

# Investing in Hispanic Families in Savannah-Chatham County Public Schools

THE CASE FOR STRENGTHENING SCCPSS' COMMITMENT  
TO IMMIGRANT STUDENTS AND FAMILIES



**m**IGRANT  
equity  
SOUTHEAST

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Metropolitan Center for Research on  
Equity and the Transformation of Schools

## **About Migrant Equity Southeast (MESE)**

Migrant Equity Southeast (MESE) is a Latinx and immigrant-led 501(c)(3) organization based in South Georgia that advocates for immigrant rights and engages in mutual aid, education and outreach with the migrant and refugee communities of South Georgia. Their mission is to fight for the liberation, economic justice, and human rights of under-served migrant and refugee communities in the southeast region through empowerment, advocacy, and education.

Our goal is to highlight the disparities of equitable access to resources for students and communities for whom English is their secondary language. We hope that the data provided will bring light to issues non-immigrant communities are not aware of and encourage them to engage with immigration advocacy organizations such as MESE, to change the current reality of immigrants and students. United we can bring about change and fight for immigrant rights to create a better future for all.

## **About the Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools**

NYU Metro Center advances equity and excellence in education by connecting to legacies of justice work through critical inquiry and research, professional development and technical assistance, community action and collaboration. NYU Metro Center is nationally and internationally renowned for its work on educational equity and school improvement.

## **About the Education Justice Research and Organizing Collaborative (EJ-ROC)**

The Education Justice Research and Organizing Collaborative (EJ-ROC) at the Metro Center brings together researchers, data and policy analysts, and community organizers to provide critical research, data, policy and strategic support for the education justice movement, schools, and districts. We partner with grassroots organizations, schools, and districts to bridge community-based solutions with school and district policy. EJ-ROC aims to democratize education data, research and policy, maximize the synergy between research and community organizing, magnify the voices of grassroots communities of color, and advance the capacity of organizing efforts to design solutions, make demands, and sustain policy wins, and education systems change. EJ-ROC builds on the long tradition of movement-driven, community-derived research and uses an explicit racial justice lens in our two main areas of work.

## **Acknowledgments**

MESE would like to thank all of the Spanish-speaking parents and families who interviewed with us; without your words and support, this report would not have been possible. For the teachers and faculty that interviewed with us, we appreciate your honesty and guidance in highlighting the inequities Hispanic students face in their educational journeys. Thank you for your tireless work and dedication in supporting students.

A special thank you to Claire Choi for support in data collection and to the EJ-ROC team at NYU Metro Center for their research assistance.

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\* Unless otherwise noted, data source for figures: [Georgia Department of Education, 2022](#).

# Introduction

As cities across the country diversify, school districts must innovate and transform their practices to ensure that all students are educated to their highest potential. In Savannah-Chatham County Public Schools, the fastest growing population of students are Hispanic\*, who constitute more than [12 percent](#) of the district. However, a lack of representation and support for Hispanic students and non-English speaking families is a barrier that impedes student wellbeing and academic success.

Student achievement rates for Hispanic students and English Language Learners evidence the need for Savannah-Chatham County Public School System (SCCPSS) to better serve this growing population. While SCCPSS has made efforts to address cultural diversity, including [efforts to hire more diverse teachers](#) and a new [US Department of Education grant to improve literacy among English Language Learners](#), further efforts must be made in order to adequately serve immigrant families and advance immigrant student achievement.\*\* Additionally, SCCPSS must do a better job at supporting Black students, students with disabilities, and other vulnerable populations of students, as [Deep Center](#) and other community groups have called on the school system to do. When vulnerable populations of students are supported and thrive, all students do better.

With the appointment of a new superintendent for the 2023-24 school year comes a critical moment to strengthen SCCPSS’ commitment to immigrant students and families.

**In this time of transition, Migrant Equity SouthEast (MESE) calls on SCCPSS to improve education for immigrant families through an increase in bilingual staff, improved translation services, and more robust engagement of immigrant families. MESE has raised many of these issues with the SCCPSS leadership over the past year, in school board meetings and individual meetings, and while we appreciate the progress that has been made, the changes have not been significant enough to improve conditions for SCCPSS’ Hispanic students.**

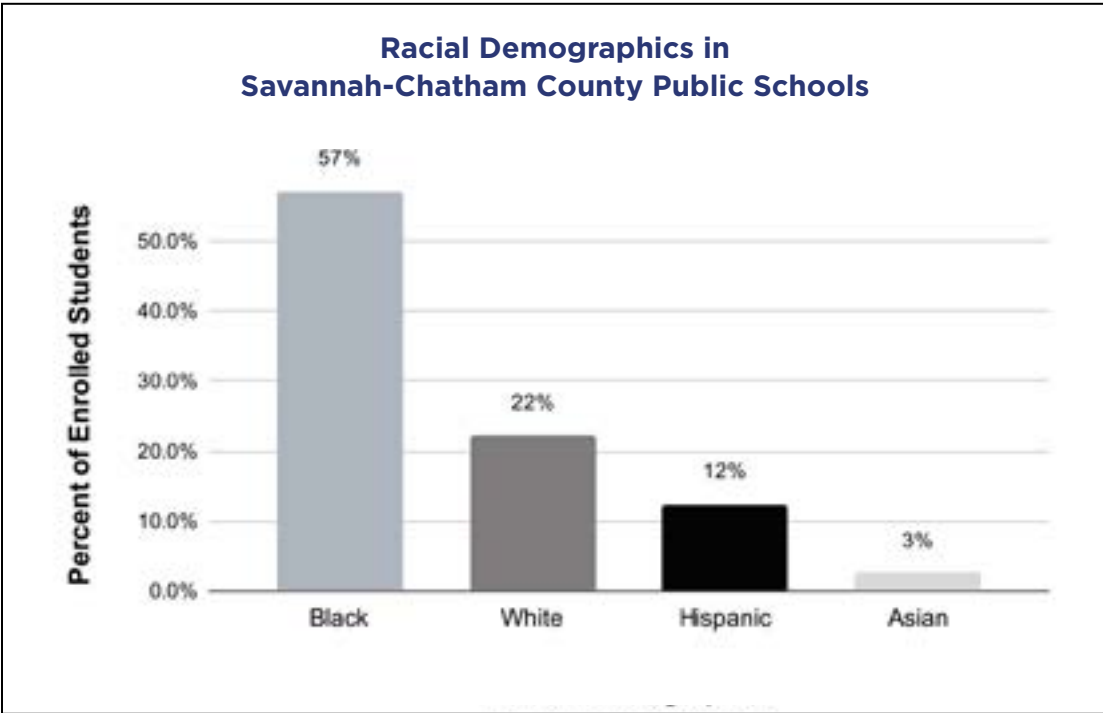
\* Hispanic is a gender-neutral term used throughout the report to refer to the demographic group consisting of those designated “Hispanic and Latino,” “Latino,” and “Hispanic” by data sources presented.

\*\* This report will refer to students learning English as English Language Learners (ELL) students, as many districts and educators currently use this term; however, MESE encourages the shift from ELL to multilingual learners to emphasize students’ multilingual capacity and skills.

# Hispanic Families Are an Essential Community in Savannah-Chatham County

## Hispanic Families Are a Rapidly Growing Segment of the Savannah-Chatham County Population

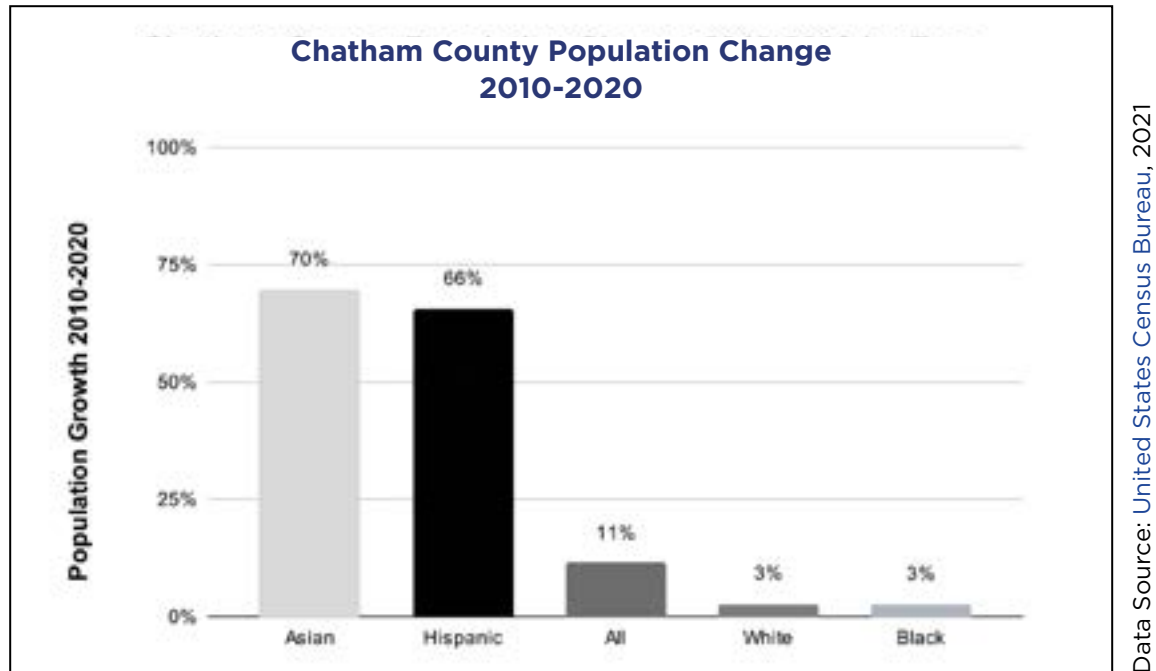
Currently, Hispanic students make up 12 percent, or about one in every eight, students enrolled in the Savannah-Chatham County public school system.



