Ready or Not?
How Los Angeles Families Get Information About Their Children’s Learning and Academic Progress
During the 2017-2018 school year, parents from the Parent Power Network (PPN) organized to help pass a resolution at the LAUSD school board to create a school performance framework. Since 2013, families throughout California, including Los Angeles, have had no access to school quality information. Having achieved the important goal of making sure that all families have access to clear and comparable school quality information, parent leaders identified other types of information that families need to make sure that their children get a great education. Through meetings and surveys, PPN leaders surfaced that many Los Angeles parents do not feel like they get enough information about how their children’s academic progress. Many families simply do not have enough information about what their children should be learning and how they are doing. Other families, who are aware of their children’s academic standing, are frequently frustrated at a lack of clear steps to support their children’s growth.

To gather the findings in this report, families collected artifacts from their schools and from web resources. Families designed and asked a shared set of questions during parent teacher conferences at 50 Los Angeles Unified Schools. Through individual meetings and ongoing committee meetings, PPN members shared feedback and identified strengths and gaps in the information available to LAUSD families. By publishing this report, we hope to elevate these findings and to support families as they organize for the implementation of its recommendations. When families have access to the right information about their children’s learning they can more fully contribute to their children’s success and the success of their schools.

This report is centered on three key questions that parents seek to answer when navigating their children’s academic experience.

What should my child be learning?

How is my child doing academically?

What can be done to accelerate their learning?
Parent Revolution worked with members of the Parent Power Network during the 2018-2019 school year to understand how Los Angeles Unified School District families receive academic information about their children.

This project arose because many members report that they don’t know enough about what their children should be learning, how they are doing and what can be done to accelerate their learning. Families also frequently report that they feel as if they find out “too late” that their children are not prepared for high school and college.

As part of this project, families gathered information from their experiences at parent teacher conferences, collected information that was sent home, gathered student report cards and progress reports, and looked at online resources, including LAUSD’s Parent Portal. These information sources were evaluated for their ability to answer families’ key questions:

- What should my child be learning?
- How is my child doing academically?
- What can be done to accelerate their learning?

The project revealed some clear, consistent strengths, including:

- Access for families who speak a language other than English.
- Significant efforts to engage families.
- Consistent use of state standards.

The report also identifies key areas for improvement, including:

- A lack of clarity on academic enrichment or intervention opportunities.
- Misalignment between report card grades and standardized assessments.
- Misalignment between information shared from general education, special education and English learner sources.
- Little opportunity to track students progress on academic standards on an ongoing basis.
- Unclear implications of current achievement for high school and college readiness.

This report does not identify individual schools, as one of our key findings is that the district should do more to ensure consistency across all schools.

The report concludes with recommendations for how LAUSD, its local districts and schools can strengthen the communication with families regarding academic programming, readiness and growth. These recommendations emphasize the use or improvement of existing resources.
A Missed Opportunity

While it is often said that parents are children’s first and best advocates, the gap in actionable student-level academic information presents a missed opportunity to use the power of families to improve student learning outcomes. Almost all families that were surveyed reported that they wanted to know more about what their children were supposed to be learning, more about how they were doing, and wanted to know how they and their child’s school can provide extra support. Almost all families shared that with this information they could have a bigger influence on how much their children learned. In a school district where six out of ten students are not proficient in reading and progress is stalled at 1% a year, it will be another 60 years before all children in Los Angeles can read. This is too slow. We believe that change can be accelerated by creating the conditions where parents can do for their children’s learning what they do best: advocate.

One of the most frequent experiences that families shared was not knowing the implications of their child’s English proficiency and English learner status on high school and college readiness. Other families reported that they had relied on good report card grades and positive comments from school staff, only to later learn that their child had scored below standards on the state SBAC exam.
Families receive lots of information about their children, from flyers sent home in backpacks to password-protected web portals. This information comes from four main sources: the state, the school district, schools and classrooms. Parent collected this information and we looked to see what each source shared.

Based on parent experiences, we crafted three criteria to evaluate the usefulness of each body of information to answer parents’ key questions.

- Is the information aligned with other sources?
- Is the information accessible to families?
- Is the information actionable for families?
What should my child be learning?

