



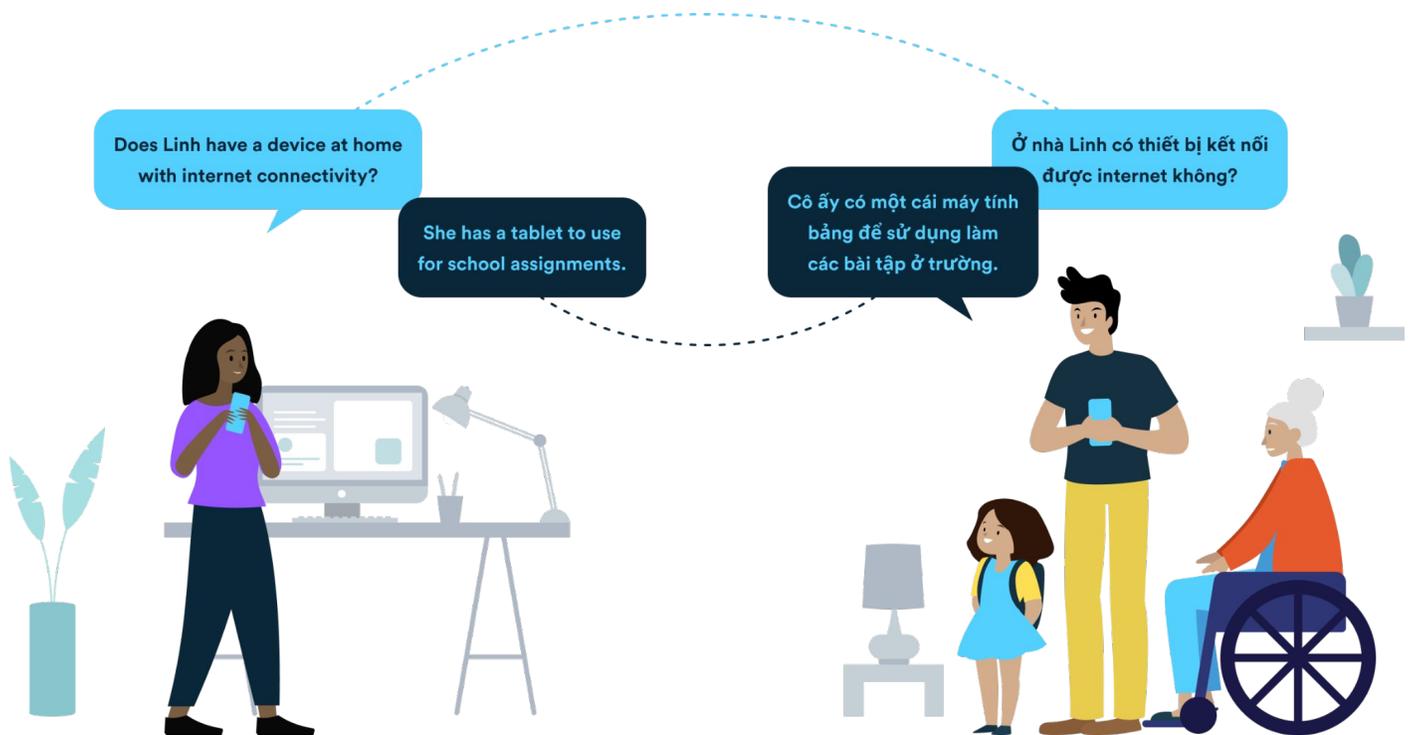
Family engagement and its impact during distance learning: follow-up report

Findings from the 2020-21 school year and a look at year-over-year changes from 2019-20

Introduction

TalkingPoints' mission centers on advancing best practices for building teacher and family capacity to support students through meaningful family-school partnerships. We designed our multilingual communication platform to help foster effective relationships between schools and families in under-resourced communities. Studying what makes communication and relationship-building effective - its frequency and the nature of what is shared - is an ongoing focus of this work.

With this in mind, we set out to learn more about how distance learning impacted family and educator capacity to support student learning. In June 2020, we published our first report, "Family Engagement, COVID-19, and Distance Learning: Data & Insights from the Field," which looked at the early days of pandemic-induced distance learning. A year later, in June 2021, we wanted to understand what had changed after a whole year of distance learning and how family-teacher communication impacted the learning experience in the past school year. In this report, we share key insights from our findings in the hope that they will help inform the field's work to support family-school partnerships and the important role those partnerships should play in the upcoming school year.