**FIGURE 1**  
*Racial breakdown<sup>1</sup> of students enrolled in all Savannah-Chatham County public schools.<sup>2</sup>*

**The population of Hispanic families in Savannah-Chatham County Public Schools is rapidly growing.** According to the US Census (United States Census Bureau, 2021), the Hispanic population constituted 5 percent of Savannah-Chatham County in 2010 and had grown to 8 percent by 2020. Over the decade, this growth amounts to an increase of 9,420 Hispanic individuals, and an enormous 66 percent growth in the Hispanic population.

In comparison, over the same period, the Black population and the White population in Savannah-Chatham County each increased by only 3 percent. (**Figure 2**) The growth rate of the Hispanic population in Savannah-Chatham County surpasses both the statewide growth rate of 32 percent and the national growth rate of 23 percent.



**FIGURE 2**

*A comparison of population growth from 2010 to 2020 by race in Savannah-Chatham County.<sup>3</sup>*

**Given the growing population of Hispanic individuals in Savannah-Chatham County, it is essential that SCCPSS provides adequate resources to meet the existing and expanding educational needs of Hispanic families.**

## Hispanic Families Make Critical Contributions to Savannah-Chatham County

**Hispanic and immigrant communities are an essential pillar of the American economy.** Per the 2021 New American Economy Research Fund:

- the total earnings of Hispanic communities in 2019 in the United States amounted to \$1.2 trillion
- Hispanic communities contribute \$308.5 billion in federal, state and local taxes
- Recent data demonstrates that Hispanic spending power amounts to approximately \$910 billion.

And, according to the American Immigration Council (2019), immigrants contribute \$467.5 billion in federal, state and local and their spending power is \$1.3 trillion nationally.

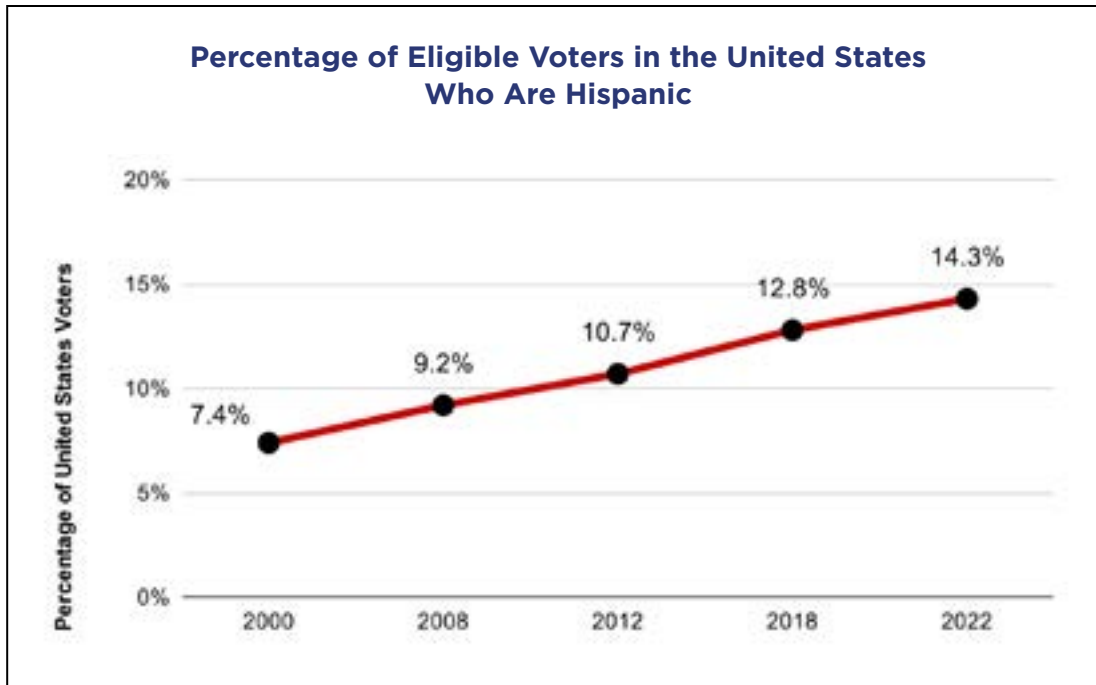
Investing in Hispanic and ELL communities has a wide range of benefits for the Savannah-Chatham County community, and supporting ELL students now will make possible a wealth of opportunities for the county's future workforce.

**Hispanic and immigrant communities also wield tremendous political power.**

Ensuring that Hispanic students have access to adequate educational resources will shape a more informed future generation of voters. Over the past two decades, Hispanic voters have become a widely influential constituency, doubling their share of the U.S. eligible voting population (Natarajan and Im, 2022) (**Figure 3**).







Data Source: Natarajan and Im, 2022

**FIGURE 3**

*Percentages of eligible voters in the United States who are Hispanic from 2000-2022.*

Gonzalez and Medina, 2021 findings show:

- At the state level, there were 385,185 Hispanic voters in Georgia in 2020, a growth of 58 percent from the 2016 election.
- At the county level, Savannah-Chatham County ranks among the ten counties with the highest numbers of Hispanic registered voters in Georgia, which has grown by 154 percent from the 2008 to 2020 elections.
- Recent data finds that there are currently 9,484 registered Hispanic voters in Savannah-Chatham County.

**Hispanic students comprise a critical body of young learners who will become future workers, voters, leaders, and essential contributors to society. Ensuring that Hispanic and other immigrant students have access to adequate educational resources will shape a more informed future generation of voters.**

# Hispanic Student Achievement in the Savannah-Chatham County School System

## Hispanic and English Language Learner Students Struggle More than Their Peers in School

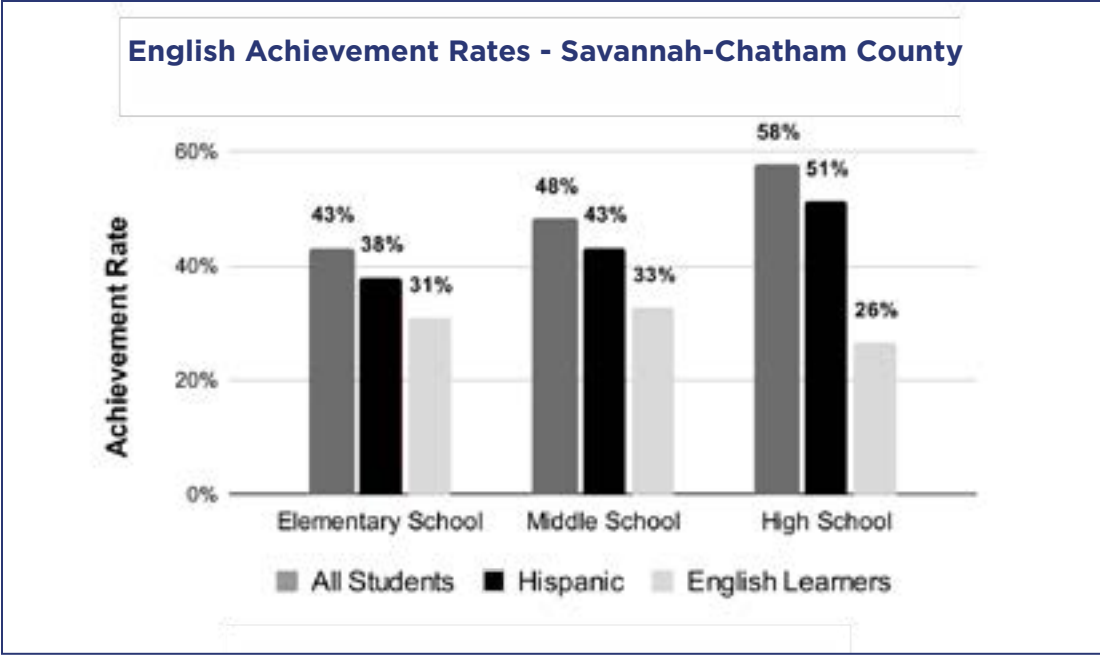
Savannah-Chatham County Public Schools (SCCPS) must do more to support students from immigrant families. Without the proper culturally informed and linguistically accessible resources, funding and dedicated staff to support their implementation, Hispanic and ELL students' performance rates will not reach their full academic potential.