From The Classroom

Most of the information that families have about what their child is learning comes from their classroom teachers. As part of their parent teacher conference surveys, parents asked their teachers about curriculum and standards. Almost all teachers were able to share the specific state standards that were covered by their grade or course. Some teachers shared lists of assignments that aligned to each standard, while others only referred to the standards themselves. The degree to which families felt that they understood what those standards meant varied from classroom to classroom.

Beyond parent teacher conferences, teachers provided a variety of information to families on standards, curriculum and assignments. Parents report receiving calendars, reminders and unit previews sent home from school with their children. However, the information varied greatly from teacher to teacher. Documents differed in whether they referenced state standards or presented assignments and goals in language disconnected from standards. While some parents reported receiving all of the above, others reported only receiving supply lists at the beginning of the year and then relying on conversations with the teachers after that.

The same range of experiences was true of digital communication via LAUSD’s web-based Parent Portal. Within the same school a family might receive regular digital updates on assignments and learning from one teacher, while receiving no information from another teacher. In the first case, a parent could see how each assignment their child worked on contributed to mastery of a state standard. In the other course, the parent was left to rely on what they could learn from their child, two parent teacher conferences a year and ad-hoc conversations with school staff.

From The State

At no stage of this project did parents report that they used state level resources to understand what their children should be learning. The California Department of Education’s website does contain some parent focused resources on English learner instruction and standards, but even when shown to families these were less useful to families than similar resources on LAUSD’s website.
From The District
Parents can find information on the Common Core State Standards for their child’s grade in several places on the LAUSD website. This information is hard to find and primarily consists of links that are not useful to families. For example, from the LAUSD Parent Portal, a family must click through to the “LAUSD Families” page, which has outdated content, and then through another menu onto the “Parent and Community Services” page. Here they find another list of links where parents can navigate to a variety of information in the form of presentations, videos and flyers on topics such as state standards, the district’s English learner master plan and graduation requirements. When shown individual resources, families found them useful. However, no family in our network reported that they had proactively and independently used the information on these sites to understand their children’s academic goals.

Parents are also provided with a copy of a “Parent-Student Handbook” in either hard or soft copy. The handbook dedicates over 50 pages to district polices and only half to one page each for state testing, high school graduation requirements, Instructional Programs for English learners and Special Education.

From The School
All schools host back to school nights and curriculum nights. While some families attend these events, others have trouble making it to school at the scheduled time. Several families report that their schools hold regular workshops to help them understand what their children are learning, but this is not consistent across all schools. While some schools use the Parent Portal to provide resources on curriculum and instruction, it is more frequently used to highlight non-academic events like trips, contests or fairs. Some parents find school based parent centers to be helpful resources to understand their children’s assignments or coursework, but the utility of these centers for providing specific knowledge varies from school to school.
Artifacts: What should my child be learning?

Family-facing Resource Pages

While Los Angeles Unified has done an excellent job of redesigning its school finder tool so that it provides a customized guided exploration to families, academic information is still presented as a collection of links, often hidden behind several redundant and outdated district web pages.

LAUSD Parent Portal

Through the LAUSD Parent Portal, parents potentially have access to much of the information that they would need to be engaged in their children’s education. However, the information currently available to families varies from classroom to classroom and most families who participated in this project either had never registered for the portal or were not active users of the tool.

Welcome Parents

- Community Resource Guide for Immigrant Families English Spanish
- California Content Standards
- College and Career Readiness
- Digital Citizenship
- Graduation Requirements Video
- LCAP and Title I
- Parent Education Library
- Parents’ Rights and Responsibilities
- Parent Portal
- School and Office Volunteers
- School Calendars
- School Forms and Resources
- Social Emotional Support
- Student Assessments
- Supporting English Learners
- Supporting Gifted Students
- Supporting Students with Special Needs
- Title I Study Group
Homework & Assignments

The information on student assignments and academic progress that families can proactively find varies greatly from teacher to teacher. Some teachers provide regular updates on assignments, and some go further to show how each assignment aligns to standards. Many parents cannot independently check on their child’s progress and must rely on visiting or contacting the school, waiting for report cards or asking their children to see their graded assignments. Families found assignment information the most useful when it was linked to standards. This linkage tied together the various pieces of information they receive about their child’s progress.

