phone calls in two different non-English languages.
- **Document review** of targeted division-level policies related to communication, translation, and interpretation to provide a clearer, more nuanced understanding of these complex issues. School-level family engagement policies or parent handbooks, where present, were also reviewed.

Individual school participants were recruited with assistance from study liaisons at each site. Individual parents and family members were recruited with assistance from district-level parent

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<sup>24</sup> Throughout this report, comments made by participants in these focus groups are attributed to staff, which could indicate teachers, front office staff, or other support staff. Exceptions are made when the context of the quotation indicates that the person speaking is clearly in one of those roles.

<sup>25</sup> The initial evaluation plan called for secret shopper emails alongside secret shopper calls. However, in discussing the logistics of this with ACPS, we realized that there were no established policies or procedures for how to respond to non-English email communication. As such, the secret shopper emails were reallocated to be phone calls.

liaisons and were randomly selected and invited to participate based on lists of language preferences and school of enrollment.

## **Analytic Methods**

**Phase 1 Analysis.** Data from the Phase 1 survey were analyzed using descriptive statistics including frequencies and cross-tabs. High-level findings were compiled by ACPS staff while examination of the data across respondent types and school levels was performed by ICF staff.

**Phase 2 Analysis.** Qualitative interview and focus group data from Phase 2 were recorded and transcribed, then coded thematically in Dedoose qualitative software. The initial coding scheme was developed by ICF and refined collaborating with ACPS staff prior to applying the first layer of codes. Additional iterative codes were defined and applied by the analytic team throughout the coding process. Descriptors including school level, respondent type, and language of the focus group were then applied to each transcript to enable sub-group analysis. Thematic code frequency tables, code co-occurrence tables, and narrative code outputs were all examined individually and by sub-group.

Building walk-through observations were scored on a scale of 1 to 4 where 1=No Evidence and 4=Exceeds Standards. After teams of observers completed their observations, a composite total for each dimension was generated. An overall observation database with scores for individual items and composite scores was created. Descriptive analyses were then conducted which compared dimension-level and school-level scores. Observation notes were used to contextualize the findings and helped to identify innovative practices observed in the highest scoring schools. Secret shopper calls were similarly rated across a series of items on a scale of 1 to 4 where 1=Strongly Disagree and 4=Strongly Agree. These data were also analyzed descriptively and used to support or provide a counter point to themes found across other Phase 2 data collection.

## **LIMITATIONS**

This evaluation is not without limitations. Delays in the implementation of the Phase 1 survey resulted in Phase 2 instrument design that was conceptually informed by the Phase 1 survey design but not by the Phase 1 survey findings. Additionally, this evaluation was not longitudinal in nature; it is possible that observations and discussions reflected outsized recent concerns or reflections that did not represent school-year long patterns.

Notable survey limitations include the representativeness of the parent survey; respondents within that sample were not representative of the school system when examined by race/ethnicity, which limits any generalizability from the survey. In addition, limitations of the survey platform prevented the availability of online surveys in Amharic which may have impacted the response rates among Amharic-speaking families; however, hard-copy paper surveys were mailed home to Arabic-speaking elementary and middle school parents, and hard-copy paper surveys were available at T.C. Williams high school in Amharic. In addition, the relatively low response rate among school and division staff limit the strength of survey findings; staff who responded to the survey may represent those with strong negative or positive feelings and could indicate the presence of non-response biases.

Limitations of the qualitative study are also present. Due to the need to protect participant confidentiality and the limitations of focus group transcriptions, we are unable to distinguish between comments made by teachers and those made by support staff or front office staff during the focus group discussions. Finally, this report relies heavily on qualitative interviews and focus groups which by nature are not representative. It is therefore possible that views expressed during

interviews or focus groups are outliers or exceptions. We have attempted to minimize these effects by triangulating interview and focus group data with observational data and survey data, along with limited document review of pertinent policies, but findings may reflect limited perspectives and not broader experiences.

## APPENDIX B: STUDY INSTRUMENTATION

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### **Family Engagement Parent/Guardian Survey**

**Thank you for taking the time to complete the Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) Family Engagement Survey. Your opinions will help us to improve our understanding of the needs, barriers, resources and services to engage all families. We value feedback from our families and would like to hear from you.**

**Instructions: Please read each statement about your child's school or school staff and respond with the current school year in mind. If you have more than one child attending a school in ACPS, please complete the survey for your oldest enrolled child. You may also complete this survey for each additional child separately. The survey should take about 10 minutes to complete; your individual responses will remain anonymous.**

**1. Which school does your child currently attend? If you have more than one child currently enrolled in ACPS, select the school your oldest child attends. You have the option to complete this survey for any additional children separately.**  
(Select one option)

Early Childhood Center  
John Adams Elementary School  
Charles Barrett Elementary School  
Ferdinand T. Day Elementary School  
Cora Kelly School for Math, Science and Technology  
Lyles-Crouch Traditional Academy  
Douglas MacArthur Elementary School  
George Mason Elementary School  
Matthew Maury Elementary School  
Mount Vernon Community School  
James K. Polk Elementary School  
William Ramsay Elementary School  
Samuel W. Tucker Elementary School  
Patrick Henry Elementary School



Jefferson-Houston School  
 Francis C. Hammond Middle School  
 George Washington Middle School  
 T.C. Williams High School - Minnie Howard  
 T.C. Williams High School - Satellite  
 T.C. Williams High School - King Street  
 Chance for Change

**Relationships**

**2. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements about your child's school.**

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
(a) My child's teacher helps me understand his/her academic progress					
(b) School staff care about my child					
(c) My child's school respects me as a parent/guardian					
(d) I trust the staff at my child's school					