The American School Counselors Association most recently recommends a school counselor ratio of 1:250. The most recent data available from National Center for Education Statistics (2023) shows that Georgia schools employ a counselor for every 419 students. How this affects vulnerable student populations, especially ELL students, can have detrimental effects in student achievement.

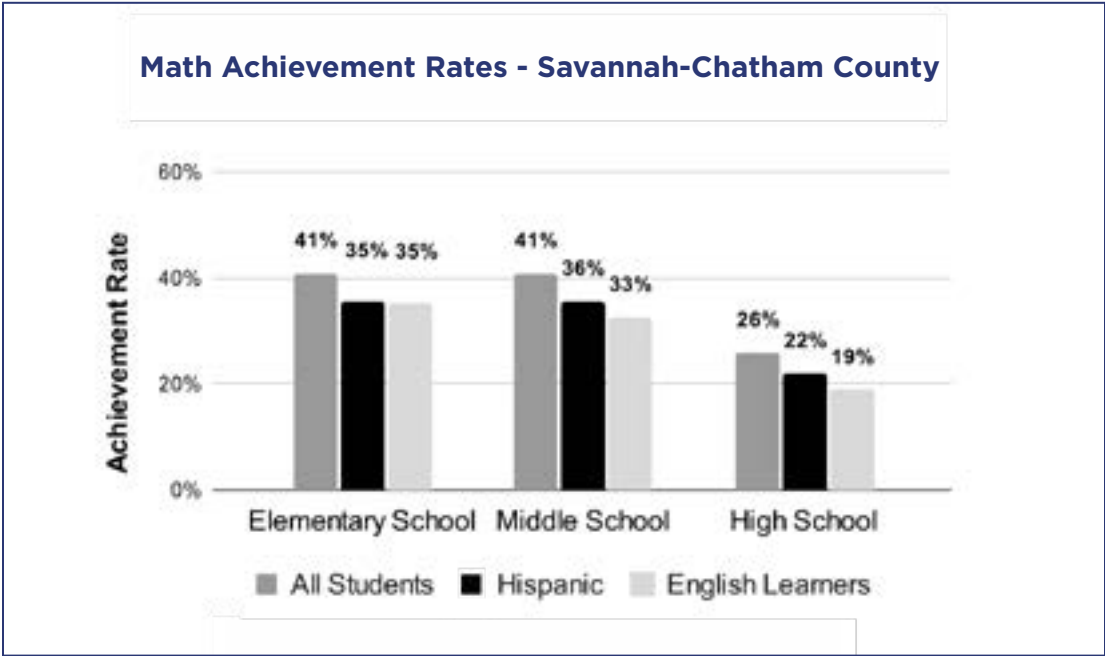
Beyond the need for school counselors, ELL students require the programs and educators necessary for their educational development. In Savannah-Chatham County, 7 percent of enrolled students have limited English proficiency, yet, only 4 percent of students (1,415 ESOL students) are enrolled in ESOL programming (Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2022). Although ELL students are in need of ESOL programming, due to lack of school transportation services, parents often have to opt for schools nearby that do not have ESOL programming, and are unable to meet their children's linguistic needs. This intersection of compounding disparities in access exemplifies what many ELL students and their families face in their daily educational journeys. Savannah-Chatham County would greatly benefit from an expansion of ESOL programming.

## Achievement Rates in English and Math are Lower for Hispanic Students than that of Other Racial Groups and County Averages

Hispanic and ELL students consistently have lower achievement rates<sup>4</sup> in English (**Figure 4**) and Mathematics (**Figure 5**) than the school system average. This holds true at the elementary, middle, and high school level.



**FIGURE 4**  
*Average achievement rates in English among all students, Hispanic students, and ELL students across all grade levels.*



**FIGURE 5**  
*Average achievement rates in Mathematics among all students, Hispanic students, and ELL students across all grade levels.*

## Schools of Particular Concern

Schools serving concentrations of English Language Learners do the best they can with limited resources, but they need additional support from the district. Of all of the public elementary schools in Savannah-Chatham County, Gould Elementary School has the lowest achievement rates among Hispanic students in both English and Mathematics. Hesse Elementary School has the lowest achievement rates among ELL students in English, and Rice Creek School has the lowest achievement rates among ELL students in Mathematics.<sup>5</sup>

At the middle school level, Southwest Middle School has the lowest achievement rates among Hispanic students in both English and Mathematics. Hesse Middle School has the lowest achievement rates among ELL students in English, and West Chatham Middle School has the lowest achievement rates among ELL students in Mathematics.

At the high school level, Windsor Forest High School has the lowest achievement rates among Hispanic students in English; there is insufficient data for achievement rates among ELL high school students in English. New Hampstead High School has the lowest achievement rates among both Hispanic and ELL students in English and Mathematics.

See **Tables 1, 2, 3,** and **4.** for English and Mathematics achievement rates for each school.

**TABLE 1**

### Schools with the Lowest English Achievement Rates Among Hispanic Students

School Level	School with Lowest Achievement Rates	Hispanic Student Achievement Rate, School	Hispanic Student Achievement Rate, SCCPSS
Elementary	Gould Elementary School	19%	38%
Middle	Southwest Middle School	23%	43%
High	Windsor Forest High School	29%	51%

**TABLE 2**

### Schools with the Lowest Mathematics Achievement Rates Among Hispanic Students

School Level	School with Lowest Achievement Rates	Hispanic Student Achievement Rate, School	Hispanic Student Achievement Rate, SCCPSS
Elementary	Gould Elementary School	22%	35%
Middle	Southwest Middle School	17%	36%
High	New Hampstead High School	19%	22%

**TABLE 3****Schools with the Lowest English Achievement Rates Among ELL Students**

School Level	School with Lowest Achievement Rates	ELL Student Achievement Rate, School	ELL Student Achievement Rate, SCCPSS
Elementary	Hesse School	16%	31%
Middle	Hesse School	17%	33%
High	Insufficient Data	Insufficient Data	26%

**TABLE 4****Schools with the Lowest Mathematics Achievement Rates Among ELL Students**

School Level	School with Lowest Achievement Rates	ELL Student Achievement Rate, School	ELL Student Achievement Rate, SCCPSS
Elementary	Rice Creek School	16%	35%
Middle	West Chatham Middle School	14%	33%
High	New Hampstead High School	15%	19%

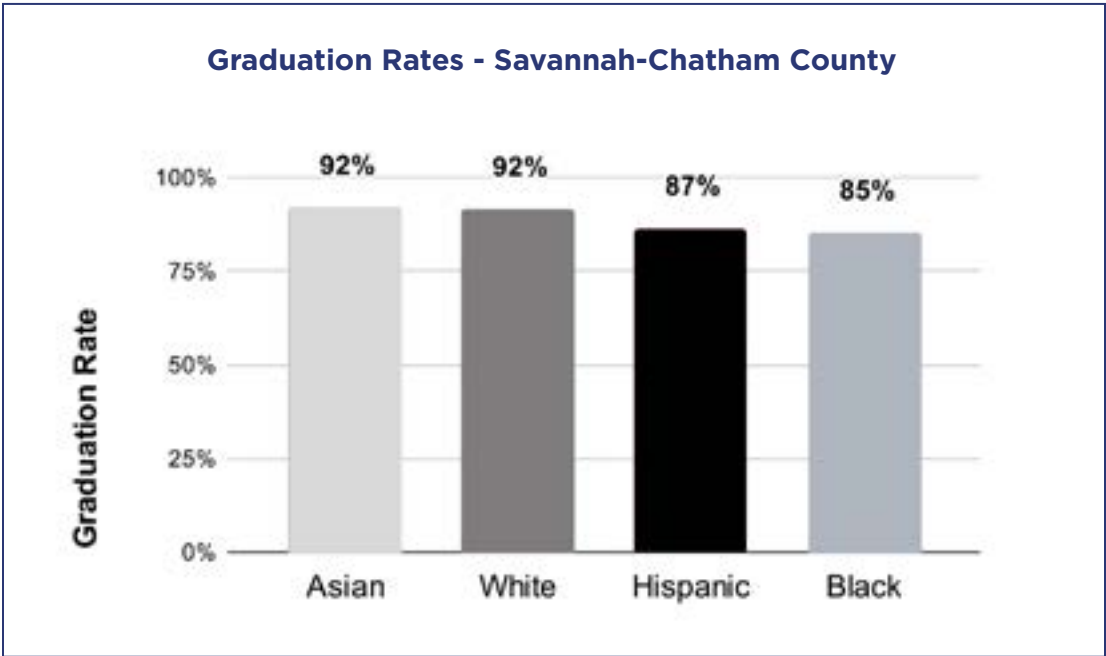
Data Source for Tables 1-4: [Georgia Department of Education](#), 2021

**Particular attention must be paid to these schools, and funding allocated accordingly to support those students who are falling most behind.**

**Hispanic and ELL Students Graduate At Lower Rates than Their Peers of Other Racial Groups and County Averages**

Disparate growth rates continuing from the elementary to high school level ultimately produce disparate graduation rates, with only 87 percent of Hispanic students, 85 percent of Black students and 69 percent of ELL students graduating high school (**Figures 6 and 7**). In comparison, 92 percent of White students and 88 percent of all students graduate (**Figure 6**). However, the disparities at some schools are even greater.