Course Syllabi

In many cases, parents can find course syllabi for their child’s classes online. Many syllabi list what students will be learning and are sometimes aligned with state standards. But the location of syllabi, updated websites, course descriptions and lessons are inconsistent within and across schools.

Many other families remember receiving a paper copy of a syllabus or grade overview at a school event or brought home by their child, but report that it has not been embedded in other school engagement opportunities.
How is my child doing academically?

**From the Classroom**

Not surprisingly, families overwhelmingly rely on their child’s classroom teachers to understand how their child is doing in school. Almost all families reported that their children’s teachers were accessible, although the method and frequency of communication varied from teacher to teacher. Families also reported respectful communication in their preferred language. Families rely primarily on three types of communication from the classroom about their child’s academic progress: report cards, items sent home in backpacks such as graded assignments and letters; and conversations with teachers, including parent teacher conferences. A majority of parents reported that when asked, teachers shared the specific standards on which students struggled or excelled to explain report card grades. However, the conversations lacked specificity when parents did not ask targeted questions. In only very few examples did teachers discuss the previous year’s state tests, district interim assessments, or school report card grades in reference to student progress during the current year. Student achievement and progress was also almost entirely framed in terms of marks in a single course or grade, or progress toward the next grade but almost never in terms of district benchmarks like 3rd grade reading, high school readiness, or high school graduation with UC/CSU eligibility. Families reported that DIBELS scores were consistently shared during conferences across most schools. The district administers this assessment of early literacy skills to all students in grades K-2 and to English learners and Students with Disabilities in grades 3-5/6.

In many schools, report cards and parent teacher conferences were the only regularly scheduled classroom view into a child’s academic progress, with all other information coming at irregular intervals. In a few classrooms, families received regular, standards based academic progress reports that showed student progress toward mastery, but these were an exception and existed based on the initiative of the individual teacher. Similarly, some teachers use the district’s Parent Portal as a vehicle for providing regular academic updates to families of all of their students, but we did not see this to be systemic, even within an individual grade in the same school. Even when teachers are maximizing this tool, the impact is hampered by low adoption by families. In one case a teacher had regularly uploaded academic progress reports of a student, but these were missed by a parent because he had never registered for the Parent Portal.

When engaged with state exam or standardized benchmark information that shows their children to be off track, many families report feeling mislead by classroom information that shows their children to be successful.

Families of English learners frequently report receiving contradicting or confusing information from the general education and English learner programs. The same is true for families whose children have Individualized Education Plans, where the goals and progress measured in the IEP are rarely reflected in information received from the general educator.
From The School
At the schools where families felt the highest level of understanding of their child’s academic progress, there was consistency in their experience of parent teacher conferences and in the information sent home by individual teachers. At several schools, parents felt that there was an overall understanding of their child’s academics that could be gained through a combination of engagement with teachers, attendance at school meetings and workshops, and participation at the school parent center. In other schools, this experience was not well curated, and these opportunities were either limited, disconnected from one another or focused on generalities like “teaching your child the importance of education,” rather than building specific and actionable knowledge. Almost all families report being able to regularly establish contact with their children’s teachers, indicating widespread and strong school culture on responsiveness.

From the State
The state of California generates information on student reading, math and science proficiency, as well as the English Language proficiency of English learners. This information is supplied to families by the district. Not all families report receiving or engaging with this information. Families want more individual engagement to understand their children’s scores, but do not feel that there are adequate opportunities for engagement. The California Department of Education’s website hosts a variety of high quality, multi-media resources in multiple languages for families to understand their children’s academic results and progress. These resources are designed in a way that is easily navigable for families. However, no family in our network had independently discovered or used these resources and no families reported being directed to these resources by school staff.

From the District
The district standardizes the information that families receive from their school and classrooms through report cards, minimum conference requirements, interim assessments and the English learner master plan. The district also creates the structures for how families receive this information. These include the report card format, the Parent Portal, and oversight of parent centers. However, the district is not a direct information source for families on student academic progress.
SBAC Results
For families of students scoring at Level 2, the descriptor of “Standard Nearly Met” is often misleading. Families often understand “Standard Nearly Met” to mean that their child is on track when they are not, particularly for students who score at Level 2 proficiency for multiple years.