**Two-Way Communication**

**3. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements about your child's school.**

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
(a) When my child's school communicates with me it is easy for me to understand					
(b) My child's school keeps families informed about important issues and events					
(c) My child's school connects me with the appropriate staff or resources to address my questions or concerns					

(d) My child's school responds to my concerns promptly						
(e) My child's school shares information with families about the curriculum						
(f) It is my responsibility to communicate with the teacher if my child is not performing well academically						
(g) It is my responsibility to contact my child's school immediately if there is a concern						
(h) It is my responsibility to keep track of my child's progress in school						

**4. What are the two MOST COMMON WAYS your child's school communicates with you about your child's education?** [Please only select two answers]

Email

Face-to-face

Flyers, Letters sent home, Newsletters

Phone calls

Robo calls

Text messages

Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**5. What are the two BEST WAYS you prefer that your child's school communicates with you about your child's education?** [Please only select two answers]

Email

Face-to-face

Flyers, Letters sent home, Newsletters

Phone calls

Robo calls

Text messages

Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**Environment**

**6. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements about your child's school.**

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	
(a) Staff at my child's school greet me warmly when I call or visit						
(b) My child's school is a friendly environment for families						
(c) My child's school respects my culture						
(d) My child's teacher is available if I need to meet with him/her						
(e) Overall, I feel welcome at my child's school						

**Opportunities**

**7. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements about your child's school.**

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	
(a) My child's school provides me opportunities to better understand how to support my child's learning at home						
(b) My child's school provides me with opportunities to participate in school events						
(c) This school year, I have attended activities at my child's school (e.g. principal coffee talks, PTA meetings, Family Literacy Night)						
(d) The school provides training and information about how the school system works						

**Decision-Making**

**8. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements about your child's school.**

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
(a) My child's school provides opportunities for my family to provide feedback					
(b) My child's school involves me in important decisions regarding my child					
(c) My child's school shares information about overall school progress					
(d) Overall, my child's school values my opinions and feedback					

**Barriers**

**9. How big of a problem are the following issues for becoming involved with your child's current school?**

	<b>Not a problem</b>	<b>Small Problem</b>	<b>Medium Problem</b>	<b>Large Problem</b>	<b>Very Large Problem</b>
(a) Childcare needs					
(b) Transportation challenges					
(c) Work obligations					
(d) Language barrier					
(e) Access to technology					
(f) My child does not want me to contact the school					
(g) Negative memories of my own school experience					

**10. Please use the space below to provide any additional feedback you have related to family engagement.**

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**11. Please select your race/ethnic group from the categories listed below.** (Select one option)

- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Multi-Racial

**12. What language are you most comfortable communicating in?** (Select one option)

- Amharic
- Arabic
- English
- Spanish
- Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**13. Please select any special programs your child is participating in this school year.**

- English Learner
- Special Education
- Talented and Gifted
- None of the above



## **Family Engagement Staff Survey**

**Thank you for taking the time to complete the Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) Family Engagement Survey. Your opinions will help us to improve our understanding of the needs, barriers, resources and services to engage all families. We value your feedback and would like to hear from you.**

**Instructions: Please read each statement and respond with your school and the current school year in mind. If you work in multiple locations please complete the survey for the location where you work the majority of your time or for each location separately. Central office staff should respond for the division in general. The survey should take about 10 minutes to complete; your individual responses will remain anonymous.**

**1. Which school/location are you currently located the majority of your time?**  
(Select one option)

- Early Childhood Center
- John Adams Elementary School
- Charles Barrett Elementary School
- Ferdinand T. Day Elementary School
- Cora Kelly School for Math, Science and Technology
- Lyles-Crouch Traditional Academy
- Douglas MacArthur Elementary School
- George Mason Elementary School
- Matthew Maury Elementary School
- Mount Vernon Community School
- James K. Polk Elementary School
- William Ramsay Elementary School
- Samuel W. Tucker Elementary School

Patrick Henry Elementary School  
 Jefferson-Houston School  
 Francis C. Hammond Middle School  
 George Washington Middle School  
 T.C. Williams High School - Minnie Howard  
 T.C. Williams High School - Satellite  
 T.C. Williams High School - King Street  
 Chance for Change  
 Central Office

**2. Which of the following best describes your position? (Select one option)**

Central Office Staff  
 Front Office Staff  
 Paraprofessional  
 School-based Administrator  
 Student Support Services (Social Worker, Psychologist, Nurse, Counselor)  
 Teacher

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**Relationships**

**3. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.**

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	
(a) Families understand their child's academic progress						
(b) Staff care about all students						
(c) Staff respect all students' families						
(d) Families trust our school staff						

**Two-Way Communication**

**4. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.**

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
(a) School communication is easy for families to understand					
(b) Staff keep families informed about important issues and events					
(c) Staff connect families with the appropriate person(s) or resources to address their questions or concerns					
(d) Staff shares information with families about the curriculum					
(e) Staff value families' feedback					
(f) It is the parent/guardian's responsibility to communicate with school staff if their child is not performing well academically					
(g) It is the parent/guardian's responsibility to contact school staff when there is an immediate concern regarding their child					
(h) It is the parent/guardian's responsibility to keep track of their child's progress in school					

**5. School – family communications tend to focus on: (please select two)**

- |                                      |                              |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Student problems and misbehavior     | Overall student progress     |
| General news about a class or school | Other (Please specify) _____ |
| Progress in specific problem areas   |                              |

**6. Staff are expected to communicate with families:**

- When there is a problem
- At least every two weeks if a student is struggling
- At least every two weeks with every family
- At least once a month if a student is struggling