Key Insights

KEY FINDING 1

Both teachers and families identified family-teacher communication as a top – and increasing – priority

Families and teachers both cited better communication as foundational to boosting student learning, a finding that increased up to 20% in the past year, compared to summer of 2020. In our June 2020 study, families and teachers alike identified regular communication between teachers and families as essential to helping students learn. Our June 2021 research shows that the full 2020-21 academic year under distance learning conditions further enhanced these viewpoints. Family-teacher communication continues to be top of mind for both parties, who believe it will be of critical importance for them in the upcoming 2021-22 school year:

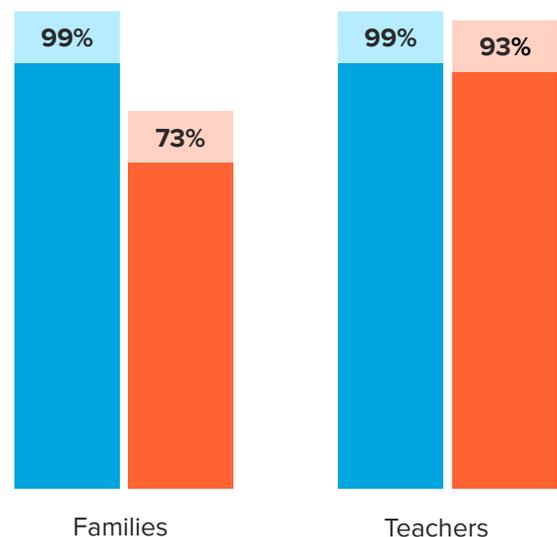
- 99% of educators believe that regular teacher-family communication will be equally (46%) or more (53%) important in the coming school year compared to this past school year. In our 2020 survey, 93% of educators shared this view.
- 99% of families think it will be equally (29%) or more (70%) important to communicate regularly with their child's teachers in the coming school year compared to last school year; a considerable increase from June 2020 when 73% of families expressed this view.

The above numbers show a clear increase in the perception that family-teacher communication is an important component of student learning during the pandemic, representing a 6-20% increase for teachers and families from June 2020 to June 2021.

How important do you think regular teacher-family communication will be compared to this past school year?



- More or equally important (2020-21 school year)
- More or equally important (2019-20 school year)



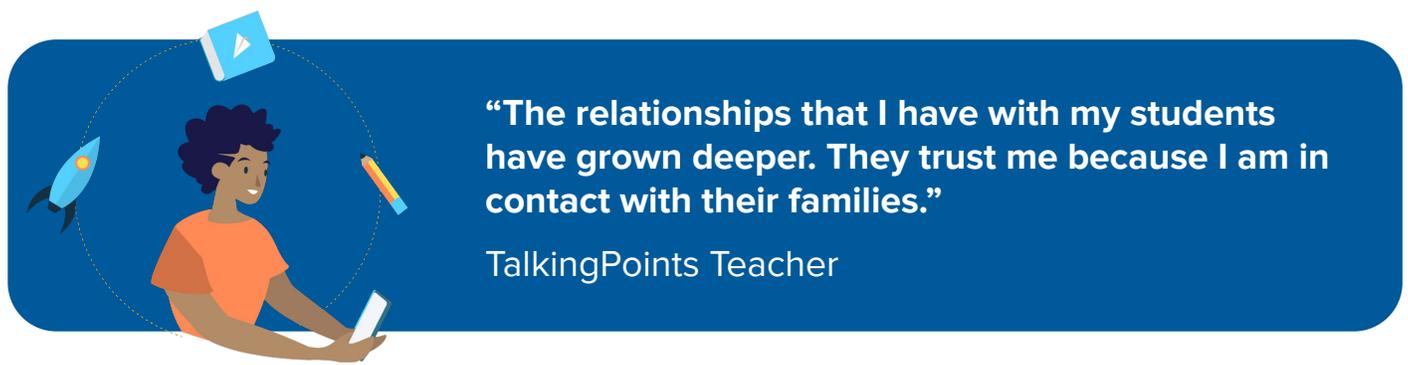
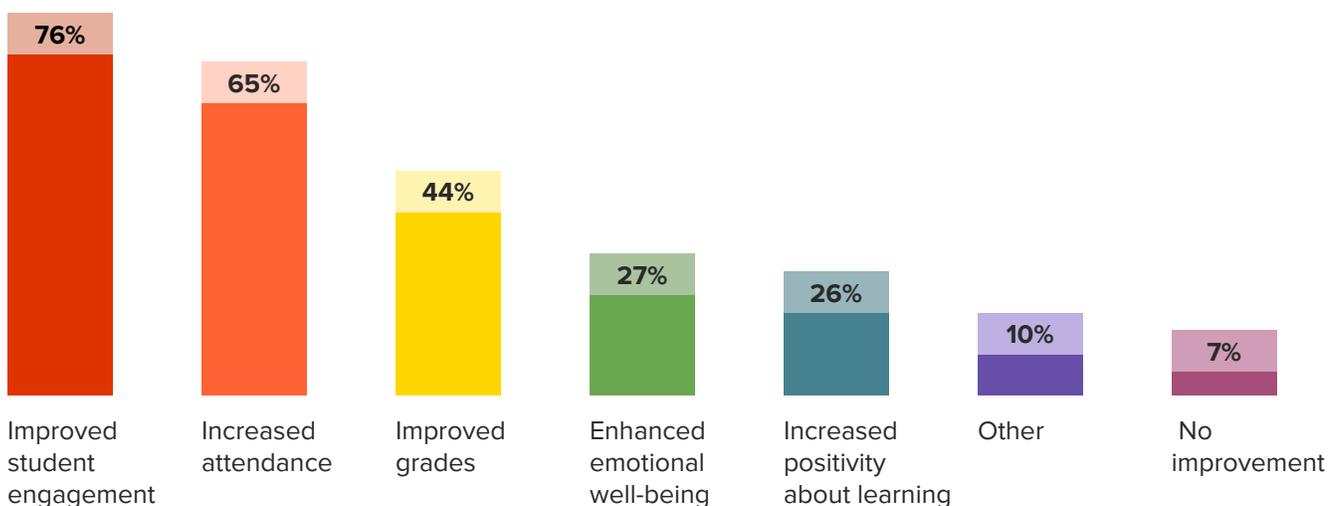
KEY FINDING 2