ELPAC Scores
Families of English learners experience misalignment between state ELPAC proficiency levels and classroom report card grades. In many cases, ELPAC levels are much lower that report card grades, and families of English learners are not engaged to have a clear understanding of what language skills their children are supposed to master, and by when. This misalignment creates confusion, which intensifies for families with older English learners and inhibits their ability to take urgent action on behalf of their children. There is a specific gap in engaging families to understand how English proficiency impacts college readiness at various grade levels.

DIBELS Scores
LAUSD administers the DIBELS assessment of early literacy skills to all students in grades K-2 and to English learners and Students with Disabilities in grades 3-5/6. Families reported that DIBELS scores were consistently shared during parent teacher conferences and were linked to action steps for their children.
Artifacts: How is my child doing academically?

LAUSD School Report Card

Overall Academic Scores
Describes how a student is doing overall in a specific subject.

California State Standards
Overall grades are broken down to show student mastery of specific state standards. While families appreciate clear information about standards, presenting classroom generated grades alongside state standards can create confusion for families. The depth of parent engagement opportunities linking classroom and state assessments varies from school to school.

Academic Scores Key
Report cards use the same scoring range for class grades that is used on state exams. This becomes misleading for families, as state exams scores do not appear on the report card.

College and Career Readiness
Students receive marks on state standards for college and career ready behaviors. This may be misleading as families want and do not receive adequate information on how mastery of content standards impacts college readiness. This is especially pronounced for the families of English learners.
What can be done to accelerate their learning?

Parents received both the least information and the least useful information from all information sources in response to variations of this question.

From the Classroom and School
Almost all schools have some sort of parent engagement effort that focuses on helping families to understand how to support their children academically. The quality of these engagement efforts and the breadth of their reach varied by individual school. Families found the most utility from workshops and resources that helped them understand how to navigate the full K-College continuum. In the schools with well designed parent engagement, families felt that they gained this knowledge through both formal programing and engagement with school staff, including in parent centers. In many other schools, there was too little of this information, with families being told to read with their children, check their homework and send them to school as the extent of their role. In some schools, parents found there was too much incoherent information, with poorly aligned flyers, pamphlets and advice abounding.

Even in schools with well designed and well received parent engagement programs, there was little specific information available on what actions parents could take to help their children who had fallen behind or who were not on track to meet benchmarks for college readiness. More concerning, in very few classrooms and in even fewer schools did families have a strong understanding of how educators would help students who were off track to catch up.

In several instances, teachers were able to share specific learning activities and teaching techniques they were using in their classrooms to support struggling students. In these cases, parents felt more confident in monitoring students’ progress and in further engaging with their teachers. In several schools, families could gather information on a core instructional program and program of tiered intervention, although this information was shared upon request rather than being proactively embedded in parent programming.

Many families approach questions about how to accelerate student learning as a request for extra services, often framed as “tutoring.” Most of the responses from schools take these questions literally, rather than as an opportunity to engage families to understand the school’s approach to teaching and curriculum and to make specific commitments to expected student outcomes.

All of these challenges are more acute for families of English learners.

From the District and State
District and state resources in response to this question largely replicate the type of information available at the school level. There is a good deal of “how to” information available for parents, but it is poorly organized and not specifically targeted to students who are behind. Resources about K-College pathways and English learner reclassification are of higher quality, but there is low engagement from families in our network.
Artifacts: What can be done to accelerate their learning?

California Department of Education Website
The California Department of Education website links to resources from the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium that explain the assessment and how parents can support their children. These resources are well designed, but no family in our network had used the resources or had been directed to them by their school’s staff.

Los Angeles Unified School District Website
LAUSD’s website links to a library of parent resources. Many of these resources are also used in school site parent centers. While these resources cover a range of topics that families are interested in, they do not appear to be tailored to Los Angeles families and some topics are outdated.