At least once a month with every family

None of the above

Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

### Environment

#### 7. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
(a) Staff greet families warmly when they call or visit						
(b) Staff are friendly toward families						
(c) Families' cultural traditions, values, and practices are respected						
(d) Staff are available if families request to meet in-person for a meeting						
(e) There are standards of welcoming behavior that apply to all school staff, including bus drivers, security guards, custodians and cafeteria workers						

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### Opportunities

#### 8. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
(a) Staff offer special workshops, learning kits, and other activities to show families how to help their children at home						
(b) School activities and events are planned with parents and respond to their interests						

(c) All staff have been trained on effective approaches to working with families of diverse cultural backgrounds						
(d) Programs and activities for families focus on student achievement and helping families understand how children are learning						
(e) The school offers regular workshops and other information sessions that help families understand how children learn and are being taught						
(f) Activities and events honor all the cultures in the school						

**Decision-Making**

**9. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.**

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
(a) Staff provide opportunities for families to provide feedback					
(b) Families are involved in important decisions regarding their child(ren)					
(c) Student achievement data are shared with families in ways that solicit their ideas about how to improve achievement					
(d) Families are involved in planning how they would like to participate in school activities					

**Barriers**

**10. How big of a problem are the following issues for school staff in engaging families.**

	<b>Not a problem</b>	<b>Small Problem</b>	<b>Medium Problem</b>	<b>Large Problem</b>	<b>Very Large Problem</b>
(a) Language barrier					
(b) Cultural differences					



(c) Family access to technology						
(d) Lack of time						
(e) Lack of expectations to engage families						

**11. Please use the space below to provide any additional feedback you have related to family engagement.**

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## Interview Protocol for School Principals

My name is [NAME] and before we get started I wanted to thank you for taking time out of your day to talk with me. I know how busy you are so I'll do my best to make our time engaging and worthwhile; overall, this interview should last about an hour. Our discussion today is part of a broader division-wide study to learn more about efforts schools are taking to engage families in their children's education and the resources and supports they need to do that successfully. The information we learn from you today will be used to support ACPS' decision-making around family engagement.

As stated in the consent form you have in front of you, your participation in this discussion is voluntary and you may end your participation at any time. We work for an independent evaluation company called ICF, not the division, and are just here to learn about family engagement at [school name]. I will be recording this conversation, so I would ask you not to mention your name or anyone else's name during this interview to help protect individual's confidentiality.

We're not here to evaluate you or your school and neither your name nor your school's name will be included in any of our reports or findings that are presented to the division.

### Background and Understanding

To get us started, I'd like to learn about your role, and then we'll dive in about your perceptions of family engagement and experiences at [school name].

1. Please briefly describe your role at this school – what are your primary responsibilities, and how long have you been at this school?
2. To start off, I want to hear your thoughts on “family engagement.” I don't need a concise definition, but what comes to mind when you hear that term?
3. From your perspective, how does the division support family engagement?
  - a. What are the division's policies on family engagement?
  - b. Tell me about the role that FACE plays.
  - c. To what extent does that Center operate across the entire division versus collaborate with individual schools?

### School-Specific Context and Environment

Let's talk now about [school name].

4. I'd like to learn a little bit about the context of [school name]. What do you think are your school's two biggest strengths and two biggest challenges related to family engagement?
5. We know that ACPS is an incredibly diverse division, but that diversity varies from school to school. Approximately, how many different languages are spoken at home by the students at [school name]?
  - a. How would you describe the socio-economic diversity at this school?
  - b. Are there other family or neighborhood characteristics that contribute to the diversity of this school that we should be aware of?
  - c. *[For the alternative site]:* What are the main factors that lead students to enroll here?

6. From your perspective, what school-level factors most promote high-levels of family engagement? What school-level factors most hinder high-levels of family engagement? *[If not mentioned, ask if school resources and levels of staff buy-in with family engagement promote or hinder family engagement]*
7. From your perspective, what family-level factors most promote high-levels of family engagement? What family-level factors most hinder high-levels of family engagement?
8. That's all really helpful context. So in that context, what does a welcoming school environment look like?
  - a. To what extent do you think [school name] has a welcoming environment?
  - b. What is your role in creating or providing a welcoming environment to families?
  - c. What is the role of teachers and staff in providing a welcoming environment to families?
  - d. Are there any staff specifically charged with fostering a welcoming environment?

### Communication

9. More broadly, describe the ways in which you communicate with families of children in this school. *Probe for in-person, email, phone call, flyers, frequency of communication*  
 What types of things are you communicating about?  
*Probe for events, updates on student progress, testing, positive behavior or performance, discipline issues*
  - a. How effective do you think this communication is in reaching all families?
    - i. What groups in this school are hard to reach?  
*Probe for poor/homeless, immigrant, low-educated/low-literacy, non-English speaking*
    - ii. What strategies have you used to try and communicate more effectively with these families? What has worked or not worked?
  - b. *[If not covered]* Are these communication strategies and approaches the same or different for non-English speaking families?
    - i. Is there a staff member or a division resources office who helps facilitate non-English communication?
    - ii. In general, do you find that process easy or difficult? What could be improved?
10. What is the primary way that families communicate with you?
  - a. What types of families do you hear from the most? The least?
    - i. And to the best of your understanding, why is that (for most and least)?
  - b. Does the way in which families communicate with you vary by family characteristics such as socio-economic status, education level, or English proficiency? If so, how?
    - i. What groups are the least likely to reach out to you?
    - ii. What strategies or approaches have you used to encourage feedback from these harder to reach groups?
  - c. *[If not clear]:* Can you walk me through what typically happens when a non-English speaking family member calls to speak with you? How long does that process usually take, from start to finish? What about if an email or letter is sent to you in a different language – what does that process look like?