Frequent family-teacher communication positively impacted student learning and well-being, especially for students from non-English-speaking families

The overwhelming majority of educators reported seeing students improve after communicating regularly with their students' families:

- 93% of educators reported improvements in student academics and well-being after engaging with families.
- The most significant improvements were in student engagement (as observed through increased turn-in of work, increased participation in class), followed by attendance, grades, student well-being, and student attitudes towards learning.
- Educators of English Language Learner students and those who communicated more frequently with families¹ reported higher levels of improvement across all areas of student learning and well-being.

Teacher reports of student improvements after communication with families through TalkingPoints

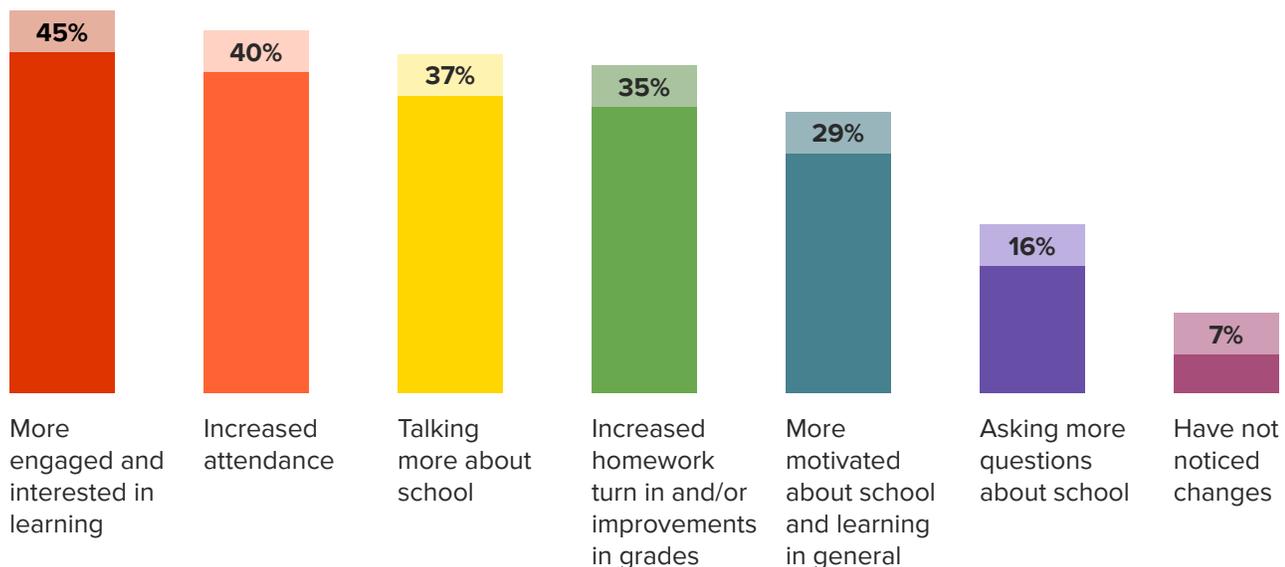


¹ Defined as higher-than-average communication with families

As with educators, this finding proved consistent among families, with 84% of families reporting improvements in student academics, behavior, or social-emotional development.