School Websites
When parents ask about support for their children, they are often directed to tutoring information on school websites. Families report that being referred outside of the school for the help that their children need harms their sense of trust in and collaboration with the school.
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<th>Key Question</th>
<th>Aligned?</th>
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<td>Does information from each source align with other sources to give families a clear and coherent understanding? Is there a consistent parent experience from classroom to classroom and from school to school?</td>
<td>The use of Common Core State Standards is consistent and aligned from the state to the classroom. Across the many vehicles and sources of information, families get a clear and consistent picture of the standards that students should master in each grade. However, this consistency breaks down at the school and classroom level. Some schools provide much more information to align standards with day-to-day academic experiences than others. At the classroom level, families receive information about assignment completion and mastery, but both completion and mastery of assignments are often disconnected from the K-12 standards sequence.</td>
<td>The most useful and frequently used information on what children are learning comes at the school level. In the most effective examples, the content is specific, links assignments to standards and is consistently communicated by all school level sources. The consistency allows a parent to miss one opportunity, but still catch another. However, in most schools the information is provided irregularly, lacks linkage between specific assignments and standards, and is not part of a comprehensive engagement effort.</td>
<td>Across all schools, parents in elementary and middle grades are encouraged by school staff to read to their children, make time for at-home reading, or listen to their children read. There is far less consistent engagement to help parents understand other subject area learning goals. In the late elementary and middle grades, there is a heavier emphasis on assignment completion. Families want more information on benchmarks so that they understand what their child should be working toward. Families of English learners find workshops helpful, but feel that the same information is disconnected from general education.</td>
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<td>What should my child be learning?</td>
<td>Families struggled to get a full picture of how their children are doing academically. In many cases, report card grades were far higher than SBAC scores or ELPAC levels. Since parents tend to look to trusted school staff as the experts and often do not get individual engagement with state standardized results; report card grades, class assignments and reports from the teacher factor heavily in parents’ perception of how well their child is doing academically. The confusion was greater with English learners and intensified with older English learners. Parents whose children have Individualized Education Plans found misalignment between information from IEP conferences and information shared by the general education program. Struggling readers in elementary school who scored not meeting standards (the lowest level on state exams) saw the greatest alignment in messages received from all sources.</td>
<td>Parents of students at the SBAC proficiency level of “Nearly met standards” experienced the greatest information misalignment between standardized results and classroom grades. Many parents think their children who score at this proficiency level are on track when they are not. In many cases, standardized test information either does not reach families, or there are not sufficient supports for parents to understand the implications of student scores. The Parent Portal is a vastly understated opportunity for accessibility. It is well designed, mobile friendly, and contains powerful information, but too few schools and families are using it.</td>
<td>Benchmarked student academic information remains less accessible to families than classroom based grades, which impedes families from taking urgent action as it relates to their child's readiness for the future. This issue is especially pervasive for families of English learners who frequently do not feel sufficiently engaged to understand their child's English proficiency status and the implications for their future education. Late elementary and early middle school families also report a gap in understanding high school readiness and options.</td>
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<td>How is my child doing academically?</td>
<td>Almost all families who collected information during parent teacher conferences report being told to spend time reading with their child. Although a range of resources are available on the LAUSD website there were few other at-home strategies shared with parents during conferences. Few parents thought that Individualized Education Plans were reflected in the general education program. Although most schools make reference to tiered academic programs in their public documents this information is rarely shared with families.</td>
<td>Information on academic intervention is inaccessible to families from all information sources. There is very little engagement with families to understand and participate in a school's tiered academic support program. In some cases even parents who serve on the school site council had not been engaged to understand the school's approach. Families are frequently referred to external tutoring services when they inquire about support for their children. While the information about these services is clear on school websites, the services themselves are inaccessible to many families and their suggestion as a solution causes high levels of frustration and mistrust.</td>
<td>While the district, state and schools share many “how to” resources for families looking to help their children, there are too many of these resources and they are inconsistently used. Across the board, families were dissatisfied when they sought to understand their school’s approach to academic intervention for general education students. In no case did families leave understanding the specific approach that a school takes to support struggling learners.</td>
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<td>What can be done to accelerate their learning?</td>
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Our Perspective

The information shared in this report is based on the experiences of families who are members of the Parent Power Network. In some cases, it is likely that teachers, schools, Los Angeles Unified and the California Department of Education are making good efforts to produce useful information, but that not all families are using this information to help their children succeed. The experiences of families reveal that there is still important work to be done on accessibility and engagement.