## Opportunities and Decision-Making

11. How does this school ask families about their preferences for engaging with the school and with their child's learning?
  - a. *[If unclear]*: Is this feedback requested across the whole school, by individual teachers, or something else?
  - b. How often is this feedback requested?
12. Do you collect feedback from families on how the school is doing with family engagement?
  - a. *[If unclear]*: How is this feedback collected?
  - b. How often is this feedback requested?
  - c. How has this information been used to adjust or improve family engagement efforts?
13. What opportunities are there for families to interact with you face-to-face?
  - a. *[If unclear]*: How often do those opportunities occur?
  - b. How well attended are those events/activities?
  - c. Are adequate interpreters available to meet the needs of families participating in those events?
  - d. What about opportunities for families to interact with their teachers face-to-face? How often do those opportunities occur?
    - i. *[If not clear]*: Are there opportunities outside of parent-teacher conferences?
  - e. What about school-facilitated opportunities for families to interact with each other? How often do those opportunities occur?
14. What opportunities do family members have for participating in classroom activities, field trips or school-based events?
  - a. Does that vary by classroom/teacher or by grade level [*for alternative site*: by morning or afternoon], or is that the same across the school?
  - b. How are family members informed of these opportunities?
  - c. How does the school make it easy for families to engage in school-based activities?
  - d. How does this school make it easy for families to engage in their child's education at home?
  - e. Overall, which groups in this school are most engaged? Least engaged?  
*Probe for differences by grade level (e.g., kindergarten vs. 5<sup>th</sup> grade, freshmen vs. senior family members), socio-economic status, language, etc.*
    - i. From your perspective, why are these groups the most/least engaged?
    - ii. Overall, what strategies have you used to try and encourage engagement among these groups? Have any of these strategies been particularly successful?
15. What opportunities do family members have for participating in school governance/management such as PTA, advisory committees, school improvement teams, or boosters?
  - a. What role do you have in those activities?
  - b. How are family members informed about these governance/management opportunities?
  - c. What is done to encourage representation of diverse perspectives on these boards and committees?

- i. Are non-biological parents such as foster parents or grandparents allowed to participate on these boards and committees? How is their participation encouraged?
16. Thinking of all the family engagement activities, events, and initiatives across this school, which do you think do the best job at engaging families? Why?
- a. Which are less successful at engaging families? Why?

### **Barriers, Facilitators, and Recommendations**

17. Knowing that there's always room for improvement, overall, how would you say [school name] is doing in engaging families? [*if needed, add: would you say this school is doing a good job, an okay job, or a poor job?*]
- a. Let's start with the positives – in what areas is the school doing a good job?
  - b. Now let's look at the areas of improvement – in what areas could the school do better?
  - c. [*If not mentioned in either place*]: Would you say that overall, the school is doing a good job of engaging families from diverse cultures, languages, backgrounds, and traditions, an okay job, or a poor job?
18. What are the top 3 priorities for family engagement in the near future...
- a. ...for yourself?
  - b. ...for your teachers and staff?
  - c. ...for families at this school?
  - d. ...for ACPS?
  - e. What resources, training, or support would you need to address these priorities?
19. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us before we end?
20. Finally, as part of this study, we're also reviewing documents including school handbooks, calendars, and teachers' professional development opportunities – do you have copies of those materials that you can share with us or direct us to?

**Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today and sharing your valuable perspective!**



## Focus Group Guide for Teacher/Staff

My name is [NAME] and I'll be facilitating our conversation today. This is [NAME] and he/she will be taking notes and helping me stay on track. Before we get started, we wanted to thank you all for taking some time out of your day to talk with us. We know how busy you are so we'll do our best to make our time engaging and worthwhile; overall, our discussion today will last about an hour and a half.

This discussion is part of a broader division-wide study to learn more about efforts to engage families in their children's education and areas for needed resources or support. The information we learn from you all today will be used to support ACPS' decision-making around family engagement.

As stated in the consent form you all have in front of you, your participation in this discussion is voluntary and you may end your participation at any time. We work for an independent evaluation company, not the division and are just here to learn about what's happening here at [school name]. We're not here to evaluate you or your school and neither your name nor your school's name will be included in any of our reports or findings that are presented to the division. We will be recording our conversation, so I would ask you not to mention your name or anyone else's name during our conversation to help us protect their confidentiality.

Does anyone have any questions before we begin?

### Background and Understanding

To get us started, I'd like to learn a little bit more about each of you, and then we'll dive in to talk about your opinions about family engagement and experiences at [school name].

1. First, please briefly describe your role at this school – your position, subject/grade level should be fine.
2. To start off, I want to hear your thoughts on what "family engagement" means. I don't need a concise definition, but what comes to mind when you hear that term?
  - a. From your perspective, based on your role, what do you think are the benefits of family engagement? Are there any disadvantages to family/parent engagement?
3. As far as you know, are there any division or school policies related to family engagement?
  - a. *[If yes]*: Can you tell me a little more about what those say?
4. Have any of you participated in professional development through ACPS related to family engagement or cultural competency?
  - a. *[If yes]*: Can you tell me a little bit more about what that entailed?
  - b. *[If needed]*: How many hours of professional development did you receive? What topics were covered? What aspects of these professional development trainings/sessions were helpful?
  - c. *[If yes OR no]* What [more] professional development do you need to be more effective in engaging families you work with?

### School-Specific Context and Environment

Let's talk now about [school name].