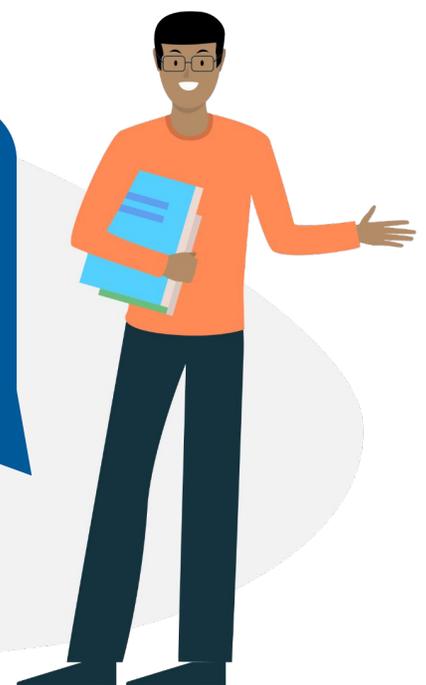
- Similarly to educators, families who had more frequent and proactive communication with teachers² were more likely to report that this engagement helped them support their child's learning (88%) compared to the rest (78%).
- Also, non-English-speaking families were much more likely to report improved student outcomes (91%) than English-speaking families, further reinforcing the impact of multilingual, accessible communication to families and its positive impact on student outcomes.

Family reports of student improvements after communication with teachers through TalkingPoints



“I saw a great improvement in communication not only between parents and me, but also between students and parents because the student knew that we were working together to support them.”

TalkingPoints Teacher



² Defined as families sent 3+ messages a month to the teachers

KEY FINDING 3

The nature of the communication also played a significant role; when conversations supported building a deeper understanding of each family's needs and circumstances, both teachers and families reported higher levels of student success

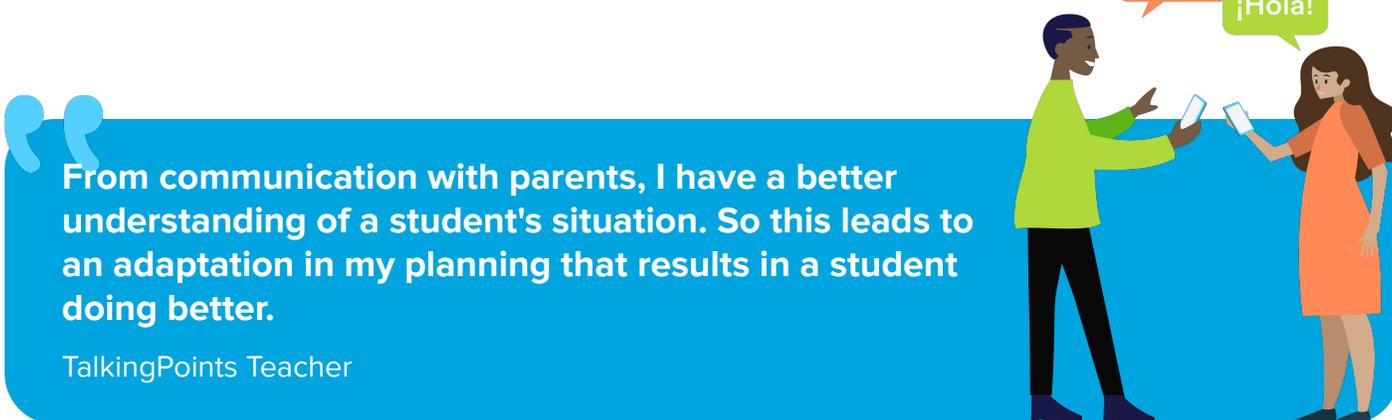
Our research showed that teachers and families can build capacity by fostering deeper, trusting relationships:

- Half (47%) of TalkingPoints educators discussed personal student/family matters that might affect student learning with the majority³ of families. Nearly a quarter (23%) discussed this with 75%+ of their families.
- Similarly, half (48%) of TalkingPoints educators learned something new that deepened their understanding of student academic or social-emotional needs with the majority of families.
- In addition, 78% of families said they were "very comfortable" communicating with their child's teacher when they had a question or concern.
- Families said that they were better able to support their students as a result of better communication with their child's teachers, with 88% of families reporting that this communication increased their knowledge, capacity, and confidence.



Communication with the teacher not only helps us with our child but gives us insight into what the teacher has going on and also gives the teacher a better understanding of us as parents.

TalkingPoints Family Member



From communication with parents, I have a better understanding of a student's situation. So this leads to an adaptation in my planning that results in a student doing better.