The members of the Parent Power Network are almost entirely people of color. About half of the families participating in this project are monolingual Spanish speakers. The perspective of White families or families whose children attend a school in one of the traditionally well-resourced pockets of Los Angeles Unified are not reflected in this report. Only one parent who participated in this project has a child who takes alternate assessments. Most participating families have children in elementary and middle schools.

Strengths

- There is clear effort to align learning expectations to Common Core State Standards from the state level to the classroom level. This effort is demonstrated in how teachers describe their coursework to families in conversation and how the district has designed its report card template to incorporate the standards.

- There are comprehensive efforts to engage families who speak a language other than English. It was notable that every family in this project reported being able to communicate directly with their teacher or through an adult interpreter in their native language and no parent had to rely on a child for translation.

- The concept of family engagement is a clear priority at all levels. Schools send home frequent communications, place value on their parent centers and host a variety of family focused events. The district has made significant investments in both school based parent centers and the online Parent Portal. Parents consistently reported respectful communication with their children’s teachers and consistent availability of teachers. At the state level, quality resources have been created to engage parents in understanding assessments and K-College pathways.

Areas for Growth

- Misalignment between report card grades and standardized assessments, with classroom generated information presenting a rosier picture than state test results, especially for students scoring at Level 2 on the state exams.

- Misalignment between information shared from general education, special education and English learner sources.

- The ability of families to regularly track student progress on academic standards on an ongoing basis is almost entirely dependent on individual teachers and is not even consistent within most schools.

- While most families did not get a clear sense of the implications of current achievement for high school and college readiness, this is especially pronounced for the families of English learners.

- When families seek answers on how to help struggling students, they are frustrated when they are referred to 3rd party tutoring resources rather than gaining an understanding of the school’s approach to academic intervention.
Recommendations

• The Parent Portal holds the potential to be a powerful tool for families, especially those who cannot always make it to the school for meetings. It is well designed, mobile-friendly, multi-lingual and when best used, allows families to understand what their children are learning and stay on top of their progress. However, its usefulness as a tool for equity is severely limited by the inconsistency in content use from school to school and classroom to classroom. There is very low usage by families, as represented by the families in the Parent Power Network. The district should work to standardize the types of information that schools provide to families. A much more intensive effort to engage families in using and gaining fluency from this tool will also be necessary.

• During the 2017-2018 school year, the Los Angeles Unified Board of Education passed a resolution entitled “Close the Gap,” which established important benchmarks for 3rd grade reading and high school readiness to go along with A-G course completion. Just as the district has invested in aligning report cards to state standards and embedding the standards in much of the academic communication with families, these important readiness benchmarks should be embedded throughout the district, school and classrooms, especially when communicating with families.

• For many families, there is a disconnect between classroom grades and both ELA/math exams and English learner status. While it is a strength that schools, and especially teachers, engage families respectfully, families need to hear more consistent messages about their children’s academic progress. The comprehensive engagement of families of English learners at the classroom, school, and district level to build greater understanding of the reclassification process, including for older students, and its relation to K-College pathways must be a priority. The district should closely monitor both the delivery and the penetration of these engagement efforts at the local, school, and district level.

• Currently 60% of LAUSD’s students are not meeting standards in English Language Arts. The district and individual schools must do a better job of letting families know what the plan is to support the learning of students who have fallen behind. Most schools have tiered instructional plans, but parents are not engaged to be able to understand, monitor and support these programs. They are left to either just trust that things will improve or to go find extra resources on their own. LAUSD and local districts should better support schools to design tiered instructional interventions, monitor their implementation, and make sure that these are transparent and accessible to families through school plans and meaningful engagement. When parents are engaged to understand a school’s instructional approach, what it looks like and what the expected results are, they can be valuable partners to make sure that the implementation of that approach happens consistently.
Parent Revolution’s mission is to ensure that families, especially those from historically underserved communities, can use their power to secure an excellent public education for their children, children in their community and all children in California. This project and report were made possible through the support of The Carnegie Corporation of New York.

www.parentrevolution.org