5. I'd like to learn a little bit about the context of [school name]. What do you think are your school's two biggest strengths and two biggest challenges related to family engagement?
6. We know that ACPS is an incredibly diverse division, but that varies school to school. So just at a high level, what family characteristics that contribute to the diversity of this school should we be aware of?
7. That's all really helpful context. So in that context, what does a welcoming school environment look like?
  - a. To what extent do you think [school name] has a welcoming environment?
  - b. What is your role in creating or providing a welcoming environment to families?
  - c. What is the role of the principal or administrators?

## Communication

8. Broadly, describe the ways in which you communicate with families of children in your classroom, on your caseload, or in this school.  
*Probe for in-person, email, phone call, flyers, frequency of communication*
  - a. *[If not all participants have shared, check]:* And would you all say that you use all these methods of communication, or do some of you communicate differently?
  - b. What types of things are you communicating about?  
*Probe for events, updates on student progress, testing, positive behavior or performance, discipline issues*
  - c. How effective do you think this communication is in reaching all families?
    - i. What groups are hard to reach?  
*Probe for poor/homeless, immigrant, low-educated/low-literacy, non-English speaking, non-biological parents (e.g., grandparents)*
    - ii. What type of resources does the school provide to help you communicate with families?
      1. Are these resources sufficient? If not, what tools or resources would be helpful?
    - iii. What strategies have you used to try and communicate more effectively with these families? What has worked or not worked?
9. What is the primary way that families communicate with you?  
*Probe for any differences by role/position (e.g., kindergarten families vs. 5<sup>th</sup> grade, classroom teachers vs. others)*
  - a. What types of things are families communicating about?
  - b. How effective is that communication from families?
    - i. Is there a different way you would prefer families communicated with you?
  - c. What types of families do you hear from the most? The least?
    - i. What strategies or approaches have you used to encourage feedback from the groups you hear from the least?
  - d. *[If not clear]:* Can you walk me through what typically happens when a non-English speaking family member calls to speak with you? How long does that process usually take, from start to finish? What about if an email or letter is sent to you in a different language – what does that process look like?

## Opportunities and Decision-Making

10. What opportunities are there for families to interact with you face-to-face?

*Probe for any differences by role/position (e.g., kindergarten families vs. 5<sup>th</sup> grade, classroom teachers vs. others)*

- a. *[If unclear]:* How often do those opportunities occur?
- b. How well attended are those events/activities?
- c. What groups are most engaged in these events? Least engaged?
- d. Are there translators available at those events?

11. What opportunities are available for family members to participate in classroom activities or events?

- a. Does that vary by classroom or by grade level [*for alternative site:* by morning or afternoon], or is that the same across the school?
- b. How are the students' families invited to participate in these activities or events?
  - i. Is that communication in English or in multiple languages?
  - ii. To what extent are family members other than non-biological parents encouraged to participate?
- c. How do you or the school in general make it easy for families to engage in classroom activities or events?
- d. How do you or the school in general make it easy for families to engage in their child's education at home?
- e. Overall, which groups are most engaged? Least engaged? Why do you think they are most/least engaged?

*Probe for any differences across grade level, and demographic differences*

12. What are some ways in which you all ask families about their preferences for engaging with your class and with their child's learning?

- a. *[If unclear]:* Is this feedback requested across the whole school, by individual teachers, or something else?
- b. What engagement ideas or suggestions made by students' families have been difficult to address and why?

## Barriers, Facilitators, and Recommendations

**I want to talk now about your recommendations and experiences of what works well and what isn't working as well in engaging families.**

13. Knowing that there's always room for improvement, overall, how would you say [school name] is doing in engaging families? [*if needed, add:* would you say this school is doing a good job, an okay job, or a poor job?]

- a. Let's start with the positives – in what areas is the school doing a good job?
- b. Now let's look at the areas of improvement – in what areas could the school do better?
- c. *[If not mentioned in either place]:* Would you say that overall, the school is doing a good job of engaging families from diverse cultures, languages, backgrounds, and traditions, an okay job, or a poor job?

14. From your perspective, what factors make it easier to engage families at this school? What factors make it challenging to engage families at this school?

*Probe for school resources, buy-in, community/neighborhood context and families*

15. From your experience, can you share activities and strategies for engaging families that work really well or are effective?
  - a. What specific activities and strategies work well with your “hard to reach” families such as [ADD ANSWERS FROM Q4]?
  - b. What family engagement activities and strategies do you find to be ineffective or not working with your families? Why?
16. Thinking more individually, what are the top 1 or 2 priorities for family engagement in the near future...
  - a. ...for yourself
  - b. ...for the school?
  - c. What resources, training, or support would you need to address these priorities?
17. Is there anything else you’d like to share with us before we end?

**Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us today and sharing your valuable perspectives!**

## Focus Group Guide for Family Members

My name is [NAME] and I will be leading our conversation today. This is [NAME] and he/she will be taking notes and helping me stay on track. Before we get started, we wanted to thank you all for taking some time out of your day to talk with us. We know how busy you are so we'll do our best to make our time engaging and worthwhile; overall, our conversation today will last about an hour and a half.

This group discussion is part of a broader division-wide study to learn more about efforts to engage families in their children's education and areas for needed resources or support. What you all tell us will be used to help ACPS do a better job engaging families.

As it says in the consent form you all have in front of you, you can decide whether or not you want to stay and be a part of this conversation and you can decide to leave at any time. We work for a company that is not a part of ACPS and are just here to learn your opinions and experiences.

We will be recording our conversation, but we will take any names out of the transcript of this conversation and your name will not be included in any of our reports or findings that are presented to the division.

Does anyone have any questions before we begin?