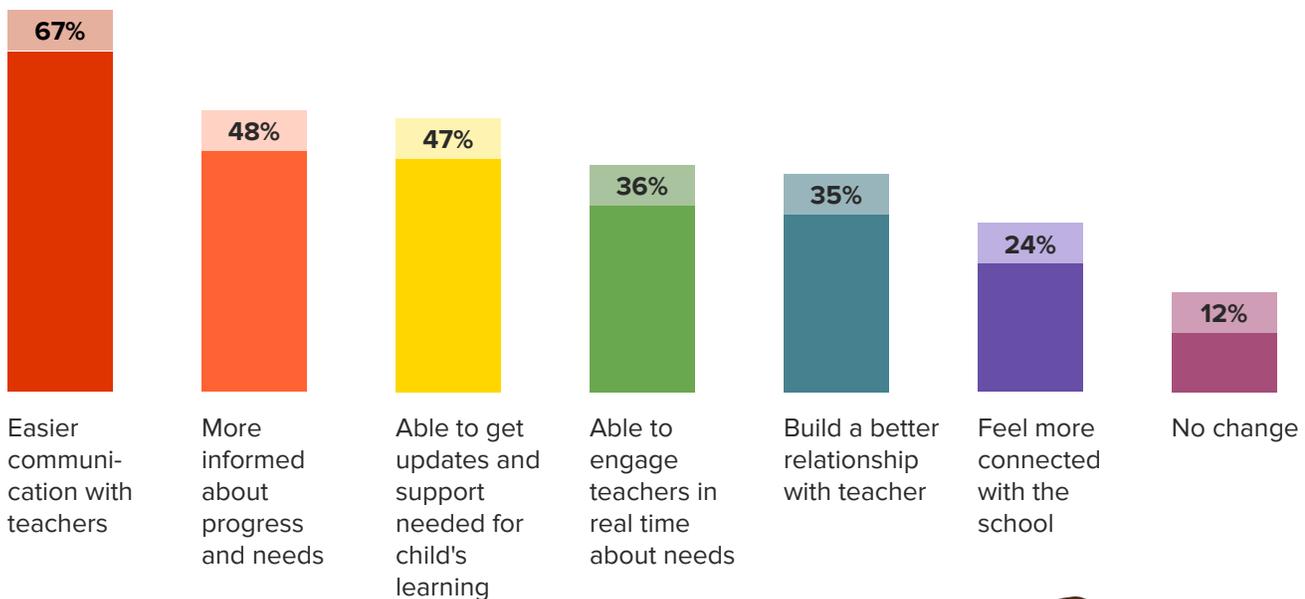
TalkingPoints Teacher

³Defined as more than 50% of families

Plus, school-family relationships can act as a catalyst to support learning at home:

- 63% of TalkingPoints educators report that they communicated with the majority of families regularly about how to support their child's learning during the 2020-21 school year
- Families reported several ways in which more effective communication with their child's teacher increased their capacity to support their child's learning, behavior and well-being, including:
 - They find it easier to communicate with their child's teachers and felt better about doing so.
 - They feel more informed about their child's needs and progress.
 - They have the information and support they need to help their child's learning.
 - They can connect in real-time with the teacher about their child's needs, attendance, and engagement.
 - They built a stronger relationship with their child's teacher.
 - They feel more connected with the school.

Families share how regular communication with the teacher helped them support their child



I learned that she has a lot of potential, and they helped her a lot in math. She improved remarkably because they [the teachers] always sent me messages to motivate her. *(Translated from Spanish)*