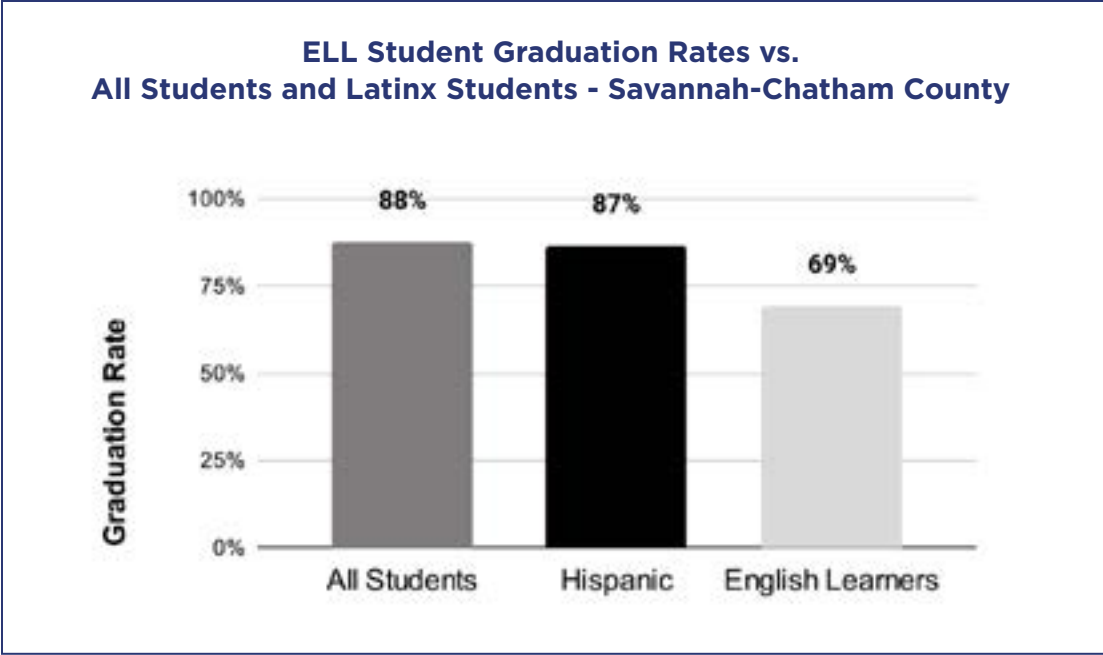
Of all the high schools in Savannah-Chatham County for which sufficient data is available, Beach High School has the lowest graduation rate of Hispanic students, with 67 percent of Hispanic students graduating.



**FIGURE 6.** Graduation rates among students in Savannah-Chatham County by racial demographic.

These rates evidence a need for additional support for Black students, as well as Hispanic students, so that both groups can graduate at rates comparable with their peers. While Migrant Equity SouthEast’s expertise is with Hispanic and immigrant communities, we fully support all initiatives focused on supporting the wellbeing and achievement of Black students and other vulnerable student populations.\*

\* [Deep Center](#) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that focuses on the detrimental effects of poverty on literacy in Savannah, Georgia. Their policy recommendations for addressing literacy rates can be found [here](#).



**FIGURE 7.**  
*Comparison of graduation rates among all students, Hispanic students, and ELL students in Savannah-Chatham County.*



## Savannah-Chatham County in Comparison to the Statewide Averages

As compared to the state of Georgia as a whole, Savannah-Chatham County mostly lags behind state averages in both ELL and Hispanic student achievement rates.

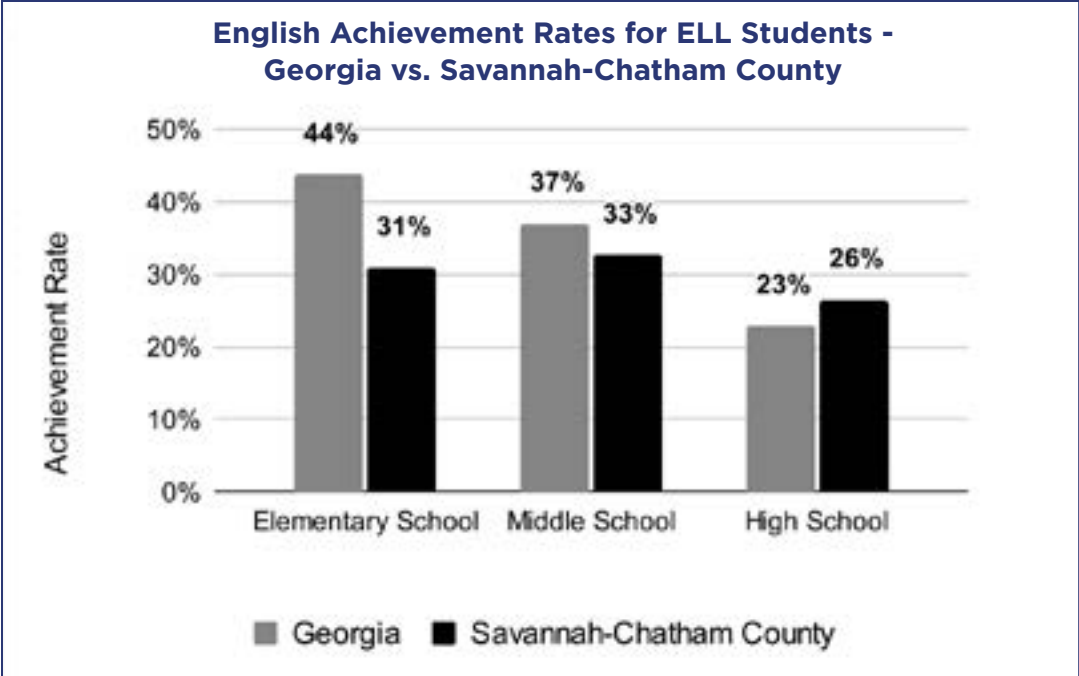
In English, ELL students in Savannah-Chatham County perform far below the state average at both the elementary and middle school levels (**Figure 8**) and in Mathematics, ELL students perform below the state average across every grade level (**Figure 9**). At the high school level, it is positive that ELL students in Savannah-Chatham County perform better than the statewide average in English.

Similarly, Hispanic students in Savannah-Chatham County consistently perform below the state average across all grade levels in both English (**Figure 10**) and Mathematics (**Figure 11**).

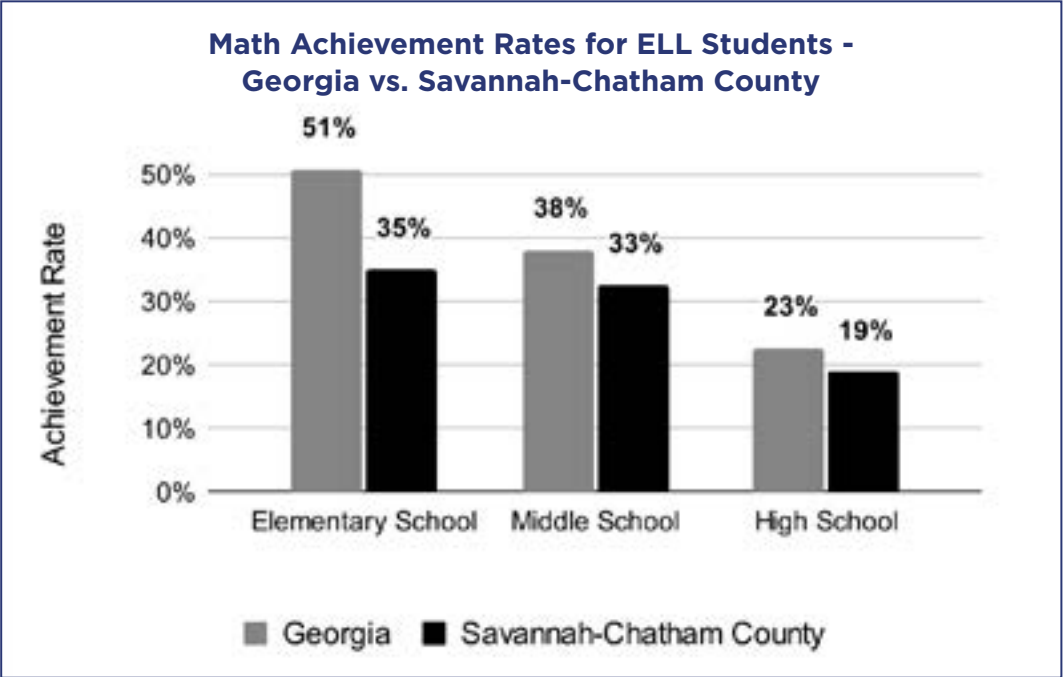
See figures on the following pages.