### Background and Understanding

To get us started, I'd like to learn a little bit more about each of you, and then we'll dive in to talk about your opinions about family engagement and experiences at your children's schools.

1. First, let's go around the room and have everyone share: how many kids you have, how many of your kids or the children you care for are in [elementary/middle/high school] at ACPS, and the name of the school that they attend.  
*[INTERVIEWER NOTE: If there are foster parents, grandparents, or other non-biological parents in the room, use the language of children/children you care for throughout the focus group.]*
2. And again, let's go around the room and tell me how many years you have been part of ACPS schools or had children or grandchildren, or children you care for in these schools.

### Welcoming Environment and Relationships

3. To what extent do you feel welcomed by your child's school?
  - a. What aspects about the school make you feel welcomed? For example, what types of interactions with school staff, communication you receive, or school events make you feel welcomed?
  - b. *[If not addressed]:* What interactions have you had with front office staff? How welcoming are front office staff?
  - c. What about the physical school building? How welcoming is that building for you? *Probe about clear signage, space for families, cleanliness of schools, etc.*
  - d. What more could your child's school do to make you feel welcomed?

4. To what extent have you felt that your child's school or their teachers are respectful of your culture, values, and language?
  - a. What does this look like?
  - b. What more could your child's school or their teachers do to make you feel respected?

### Communication and Information

5. Thinking just about your child's school, not their teacher(s), what are the ways in which you get information from your child's school?
 

*Probe for website, phone call, in-person, flyers, etc.*

  - a. Thinking back to the beginning of the school year, did you receive a welcome packet with things like a school calendar, a staff directory, and a school handbook?
  - b. More broadly, what methods of communication are the most helpful? Which are the least helpful? Why?
6. What is the main way that your children's teacher(s) communicate with you?
 

*Probe for in-person, email, phone call, flyers, frequency of communication*

  - a. What methods of communication are the most helpful? Which are the least helpful? Why?
  - b. What types of things are they communicating about?
 

*Probe for events, updates on student progress, testing, positive behavior or performance, discipline issues*

    - a. *[For non-English groups]:* Do your child's teachers primarily communicate with you in English or in [Spanish/Amharic/Arabic]?
    - c. How often do you hear from them? Would you say weekly, monthly, a few times a year, or something else?
    - d. What, if anything, would you want your child's teacher to do differently when they communicate with you?
 

*Probe for frequency, method of communication, effectiveness*
7. If you had a question for the school about your child, what would you do, or who would you contact?
  - a. When you've done that in the past, have teachers/staff been able to answer your question or help you?
  - b. Was it easy or difficult for you to get in touch with them? Were responses provided in a timely manner?
  - c. Did those conversations feel respectful to you?
  - d. *[For non-English groups]:* Was an interpreter or some other interpretation service provided to you?
    - a. How easy or difficult was it to get interpreter services? Did that take a long time?

### Opportunities and Decision-Making

**I want to talk about opportunities to meet with your child's teacher or principal, or to participate in events or activities at your child's school.**

8. What opportunities are there for you to interact with your child's teacher(s) or other school staff face-to-face?
  - a. *[If unclear/not covered earlier]:* How often do face-to-face opportunities with your child's teacher occur?



- i. *[For non-English groups]:* Is an interpreter or interpretation services always available? *[If no]:* What happens if a translator is not available?
    - b. *[If unclear/not covered earlier]* What about opportunities for you to interact with their principal face-to-face? How often do those opportunities occur?
      - i. *[For non-English groups]:* Is an interpreter or interpretation services always available? *[If no]:* What happens if a translator is not available?
- Probe for start-of-the-year meetings, principal coffees, parent-teacher conferences*
9. What opportunities do families have to participate in classroom activities or school-based events?
- a. *[If needed]:* This could be volunteering in a classroom, chaperoning a field trip, speaking at a career-day event or a story-time event, being invited to award ceremonies, etc.
  - b. How did you hear about or get invited to participate in these events?
    - i. What did the school or teacher do to make it easy for you to participate in these events?
10. What opportunities are there for family members to participate in school-sponsored events and meet other families at your child's school?
- a. *[For non-English groups]:* Have these events been open to all families, or specific to [Spanish/Amharic/Arabic-speaking] families?
11. In what ways does your child's school or teacher provide you with information or resources to support your children's learning at home - their homework, studying for SOLs or other tests, [for middle/high school: registering for classes]?
- Probe for material resources, web resources, developmental activities, parent-teacher partnerships in-person trainings or meetings*
12. Are there opportunities for you to give the school feedback on how the school or individual teachers are doing with engaging you in your child education?
- a. Have you given feedback? *[If no]:* Why not?
  - b. *[If yes]* Do you feel that feedback was valued? Have you seen changes based on that feedback?
13. Are there opportunities to participate in things like advisory committees, parent-teacher associations (PTA), school improvement teams, or boosters?
- a. *[If needed]* Have any of you heard about these opportunities or been involved in any of these?

### **Barriers, Facilitators, and Recommendations**

**Thinking about all these opportunities – to meet with staff at your child's school, or opportunities to participate in activities in the classroom or events through the school, or being involved in decision-making – I want to learn more about the ways in which it was easy for you to get involved and the ways in which it was difficult for you to get involved.**

14. *[If not discussed throughout FG]:* What things about your personal situation make it easy for you to participate in school activities and your child's education? What things about your personal situation make it difficult for you to participate in school activities and their education?

*Probe for things like work schedule, owning/not owning a car, needing childcare, language or cultural barriers, if the information is hard to understand, children don't want you to participate (mainly for parents of older students), etc.*

15. [If not discussed throughout FG]: What things about your child's school make it easy for you to participate in school activities and your child's education? What things about your child's school make it difficult for you to participate in school activities and their education?