TalkingPoints Family Member



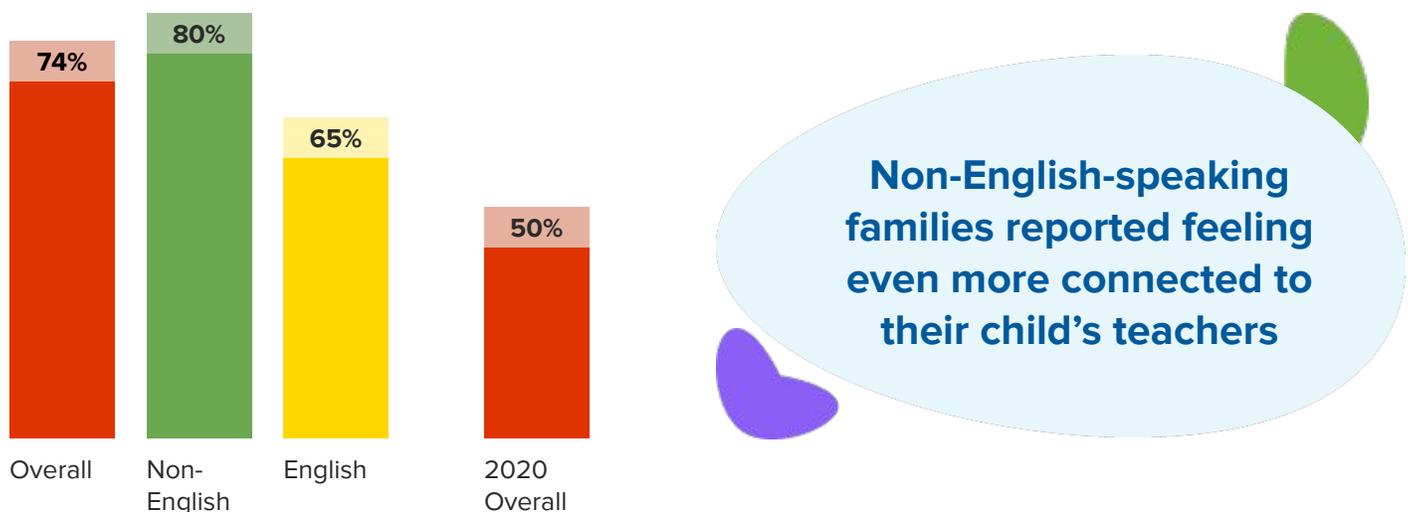
KEY FINDING 4

While both teachers and families value the benefits they saw from regular and meaningful communication, the data also uncovered some disconnects that represent areas for improvement in the coming year

Unsurprisingly, the pandemic-related distance learning experience seems to have strengthened family-school connections:

- As a result of increased communications during the 2020-21 school year, almost three-quarters (73%) of families say they felt more connected with their child's teacher, representing a 25% increase compared to our June 2020 survey.
- An even higher proportion of non-English-speaking families (80%) reported that they feel more connected with their child's teacher, underscoring the value of language barrier-free, family-teacher connections to build trusting and deep relationships where educators are able to meet families where they are.

Families who felt more connected to their child's teacher than before



However, our research shows a lingering disconnect between what schools and teachers are sharing with their families, what they want to hear about, and what families need and want to know.

Teacher needs and wants

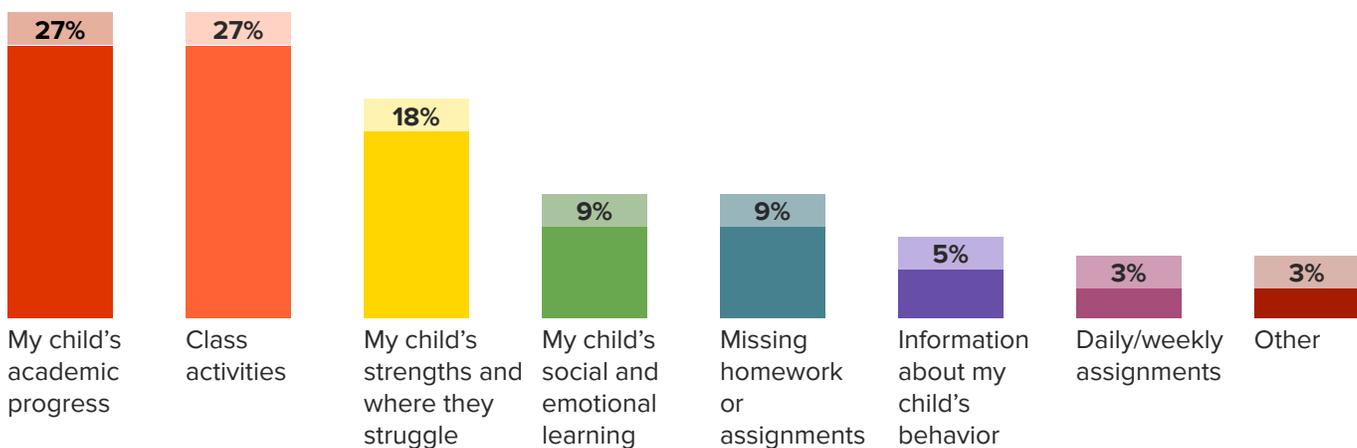
- When asked what information they would most like families to share to help them understand their students' needs, an overwhelming majority (75%) of teachers said they wanted to know about significant family circumstances/events that could impact a student's learning experience. A distant second, teachers cited wanting families to share their expectations and goals for their children's learning. Despite identifying these priorities, less than half of educators said they discussed personal student or family matters that might have impacted student learning during the last school year, indicating misalignment around the information families share and what teachers need and want to know.

- Perhaps it's not surprising that only 38% of educators reported that more than half of their families effectively supported their child's learning this past school year. In June 2020, three months into the pandemic, only 43% of teachers surveyed agreed that families were effectively supporting their child's learning at home. This year-over-year view highlights that while some progress has been made, the opportunity to better support learning at home persists. Furthermore, only 12% of educators reported that more than 75% of their families effectively supported their child's learning this past school year, suggesting lots of room for improvement in facilitating how families can partner with schools

Family needs and wants

- Families did not have one clear priority that they wanted their children's teachers to share, rather they expressed equal interest (27%) in learning more about their child's academic progress, their child's strengths and weaknesses, and class activities. In general they expressed a desire for more communication from teachers. Similarly, last June three quarters (75%) of families said they would like more frequent reports on their child's progress.