**To reduce these persistent interracial and county-state achievement gaps, Savannah-Chatham County must make greater efforts to support Hispanic and ELL students—first and foremost, through linguistically accessible resources that support families as well as students.**

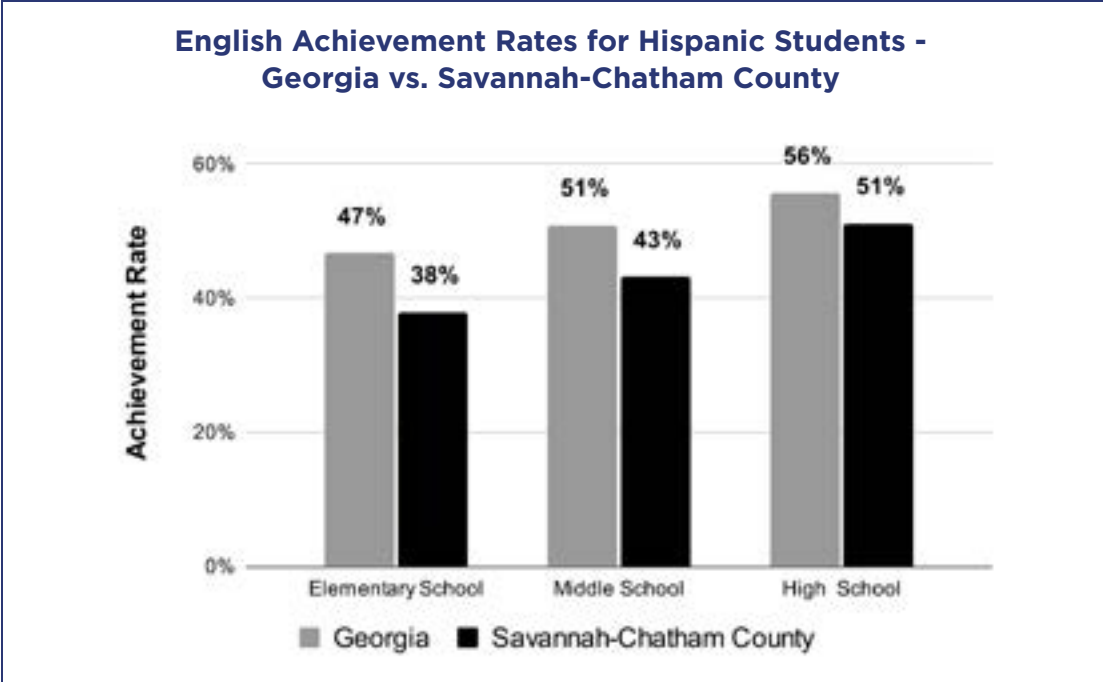




**FIGURE 8.** Average achievement rates in English among ELL students at the state and county levels across all grade levels.

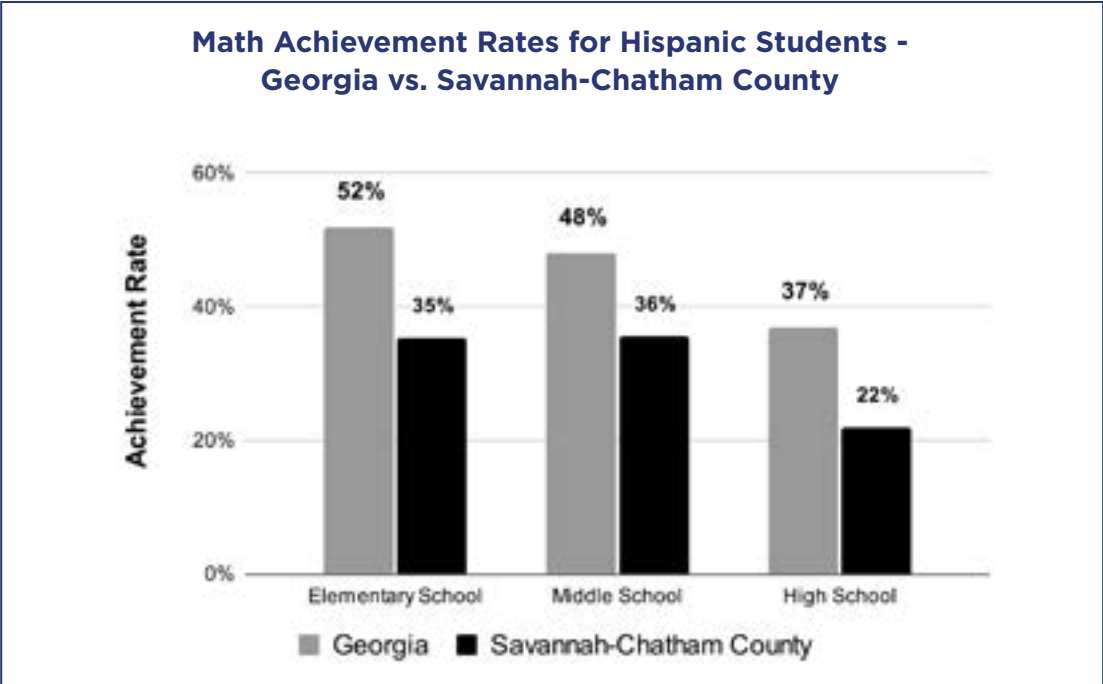


**FIGURE 9.** Average achievement rates in mathematics among ELL students at the state and county levels across all grade levels.



**FIGURE 10.**

*Average achievement rates in English among Hispanic students at the state and county levels across all grade levels.*

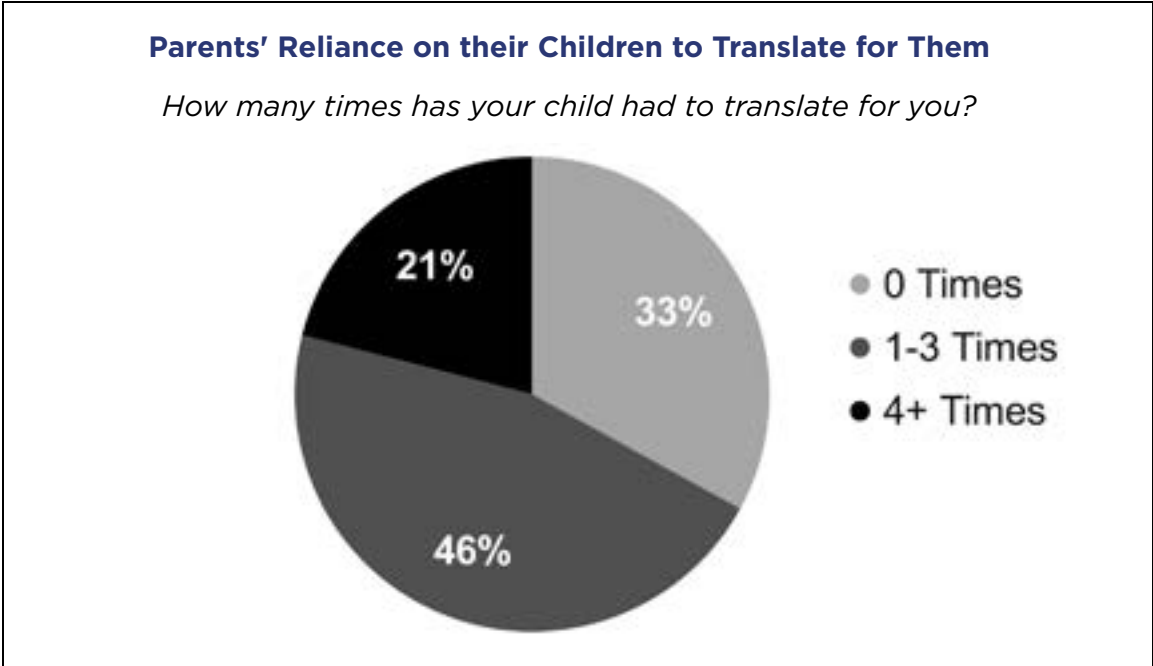


**FIGURE 11.**

*Average achievement rates in mathematics among Hispanic students at the state and county levels across all grade levels.*