*Probe for things like timing of events, advanced notice of events, location of school or event, relevance, childcare/transportation provided,*

16. What types of interactions with other families in your child's school make attending school events a positive experience for you and encourage you to continue participating? What types of interactions with other families make attending school events a negative experience for you and make you want to stop participating?

a. Can you share examples of what families do and say in your school that encourage you or discourage you to participate in school events?

17. Thinking about all the events or activities that you've participated in, what activities or events have you most enjoyed? Why?

a. Which events were the most valuable or beneficial? Why?

b. Which events were the least beneficial or enjoyable? Why?

18. Knowing that there's always room for improvement, overall, how would you say your child's school is doing in engaging families? [*if needed, add: would you say they are doing a good job, an okay job, or a poor job?*]

a. Let's start with the positives – in what areas is the school doing a good job?

b. Now let's look at the areas of improvement – in what areas could the school do better?

19. What could the school do to better meet your needs as a parent or a family? What suggestions do you have?

20. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us before we end?

**Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us today and sharing your perspectives!**

## Secret Shopper Scenarios

*This set of scenarios will be conducted via telephone and adapted for all school sites using pertinent scheduling information found on the school websites. These scenarios will also be translated into Spanish, Arabic, and Mandarin.*

**LUNCH:** Hi- My kids will be attending [school name] next year and I'm planning on having them buy their lunch. Do students have lunch accounts or meal cards? Can I add money to their account ahead of time? And how do I find out if their account is running low? Thank you!

**EVENT:** Hi – my granddaughter is in the [musical/orchestra/choir/track] and I know they have a [performance/concert/meet] coming up soon, but I couldn't find the date for it. Could you tell me when it is?  
And where is it?  
Thank you so much!

**PARENT MEETING:** Hi – My son is a [4<sup>th</sup> grader/in 7<sup>th</sup> grade/a sophomore] at [school name] and he was telling me something about a chance to [have coffee with the principal/attend a parent event], but I couldn't find any information about it. Can you tell me when that is?  
And where is it?  
Thanks!

**EVENT:** Hi - I wanted to find out more about the [name of upcoming event]. I couldn't find the start time listed anywhere, and wasn't sure if it was in the cafeteria or auditorium somewhere else in the building. Can you help me with that?  
Thank you!

*[For middle and high schools only:]*

**OPEN HOUSE:** Hi – my daughter will be [in 7<sup>th</sup> grade/a freshman] next year. Can you tell me when the open house is to learn more about [school name]? And is there anything else I should know about that?  
Thanks!

*[For High School only]*

**BUS:** Hi- My son will be attending T.C. Williams next fall and he will be riding the bus for the first time. I saw online about the DASH bus system, but wasn't sure how that worked. Can you tell me more about that? Thank you!

*[For alternative site only]*

**BUS:** Hi – My daughter will be a freshmen next year and is interested in graduating early. Her school counselor recommended that we explore the satellite campus but before we get too far into that process, I was hoping you could tell me how busing or transportation works.

*[For central office only]*

**EVENT:** Hi – I was hoping to attend the next school board meeting, but couldn't find any information on it. Can you tell me when it is? And what's the location?  
Thanks!

Level Two Scenarios (English Only):

**LEVEL TWO:** Hi – My family is moving into the area this summer and will be districted for [school name]. I had some questions about [the STEM academy/Talented and Gifted program/AVID program/language immersion program] and was hoping you could direct me to the right person to learn more.

**LEVEL TWO:** I was wondering if you could tell me more about [the STEM academy/Talented and Gifted program/AVID program/language immersion program]. Are there admission requirements for that program? Is there an application or a test to qualify? Thank you!

[If asked, caller has a rising 4<sup>th</sup> grade/8<sup>th</sup> grade/10<sup>th</sup> grade daughter]

**LEVEL TWO:** Hi – my kids will be transferring into [school name] next year from private school. I read on your website that you all have [the IB program/AP courses], but was hoping to learn more about that. Can you connect me to someone who can tell me more about the requirements of that program so I can decide if it's best for my kids?

**LEVEL TWO:** I was hoping you could tell me more about the [IB Primary Years/Middle Years/AP courses]. Are there admissions requirements for that or a test to qualify? Thank you!

[If asked, caller has a rising 5<sup>th</sup> grade/7<sup>th</sup> grade/9<sup>th</sup> grade son]

Secret Shopper Phone Calls Ratings Rubric

4 – Strongly agree 3 – agree 2 – disagree 1 – strongly disagree

<b>School Name:</b>					<b>Date of Call:</b>
<b>Topic of Call:</b>					<b>Language:</b>
<b>Domains for All Calls</b>					
Area being rated:	4	3	2	1	Comments
1. The person or people I spoke with were friendly.					
2. The person who answered the phone was able to answer my question or promptly direct me to a person who could.					
3. I spoke to a real person in a timely manner (less than a 1 minute wait time).					
4. The person or people I spoke with were patient and I did not feel rushed.					
<b>Additional Domains for Non-English Calls</b>					
1. I was connected to someone who spoke my language in a timely manner (less than 5 minutes).					
2. I felt respected by the office staff member.					