Families on what information they would like their child's teacher to share regularly



Families are most interested in hearing about their child's academic progress and class activities.

Most likely, families and teachers are pointing to the need for these conversations because they are not taking place frequently enough. More importantly, these types of discussions are likely to be even more relevant for the upcoming back-to-school period, especially given a context in which students have been away from the classroom for the majority of the last one and a half school years. As teachers need to understand student needs and the impact that pandemic-related distance learning has had on each student's social-emotional state and academic development, families hold a wealth of information that they can share about their children. That families are not yet sharing significant family circumstances or events that could impact their child's learning may indicate that these conversations, which require high levels of trust-building, are not occurring as often as needed.

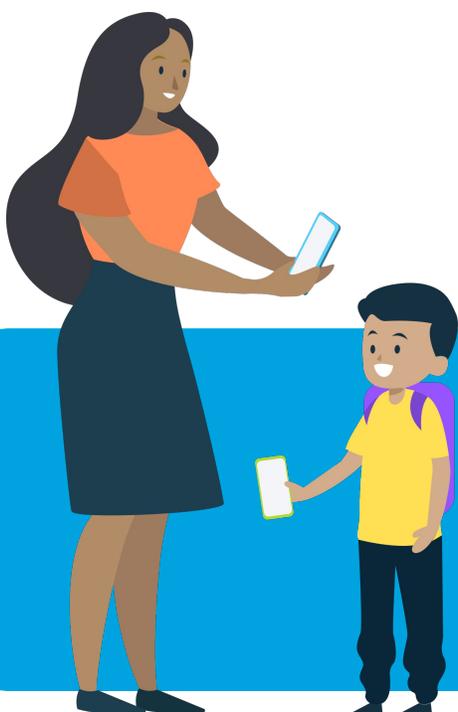
Looking Ahead

Our research found some important differences in the needs and concerns of families and teachers when thinking ahead to the 2021-22 school year. These insights can help shape meaningful approaches to fostering family-school connections to benefit student learning and well-being.

Teachers are worried about learning loss and helping students recover lost ground academically and also about student socio-emotional well-being. Families are eager to maintain communication with their children's schools and are looking for guidance and resources they can use to support their child's development as they navigate the new school year.

Teachers

- Top-of-mind concerns for teachers for the 2021-22 school year include addressing student learning loss, helping students re-build social-emotional and communication skills, and engaging students after a long period of learning outside the physical classroom, primarily via computer screens.
- Teachers also identified several insights developed during the past year that they plan to employ in navigating these challenges, including:
 - Developing connections between home and school, such as regular communication with families (e.g., weekly updates) and keeping open lines of communication, sending more positive communication and building trust with parents to “devote more time and advocacy on their behalf,” as well as learning more about each student and their family's cultural and home circumstances.
 - Considerations around learning equity and student differentiation (e.g. learning loss, access to technology) that include technology access to materials, making room for student accommodations (e.g. allowing late work, allowing students to retake assignments), and “listening to student needs and modifying where needed,” and differentiating student learning.



”
[Next year, I will remember to...] learn more about each student and their family, living conditions, and culture to effectively support student learning.

TalkingPoints Teacher

Families

For families, the biggest concerns about the new school year include helping their child transition back into the classroom or between grade levels, maintaining healthy communication with their child's teacher, and COVID-related safety considerations.

Families and their concerns



He did not do well last year so I am worried about the next school year especially since he's going to high school. I would like to get support, advice anything to help him build his confidence again.



I would like to be made privy to any grade level academic changes (reading, math, etc.) and other factors (attention, focus concerns) when they happen, not just during progress report time. There were times when I could address an issue with my daughter immediately. Instead it was delayed when I addressed it because I was made aware when the progress report was released.

The 70% of families who expressed a desire for additional guidance and resources wanted more communication with their child's teacher and school, more information about school and class activities and events, and advice about how to help their children at home. Understanding these needs can inform schools' approaches to strengthening family-school partnerships in the 2021-22 school year.

Families shared the types of guidance and resources from the teacher or school that would most help them prepare for the coming school year:



More communication so I can help him, tools he may need to succeed and maybe a weekly academic report.



That teachers take a little more time to communicate with us about what my child needs to improve his grades.



Everything that my son needs to do for his work because I hardly know much about what they need. *(Translated from Spanish)*



What subject does my son need the most to focus on or is he doing well in all his subjects?



I would love more information about my child's learning and behavior. The grades I would also like to know about more often.