# Hispanic Parents Experience Inadequate Support and Discriminatory Treatment from Savannah-Chatham County Schools

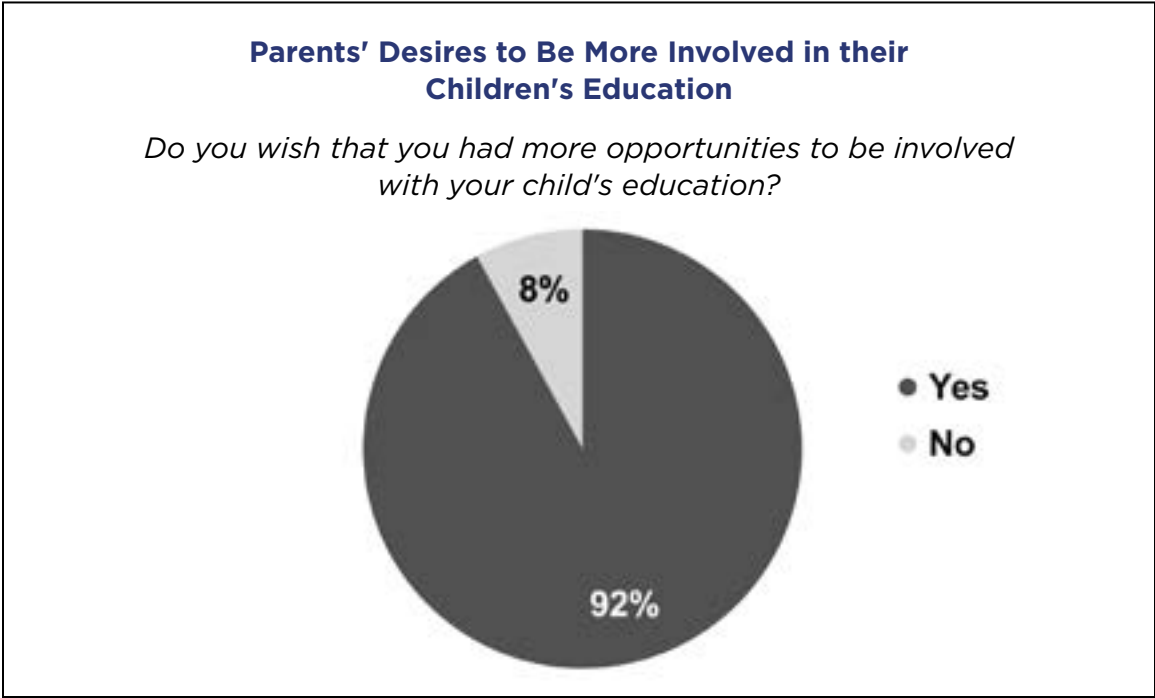
MESE collected 154 surveys of Spanish-speaking parents who were asked a series of questions related to their involvement and communication with faculty, school, and their child’s education inside and outside of the classroom. The results showed that the alienation of Hispanic families from Savannah-Chatham County Public Schools is mostly seen through the lack of support and guidance for parents with limited English proficiency. When translation is not available within school faculty, parents noted they are often left waiting on phone lines with no follow through on translation of documents, school protocol and student enrollment processes. In some cases, parents are accused of being at fault for students’ academic achievement without any outreach of feedback on academic progress or decline from their schools. The survey found that parents have had to rely on their child to translate approximately 67% of the time in any interactions with school related issues or discussions (**Figure 12**).



**FIGURE 12.**  
*Survey results: parents’ reliance on their children to translate for them.*

Out of those 154 surveys, more than half of the parents were not satisfied with parent-school communication. Parents discussed that only some school documents were translated, while other important notices regarding emergency drills and upcoming school events were usually only sent via text in English. Further, opportunities for engagement between schools and immigrant families were minimal or altogether absent. Almost half of parents surveyed did not know what the Parent Teacher Association was or how they could be involved in their child’s education outside of mandatory parent-teacher conferences.

Parents expressed interest in engaging with their children's education and assignments (**Figure 13**), but resources are not always available for parents to take part in school activities; for example, parents mentioned that complicated homework assignments do not offer guidance in Spanish, reading assignments where a parent was to be involved are only offered in English, and when specific materials were needed for school assignments there was a lack of communication with parents on those specific needs.



**FIGURE 13.**  
*Survey results: parents' desires to be more involved in their children's education.*

**Listening Sessions and Interviews**

Migrant Equity SouthEast conducted a series of listening sessions and interviews with dozens of families of Hispanic students and English language learners to determine the ways in which Savannah-Chatham County Schools were engaging immigrant families. The following interviews show that cultural insensitivity and lack of support navigating the school system can lead students' parents to disengage with school and staff interactions. In many cases, parents feel discriminated against and left without the proper means to communicate their concerns, interests, and needs.

MESE made more than 141 phone calls to Spanish speaking parents across SCCPSS. The following five themes were consistently mentioned in interviews: cultural insensitivity and discrimination, a need for Spanish interpreters, and a lack of guidance with school procedures. Despite the dearth of parental and family support in SCCPSS, nearly all who interviewed with MESE communicated a genuine interest in being more involved with their child's education.

## Cultural Insensitivity

Parents experience a lack of cultural sensitivity from teachers and faculty in response to situations between their child and other students. In some cases, parents also mentioned that some teachers and faculty react to their child for speaking Spanish inside and outside of the classroom. In these instances, parents explained that cultural differences between their children and other students were not always well received; similarly, parents felt more cultural sensitivity and acceptance throughout the school would be beneficial for students, teachers, and faculty, alike.

One parent from Windsor Forest Elementary explained:

**“ Ahí hay mucha cultura diferente. Yo adoro las diferentes culturas...A mis hijas, yo las estoy criando que si está con una cultura diferente, que aprenda a respetarla. Que cada cultura es diferente, que todos somos iguales pero somos diferentes. Es cuestión de aprender algunas costumbres y ella respeta eso. A veces ciento de que los niños de otras culturas no respetan a mis hijas.”**

English Translation:

“There are a lot of different cultures there. I adore different cultures...I am raising my daughters so that if they are with a different culture, they learn to respect it. That each culture is different, that we are all the same but we are different. It’s a matter of learning some customs and she respects that. Sometimes I feel that children from other cultures don’t respect my daughters [culture].”

Parents explained that some teachers made minimal efforts to make sure students felt safe and valued for their cultural differences. If bullying occurs based on differences of culture, some teachers approached the situation with efforts to connect and guide the class towards acceptance, while other teachers did not. Parents agreed that efforts to teach about cultural differences and engage students in these conversations could help minimize bullying and microaggressions.

Engaging in cultural sensitive training would benefit SCCPSS faculty, educators, and students as a whole. Recently, in February of 2023, during afterschool transit, two young Hispanic students from Gould Elementary were reprimanded for speaking Spanish by a SCCPSS bus driver. After a local news station reported on the situation, titling the story, “Spanish or Silence,” many Spanish speaking community members and parents communicated similar sentiments that were named in the report; difficulties in getting their voices and concerns heard within SCCPSS around acts of discrimination and bullying against their children was a constant hurdle. Further, a lack of transparency for how SCCPSS handles acts of discrimination was another concern parents and community members noted as a recurring issue.

## Discrimination

Beyond the reported cultural insensitivity many SCCPSS parents felt, there were discussions around instances of discrimination as well.

One parent from Garden City Elementary explained how her child was neglected by the school system; his autistic needs went unmet and she was not provided the tools, procedures or paperwork she needed in order to get him the resources required for his academic success. She explains how the school discriminated against her inability to communicate in English and how her identity led to differential treatment of both her and her son:

**“Usted me ha tocado un tema muy sensible de la escuela Precisamente estoy pasando por una situación. Voy a decirlo directamente, es una discriminación. Aunque soy latina y no sé mucho inglés gracias a Dios estoy legalmente en este país, pero sigo siendo una latina... Estoy pasando por un [caso] de discriminación muy fuerte tan fuerte que saqué a mi hijo de la escuela. Yo tengo un niño autista y lo estaba enviando a la escuela de Garden City. Al principio cuando él estaba en una escuela regular le pasaron cosas bien fuertes, al extremo de que por falta de conocimiento, y sabiduría, quise sentirme un poco con culpabilidad, porque yo lo permití. ¿Tú sabes, que cuando tú le das a tu hijo una trabajadora social, y tú dices, pues ella es estudiada y ella sabe lo que está haciendo, no? [ Pero un día] Llego al extremo de que llevé a mi hijo escuela, donde todos los días batallaba con él y él con señas y cortas palabras, me decía que se burlaban de él, que se reían de él porque no era inteligente.**

**[Yo quiero decir] que los derechos de los niños no se pueden vulnerar, sin importar la nacionalidad porque son derechos de los niños. Su hijo tiene derecho a recibir una educación conforme a sus capacidades, sea de la nacionalidad que sea, porque según es un derecho básico. Peor aún, es un niño Americano.”**

English Translation:

“You have touched me on a very sensitive issue at school. I am precisely going through a situation. I’m going to say it directly, it’s discrimination. Even though I’m Latina and I don’t know much English, thank God I’m in this country legally, but I’m still a Latina... I’m going through a very strong [case] of discrimination so strong that I took my son out of school. I have an autistic child and I was sending him to the Garden City school. At first, when he was in a regular school, very strong things happened to him, to the point that due to lack of knowledge and wisdom, I wanted to feel a little guilty, because I allowed it. Do you know that when you give your child a social worker, and you say, well, she is studied and she knows what she is doing, right? [But one day] it got to a point where I was fighting with my son [to take him to school] and he told me with signs and short words that they were making fun of him, that they were laughing at him because he wasn’t intelligent.