Walk-Through of School Building					
Area being rated:	4	3	2	1	Comments
<b>Physical Environment</b>					
1. Visible signs direct parents and visitors to the school from the parking lot and the street.					
2. Signs in multiple languages direct parents and visitors to the school from the parking lot and the street.					
3. Visible signs direct visitors to handicapped entrances (if main entrance is not handicapped-accessible).					<i>Note: If main entrance is handicapped accessible (ramp) mark N/A</i>
4. The school appears welcoming from the outside.					
5. The name of the school is on the outside of the building.					
6. The front entrance can be easily identified.					
7. The school's entryway is inviting, with a sign/banner/bulletin board welcoming parents/families.					
8. Staff or volunteers are available to greet students and parents in the morning and afternoon.					<i>Note: If observation occurs in the middle of the day, leave this item blank.</i>
9. Signage inside of the building is helpful and clear for visitors. It is easy for families and visitors to find their way to where they need to go.					
10. Signage inside of the building is in multiple languages.					
11. Office staff are friendly and greet visitors when they enter the office.					
12. When visitors enter the office there is no barrier between the office staff and visitors.					
13. A sofa or comfortable chairs are available in or near the office area for visitors who need to wait.					
14. The school creates displays/wall hangings that reflect the diversity of the families it serves.					
15. The school is clean and kept in the best possible condition, including classrooms, hallways, bathrooms, and all other					



areas.					
16. A clearly marked and easily accessible resource room or area is available for families to access books, educational materials, and resources.					
17. Books, educational materials, and resources for family members are provided in multiple languages.					
18. Welcoming behavior applies to all staff, including security staff, custodians, cafeteria staff, etc.					<i>Note in comments staff that observer interacted with or observed.</i>
19. The school has a warm, caring environment where positive conversations can be heard throughout the building.					
<b>Bi-Directional Communication</b>					
1. The school makes it easy for parents that do not speak English to receive information in-person.					
2. Communication media (newsletters, calendars, flyers, etc.) is attractive and welcoming for families.					
3. Information is provided to parents in a language and format they can understand.					
4. The school provides low literacy materials to parents in a format that is easily understood.					
5. The staff answering the phone are polite and professional. Staff exhibit inclusive behavior and communication.					
6. School calendars and informational material are visible and readily available in the school office.					
7. The school has a designated person who is responsible for family outreach for all families.					<i>Note: If not able to ascertain this on-site, leave blank and complete after principal interview. Note the source of the information.</i>
8. The school has a translator or interpretation services available for families.					
9. The process for obtaining translation/interpretation services is clearly stated in policies and in the front office.					

### Document Review

(To include: School handbook, calendar, website, PD schedule)

Area being rated:	4	3	2	1	Comments
<b>Policies/Practices (observed via documentation)</b>					
1. A handbook with school policies is available to all families in their preferred language.					<i>Note: Languages should align with 3% threshold, per federal guidelines.</i>
2. School has a family engagement policy.					
3. The school has a home-school compact or contract for behavior/expectations/etc.					
4. PD for staff includes trainings/ workshops on working with diverse families and family engagement.					
5. School holds events at beginning of the year to welcome families and make introductions.					
6. School holds events throughout the year to involve families.					
7. Activities are held at times that are convenient for parents to participate.					
8. Schools have an active CPAC/PTA (meetings at least quarterly) with information on meetings/involvement publically posted.					
9. Family/Teacher conferences are held at least twice a year.					
10. Family members have an opportunity to meet with the principal at least twice a year.					
11. Family educational opportunities are provided at the school.					
12. The school has a clearly communicated means for inviting families to ask questions or express concerns.					
13. Opportunities for families to observe, participate, share, and help in the classroom or school are clearly posted and/or shared online or elsewhere.					
14. The school website is user friendly.					
15. The school website demonstrates inclusivity (e.g., in images, promoted events) and is available in multiple languages.					

## **Event Checklist**

Describe the site of the event (location, room configuration, displays, etc.):

Describe the event (purpose, context, content, length, any stated objectives, etc.)

Describe key staff in attendance (include their role, interactions with participants and each other):

Describe participants in attendance (include R/E and gender break-down, those needing translation, interactions with staff and each other):

Area being rated:	4	3	2	1	Comments
<b>Physical Environment</b>					
1. Clear signs or designated individuals inform attendees where to go.					
2. Meeting/event space is clean and conducive for the meeting/event (e.g., adult-sized furniture, temperature, sound).					
3. Enough chairs were provided for family members in attendance.					<i>Note: If event is designed to have participants standing, rate availability of chairs for those who may need to sit, not for the full group.</i>
4. Available materials are provided in multiple languages					<i>Note: If no written materials provided, leave blank and note in comments.</i>
5. Tone of the event is warm and welcoming.					
<b>Bi-Directional Communication</b>					
1. Family members are greeted individually when they arrive at event.					
2. Staff or volunteers are available to assist non-English speaking family members with interpretation services.					<i>Note: If no non-English speaking family members appear to be present, leave blank and note in comments.</i>
3. Interpretation services were provided before the event started.					<i>Note: If no non-English speaking family members appear to be present, leave blank and note in comments.</i>
4. Prior to and after event, staff members interact with family members by going to them and starting interactions.					
5. Communication demonstrates mutual respect.					
<b>Policies/Practices</b>					
1. Families are invited to provide input and feedback more than once during the event.					
2. Input and feedback from non-English speaking family members is directly sought.					<i>Note: If no non-English speaking family members appear to be present, leave blank and note in comments.</i>
3. Family members are treated as valued partners in their child's education.					
4. Event is held at a time convenient for family members to attend.					
5. Childcare is provided during the event.					<i>Note: If event is held during the school day, leave blank and note in comments.</i>
6. A meal or refreshments are provided.					<i>Note: If event is not during a meal time, note that in comments.</i>
7. Event is structured to allow participants to provide feedback in multiple formats that are culturally responsive (e.g., group discussions, comment cards, microphone, etc.)					