Conclusion

As distance learning became the “new normal” in the 2020-21 school year, family-teacher communication and relationship building were strengthened. With families and teachers needing more open and frequent communication between home and school, school and district administrators increasingly recognized and validated the importance of family-school partnerships to support student learning. The unique conditions presented by distance learning gave educators a first-hand experience with how engaging with families drove improvements in student learning and whole-child development. What’s more, the positive effect of strong family-school partnerships was most prominent among families of students who do not speak English at home and for those who had more frequent touchpoints with their child’s teachers. This survey confirmed many of TalkingPoints’ hypotheses - that helping multilingual families engage with their students’ schools and teachers in their own language results in positive student impact and that accessible, equitable, and empowering communication for families is a key condition for this success. The survey results also reinforce our research-based finding that more effective communication between families and their students’ teachers can increase families’ capacity to support their children’s learning, behavior, and well-being.

Finally, the survey results highlight an emerging area of need: addressing the growing gap between what families and teachers share and what each of these groups needs to know to help students thrive. Families are hungry for a better understanding of their student's progress and a clearer sense of what is happening at school. They want more frequent connections and communication with teachers. Yet, teachers wish to understand each student's home circumstances more deeply and what students may need to succeed as they emerge from pandemic-influenced learning environments.

We believe that family engagement can have a profound, lasting impact on student outcomes, especially in under-resourced, multilingual, and diverse school communities, which TalkingPoints is uniquely poised to support. As many school districts across the country prepare to start the 2021-22 school year with yet another period of uncertainty, it is clear that the new school year will bring a new set of challenges as students return to classrooms. Families and teachers are as concerned about addressing student learning loss as they are about easing the transition back into classrooms for all students. These are legitimate concerns with no easy solutions. Solving these problems will depend on building deep relationships between teachers and families in support of students. By further facilitating home-school connections, emphasizing best practices for relationship-building, and helping create a shared understanding, we can support schools and families to work together to bridge the emerging gaps highlighted in this survey.

We are excited to partner with teachers, families, schools, and districts to understand the many ways in which TalkingPoints can help facilitate these school-family partnerships, especially for under-resourced communities disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Despite the challenges presented by the pandemic, we are encouraged that families and educators continue to be full of the highest hopes and dreams for their students, gratitude for each other, and a dedication to learning how family-school partnerships might evolve for the better in the coming school year. We, too, are filled with hope, optimism, and gratitude for how together we can build on the progress made during the pandemic and use this groundwork to fuel ongoing student success in the years to come.

[The shift to distance learning] definitely has been a learning experience for both kids and teachers, and I would love to say that we all did it together and got through it. Thank you teachers, parents and kids for all you do.

Family Member

About TalkingPoints

A 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, TalkingPoints is a multilingual platform that helps teachers and families communicate in 100 different languages through two-way translation of messages and personalized content that promotes family engagement and drives learning outcomes for students. Since launch, TalkingPoints has served more than 3 million educators and families. The platform is used primarily by under-resourced, multilingual communities: 85% of TalkingPoints schools are Title 1 eligible. Approximately 70% of the students served by TalkingPoints schools are students of color and nearly half of the families speak a language other than English at home.

Survey methodology

In June 2021, after a whole year spent in distance or hybrid learning, TalkingPoints surveyed 940 families and 497 teachers seeking to understand how families and teachers fared in the last school year and explore their perspectives on family engagement, the value and impact of family-teacher relationships, and communication. This is follow-on research from June 2020 report, “Family Engagement, COVID-19, and Distance Learning: Data & Insights from the Field,” in which TalkingPoints surveyed 589 families and 575 teachers to better understand the impact of the pandemic’s school closures on family engagement and home-school connections. All survey respondents were TalkingPoints users and generally reflected the platform’s demographics. For the purposes of this study, English-, Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking families were surveyed.

Join the TalkingPoints Mission

TalkingPoints is seeking philanthropic and research partners as well as school, district, and state education partners to join us in our mission to ensure that every child feels supported to learn, grow, and succeed by all those around them regardless of their family’s socioeconomic, linguistic, or cultural backgrounds. To learn more, please visit our website: talkingpts.org.

Acknowledgements

TalkingPoints would like to share our appreciation with all of the parents and educators who participated in this survey. Thank you also to the following partners who share our deep commitment to the TalkingPoints mission: our distribution partners including tens of thousands of schools, districts, nonprofits and educators; research partners including Behavioral Insights and Parenting Lab at the University of Chicago; and our philanthropic partners including AT&T, Arrow Impact, Ballmer Group, Carnegie Corporation, Cisco, David Weekley Family Foundation, Google, KKR, The Meadows Foundation, Overdeck Family Foundation, Open Road Alliance, Peery Foundation, Robin Hood, Schmidt Futures, SV2 and Unorthodox Philanthropy.

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