[I want to say] that children’s rights cannot be violated, regardless of nationality, because they are children’s rights. Your child has the right to receive an education according to his abilities, whatever his nationality, because it is a basic right. Worse yet, he is an American child.”

The compounding harms created by discriminatory and exclusionary policies, practices, and behaviors in school systems can lead many students to be pushed out of school. For many immigrant families, a tremendous amount of trust and deference is often given to educational and social service agencies and the professionals that make them up. This can lead to the type of abuse and neglect illustrated in this quote.

This particular case, as well as other instances mentioned in the 141 interviews, call for the need to invest in culturally responsive practices and implicit bias training for educators and staff of SCCPSS. The intersecting harms of linguistic discrimination and exclusion, along with ableist practices that devalue students with disabilities and their families, exemplifies a clear race, ethnic, and immigrant form of exclusion. The legacy of racism, discrimination, and community harm in education and social services agencies must be part of the context staff and educators understand.

### **Need for Language Access Support**

SCCPSS parents need a wide range of linguistic support, from interpreters and Spanish speaking family liaisons who can help parents address concerns involving their child’s absence, sickness, and academic progress, as well as translation of all family-facing materials, written announcements, and electronic communications. When faculty and family interactions were necessary, parents noted numerous accounts where staff only addressed concerns in English, without proper interpretation; this led many parents to want to avoid communication with staff altogether. As one parent from Mercer Middle School explained:

**“A veces es difícil cuando no hay intérprete, y por ejemplo cuando ella [mi hija] no va a ir a la escuela... para mí sería preferible no hablar y decirle [la escuela], “si le mandamos”...La razón es porque sé que no hay nadie [que traduzca]. He ido como tres veces y las tres veces que he ido a la escuela, nunca he visto alguien que hable Español.”**

English Translation:

“At times it is difficult without an interpreter which is why I prefer not to speak [to faculty] and tell them why I will not be able to send [my daughter] to school. The reason I prefer not to explain is because there is no one at the school [who will translate/understand]. I’ve been to the school about three times and each of those three times that I’ve been to the school, I’ve never seen anyone who speaks Spanish.”

Many parents described their school visits to school as exhausting, with no progress or follow through to help them understand how to better support their child’s academic wellbeing.

Beyond having interpreters available for school protocol, parents voiced how and why translation of official school documents was essential for understanding their child's academic progress. One parent discussed how it would be beneficial to guide parents through the grading system and discuss course expectations. The app, "PowerSchool," was referenced as a way for parents to track their child's progress course by course. The use of numerical breakdowns and percentages helped parents understand how their child was doing, however report cards with letter grades led to confusion. One parent noted:

**“Los boletines deberían estar en español e inglés y si lo van a enviar en inglés, nada más deberían explicarnos [más contexto] a nosotros que es lo que están enviando ellos ahí, porque yo lo traduzco, pero no entiendo. Entonces este boletín no deberían mandarlo a la casa si no, debe ser una reunión, o ellos [los profesores] explicarlo así como hacen con el power school. ¿Ok, que tú ves todo [en el boletín] y entiendes?”**

English Translation:

“The report cards should be in Spanish and English and if they are going to send it in English, they should just explain [more context] to us what they are sending there, because I translated it, but I don't understand. So this report card shouldn't be sent home, if not, it should be a meeting, or they [the teachers] explain it like they do with the power school. Ok, that you see everything [in the bulletin] and understand?”

Parents and family members agreed that translation of official documents was vital for engaging them with their child's academic success, however they also communicated translation as only one level of engagement; what is also vital for engaging parents is guidance, follow through, and clear communication between parents' questions and concerns with teachers and school faculty. Deeper forms of family engagement that were expressed were the need for: monthly parent-faculty meetings where school agendas and upcoming events were discussed, available interpreters for one on ones with their child's teacher, and bilingual front office faculty that could assist with everyday protocol and procedure around absence, school pick-up, and student grievances.

### **Lack of Support in School Protocol and Procedures**

Spanish speaking parents in SCCPSS are often left without guidance on how to address everyday situations in and out of school. There is no protocol in Spanish available for parents on student pick-up, issues with transportation and bus services, or student conflict.

One parent from Garden City Elementary School explained how picking up her child from school was a constant difficulty due to the lack of bilingual staff and protocol guidance:



**“Ah! Lo que pasa es que por ejemplo, el niño se enferma, [la profesora] me manda un mensaje porque ella sabe que no hablo inglés. Entonces ella me manda un mensaje que no se siente bien mi hijo para que vaya a recogerlo. Entonces, pues como no hablo inglés, cuando llegó [a la escuela] yo enseñé el mensaje y ya me dicen [la recepcionista] okay. Y no más, me dicen que firme y ya me traen el.”**

English Translation:

“Oh! What happens is that, for example, the child gets sick, [the teacher] sends me a message because she knows I don’t speak English. Then she sends me a message that my son is not feeling well so that I can go pick him up. So, since I don’t speak English, when I arrive [at school] I show the message and they [the receptionists] tell me okay. And then, they tell me to sign and they bring [my son] to me.”

Beyond the need for translation and interpretation, what parents continuously outlined was a need for clear communication with teachers and staff, alike. Instances, like the interview above, highlight the ways in which SCCPSS can think more broadly about linguistic access across all policies and practices. Investments in having culturally competent translators and interpreters would show a commitment to working with parents and community members, as it would acknowledge the key issues and provide more holistic solutions.

Because school protocol and practices are often communicated in English only, Spanish-speaking parents are left without the guidance for how to address student-centered issues. In instances of school bullying, parents do not know where to voice their concerns, which paperwork to fill out, or which school staff they can reach out to for support. One parent from Hess Middle School explained,

**“Mi hijo ha sido víctima del bullying en la escuela y no he contado con orientación o herramientas [en español] que me indiquen dónde acudir. Necesitamos un personal a disposición para poder canalizar las demandas de los padres y herramientas para que los padres puedan frenar el bullying con sus hijos.”**

English Translation:

“My son has been a victim of bullying at school and I have not had guidance or tools to tell me where to go. We need staff available to be able to channel the demands of the parents, tools so that the parents can stop the bullying towards my son.”

Parents outlined the ways in which SCCPSS’ guidance on school protocol and practices was ultimately a result of lack of linguistic access, however what was absolutely crucial was the need for a more holistic approach to parent, teacher and staff communication. Introducing certified language access professionals in SCCPSS could create access for staff to grow Spanish fluency while also encouraging parents who want to grow English skills, as well.

## Parental Interest in School Engagement

Despite SCCPSS parents' grievances regarding differential treatment and isolation, nearly all parents interviewed had a deep interest in engaging with their child's education in meaningful and integral ways. One parent from Meyers Middle School stated,

**“ Ayudaría mucho [tener reuniones de padres en español] Sí, porque así podría uno intercambiar ideas y dar opiniones. O preguntar algo acerca de la educación de los niños. Eso sería muy, muy, muy importante acá. Hay muchos padres aquí [que no hablamos inglés]. Entonces a veces queremos pedir alguna información acerca de un niño y no tenemos la forma de hacerlo.”**

English Translation:

[Parent-Teacher meetings] would help a lot. Yes, because that way one could exchange ideas and give opinions. Or ask something about the education of the children. That would be very, very, very important here. Because as you say, there are a lot of parents here and we know we don't talk. He doesn't speak English. So sometimes we want to ask for some information about a child and. And no, we don't have a way to do it.”

Parents discussed their interest in engaging with their child's schoolwork and academic progress, however they also noted how their jobs required much time and attention; some parents worked more than one job.

One parent from Windsor Elementary shared,

**“ Si se van a hacer reuniones en la [escuela], diré que la escuela tiene que tener un traductor [para la reunión], porque ellos [los profesores] no van a entender lo que le vamos a decir. Tienen que hacerlo, si no qué vamos a hacer nosotros allá [en la reunión] si ellos [los profesores] no nos van a entender? Vamos a perder el viaje.**

English Translation:

If there are going to be meetings at the institution, I will say that the school has to have a translator that day, because they are not going to understand what we are going to say. They need to do it, because what are we going to do there if they are not going to understand us? We are going to [waste our time].

The need for translators is vital for addressing the needs of the parents. Many of the parents and family members that were interviewed discussed having multiple jobs and heavy workloads. In the interview above, a parent noted the importance of their time commitment to their child's school meetings; engagement with the school also equates to time off work, which can in turn create a financial burden for many parents. Despite this, parents communicated that they were willing to commit to engaging with school matters so long as their time was respected and translators were present to help effectively communicate their concerns, questions, and ideas.

## Savannah Chatham Teachers Struggle To Support ELL Students

In addition to parent interviews, MESE conducted a series of interviews with SCCPSS faculty and educators; they found that the small number of bilingual staff that were available were overworked, overstrained and exploited. Oftentimes, bilingual staff were asked to work outside of their job description, translating on phone lines and in the front offices. In some schools faculty have even pulled custodians to help with translation needs.

One teacher explained:

“There are times where I’m just in the front office... just dropping off something. And then next thing you know, there’s a parent on the line. They’re like, ‘Can you please talk to them? It’s only going to take like five minutes.’ It does not take five minutes. I’ve been on the phone over for over 30 minutes...”

Although bilingual staff communicated the importance of being present for their students, the high demand for language translation, interpretation, and poor working conditions has forced some to leave, as one teacher noted:

“We have a documentation of each time we’re getting pulled to translate and we’re being taken away from our class like that. Documentation is there... but our administrators, they gave the front office the okay to continue to pull us in regard to behavior concerns or with registration issues... They’ve okayed it for us to be pulled to translate.”

Discriminatory treatment was also described as quite prevalent in SCCPSS, particularly against Spanish speaking students. One such instance was described where faculty asked multiple Hispanic students, “You speak English? Do you speak good English?”

The teacher interviewed explained her embarrassment in having witnessed the lack of cultural sensitivity multiple times and expressed:

“My parents were immigrants. I get their concerns and their struggles. I get what it feels like to...have that stereotype on you like, ‘Oh my God, you don’t know any English. You’re going to do horrible.’ No. These kids are smart. They’re intelligent.”

These interviews further affirm the urgent need for more bilingual staff in SCCPSS, as well as regular, ongoing opportunities for non-bilingual staff to learn and expand their cultural competence.

# Family Engagement and Communication Enhances Student Engagement and Academic Achievement

**S**trong family engagement practices are essential for public school systems. Research shows that improving communication and partnership with families is essential to increasing student engagement and achievement. When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more.

These findings hold across differences of class, income, culture, education, ethnicity, and student age (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Engaging families in schools can lead to improved attendance, higher grades and test scores, better social skills, increased student motivation, and improved behavior (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010; Jeynes 2012).

- Research strongly suggests that the following strategies can have a sustained and positive impact on student learning:
- Building personal relationships, trust, and mutual understanding with families via class meetings, informal one-on-one conversations, and home visits (Geller et al., 2015; Sheldon & Jung, 2015)
- Sharing data with families about student skill levels and strategies for improving those skills (Harvard Family Research Project, 2013)
- Modeling high-impact teaching practices such as dialogic reading and hands-on Mathematics activities so families can use them at home (Jeynes, 2012)
- Listening to families' ideas about their children's interests and challenges, and using this input to differentiate instruction and enrich the curriculum (Hong, 2019; Mapp, Carvar, & Lander, 2017)
- Incorporating content from families' home cultures into classroom lessons (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Jeynes, 2005)

A landmark study (Bryk et al., 2010) of low-income schools in Chicago found that schools with “strong ties to families and the community” were four times more likely to make significant gains in reading and Mathematics. Strong ties included being informed about community issues and families' home cultures, inviting families to observe in the classroom, using community resources, working as families with partners to improve learning, and responding to families' concerns about their children.

## Learning from Other Localities

Migrant Equity Southeast investigated practices for engaging immigrant families in other Southern school districts, in order to find models that could be developed in Savannah-Chatham County Schools, and found two key models described below. The following models offer an in depth observation in how school systems with Spanish-speaking student populations serve the students and families of their district.

### Atlanta Public Schools, Georgia

Atlanta Public School (APS) system offers multilingual families a robust array of services that actively involve them in their children's education and creates spaces for multilingual families to engage in community with one another. Those services include ([Atlanta Public Schools](#)):

- Translation services free of cost available via phone call
- WhatsApp groups providing multilingual school-related updates (Spanish, French, and Portuguese)
- Weekly parent meetings in Spanish
- Daily multilingual office hours for registration, portal, and other system navigation support
- Automatic website translation available via Google Translate

By supporting multilingual parents, these services enhance Hispanic families' abilities to engage in their children's education, thus working to close achievement gaps between Hispanic students and their peers.

### Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District, Texas

Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District is in Texas, along the border with Mexico. PSJA ISD houses students from three different cities who come from similar backgrounds and ways of life. PSJA offers a range of family engagement models that operate from kindergarten through high school. These models operate at two levels – the campus level and the district level.

#### District Level Engagement

PSJA offers a series of credentials, professional development courses, and licenses to parents across Hidalgo County. After assessing the needs of the community and

identifying what served students' parents best, they found GED courses, English language classes and entrepreneurship programs were valuable as resources that would help benefit families' economic growth and also nurture the needs of the community. All courses and credential programs are offered free of charge through partnerships with community colleges or introduced through grant proposals.

### **Campus Level Engagement - Parent Education Centers**

At the campus level, PSJA offers a 3-tiered approach towards engaging families. The first level is the use of parental engagement coordinators, called *Parent Educators*<sup>6</sup>. Parent educators play a critical role in connecting one-on-one with parents who are Spanish speaking. They call parents when children are absent to help identify the key issues, then propose solutions, serving as a resource guide and personable go-to liaison between parents, faculty, and outside agencies.

Beyond Parent Educators are *Site Managers* who help oversee the programs that offer parents credentials, language courses, and certifications. The most critical part of the three tiered approach are the *Parent Volunteers* themselves. PSJA has over 2,500 parent volunteers who work across 42 campuses, helping set up community and school related events; managing and delivering classroom materials; and organizing staff and parent memos.

**Both PSJA in Texas and Atlanta Public Schools offer family engagement models that work not only for Hispanic students but Black students, immigrant students, students from rural communities, students with disabilities, and other students that have been historically marginalized from the public school system.**

**Savannah-Chatham County Public Schools could learn from these two districts and others, and adapt their models to the particular SCCPSS population and needs.**

## Recommendations for Language Equity

**B**ased on MESE’s meetings with Spanish-speaking parents, we make the following recommendations for the Savannah-Chatham County Public School System:

### **1. Translation & Interpretation**

Set annual goals to hire and fairly compensate bilingual staff to provide timely translation of all documents and emergency notices and interpretation at all decision making meetings. Ensure that bilingual staff are available for in-person assistance for parents and students that don’t speak English, so they can stay informed and have a say in how the school district is run. There must be a bilingual staff member available at all times so that ESOL or Spanish teachers are not pulled away from the classroom to translate.

### **2. Enrollment Assistance**

Hire full-time, culturally competent, bilingual staff to enroll ESOL students in SCCPSS to ensure that children new to the area are enrolled in a timely manner.

### **3. More Counselors and Social Workers**

Hire more culturally and linguistically competent counselors and social workers to provide social-emotional support for students, prioritizing bilingual counselors to ensure that all students receive much needed support.

### **4. Cultural Sensitivity**

Set a timeline to provide all staff with mandatory cultural sensitivity and implicit bias training so they have the knowledge, tools, and skills, to prevent, respond to and de-escalate instances of discrimination or racism, and clearly communicate processes to parents.

### **5. Multicultural Community Engagement**

Use more hands-on methods of parent engagement, such as in-person meetings that don’t rely on technology and parent meetings held in Spanish, to give parents updates about what is happening in the system and to allow them to ask questions.

## Endnotes

- 1 Note that Indigenous students are not displayed as a demographic group because the percentage of enrolled Indigenous students is less than 1 percent (0.2 percent).
- 2 Data in all figures are rounded to the nearest 10th; for a complete range, please see the data source below.
- 3 The population growth of the Indigenous community has not been included in this graph, as the percentage of the Savannah-Chatham population composed of Indigenous individuals is less than 1 percent (0.3 percent in 2010 and 0.4 percent in 2020), and would produce a visually misleading growth rate. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the Indigenous population has grown by 56.2 percent over the past decade (United States Census Bureau, 2021).
- 4 Achievement rates are determined by students' performance on the Georgia Milestones Assessment System and the Georgia Alternate Assessment 2.0 (the latter is an alternative assessment for students with significant cognitive disabilities). Achievement rates are calculated based on weighted scores assigned to students who exhibit beginning, developing, proficient, and distinguished learner abilities (Georgia Department of Education).
- 5 This data is for all schools for which data is available.
- 6 A job description can be found [here](#) for Parent Educators.

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