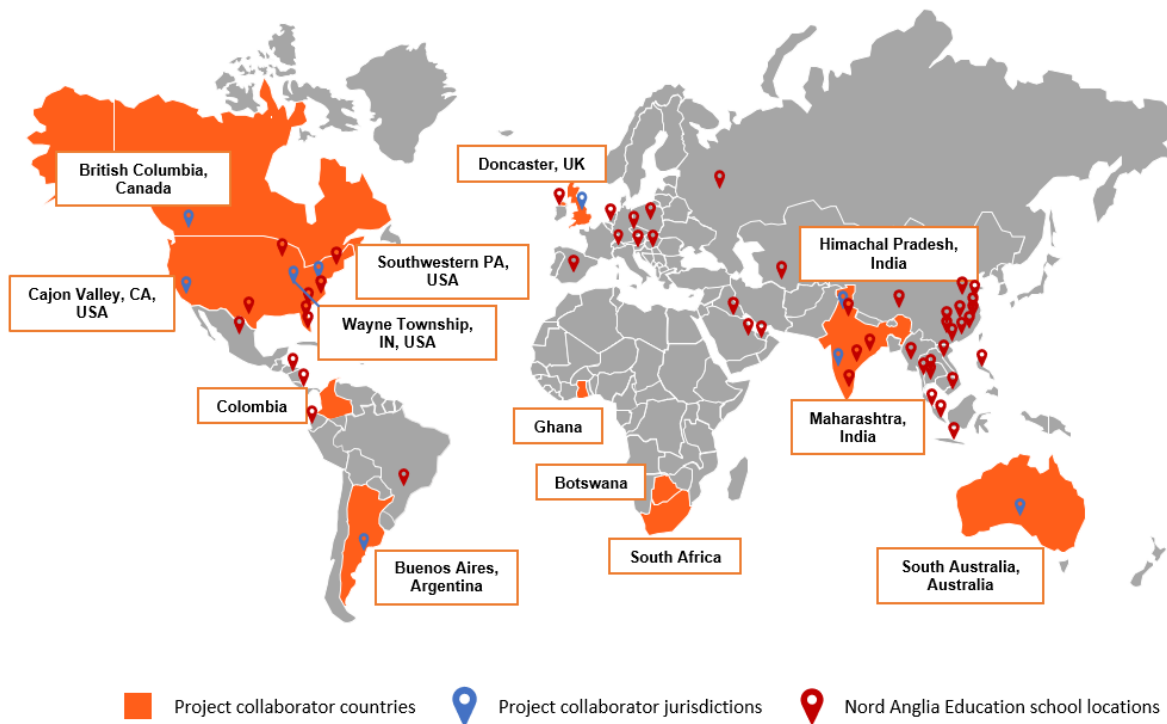# PERSPECTIVES FROM PARENTS IN SOUTHWESTERN PENNSLYVANIA,

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Rebecca Winthrop

Mahsa Ershadi

Jessica Alongi

Sophie Partington

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATION NETWORK

In January 2020, the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at Brookings launched a new project focused on family and parent engagement in education.[1] The project emerged out of CUE's work on harnessing education innovations to address inequality and help all young people, regardless of the community in which they are born, develop the full breadth of competencies and skills they will need to thrive in work, life, and citizenship in the 21st century. In 2019, CUE conducted a consultation across 15 countries with 50 decisionmakers—from ministers of education to school leaders—that were focused on advancing teaching and learning strategies that supported whole child development, or as some call it, the development of academic plus 21st century skills. A recurring theme from the consultations was a desire of decisionmakers to have more and better strategies for engaging parents and families. Together with 41 project collaborators across 10 countries, members of CUE's Family Engagement in Education Network, CUE has been exploring what it takes to build strong family-school partnerships, especially in contexts striving to address inequality and deliver a broad suite of skills and competencies for their children.

EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

The COVID-19 pandemic caused mandatory shutdowns and mass disruption of schooling worldwide. In the United States of America, over 50 million students enrolled in pre-kindergarten to grade 12 were affected. Educators responded to the crisis by rapidly shifting their in-class lessons online so that students could continue to learn remotely. As a result, parents[2] and families have been given a front row seat to how and what their children learn 'in school,' and academic outcomes and student success hinge on parent involvement now more than ever before. The coronavirus-related school

---

[1] The suggested citation for this report is: Winthrop, R., Ershadi, M., Alongi J., & Partington, S. (2021, March). *Family engagement in education network technical report: Perspectives from parents in Southwestern Pennsylvania*. Center for Universal Education at Brookings.

[2] We use the term parent throughout to denote a child's parent, guardian, or caregiver.

Brookings Institution

closed propelled new and necessary ways of teaching and learning, but despite educator's efforts, [statewide polls](#) show that 90 percent of parents are worried that their children are falling behind academically.

SOUTHWESTERN PENNSYLVANIA AREA

Demographics

Southwestern Pennsylvania is a region of approximately 5,280 square miles located in western Pennsylvania. In 2018, the Southwestern Pennsylvania area had a population of more than 2,324,740 residents (Census Reporter, n.d.).

Approximately 95% of our survey respondents who indicated the name of their child's school reported that their child's school is located in one of the nine public districts listed in Table 1. Table 1 shows the demographics of these nine districts.

Table 1. Demographics of Southwestern Pennsylvania Districts & Student Populations.

District	*n*	Number of Schools	2018-19 Enrollment	Race & Ethnicity						Special Services	
				% Asian	% Black	% Hispanic	% Multi-racial	% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	% White	% Low-Income Students[2]	% English Learners
Aliquippa	40	2	1,010	*[3]	71	2.7	9.5	*	16.8	99.7	0.4
Avonworth	118	4	1,799	2.4	2.2	1.6	3.5	*	90.2	12.1	0.6
Brentwood Borough	227	4	1,226	6.1	5.5	3.5	2.8	*	81.3	45.5	6.6
Fort Cherry	82	2	996	*	*	1.1	4.4	*	93.2	43.9	0.5
Hopewell	88	5	2,109	0.8	4	2.1	4	*	89	28.9	0.5
Keystone Oaks	109	5	1,908	6.9	4.5	4.2	6	*	78.4	30.9	3.4
Northgate	74	4	1,073	2.6	13.4	2.9	11	1.2	68.9	53.5	2.9
New Brighton	99	3	1,360	*	9.6	3	13.1	*	73.8	72.7	*
New Castle	26	4	3,141	*	22.4	3.3	12.4	*	61.5	71.3	0.6

Schools

All districts shown in Table 1 serve students in Kindergarten through grade 12, with the exception of the New Castle Area School District, which serves students in Pre-Kindergarten through grade 12. Of the nine districts shown in Table 1, Avonworth schools have the highest proficiency scores in math and reading, with an average math proficiency score of 59% and an average reading proficiency score of 82%, compared to the statewide averages of 46% and 63%, respectively ("Avonworth School District," n.d.).

Family Engagement

Volunteer Opportunities

Parents across several districts shown in Table 1 are encouraged to engage in their children's education through volunteering in classroom activities and school events. For example, the Avonworth Middle School Parent Network is a volunteer group that works to sponsor activities for students, as well as support teachers through establishing parent liaisons and providing monetary funds for teaching resources ("AMS Parent Network," n.d.).

Parent Portals

All nine districts shown in Table 1 offer parents direct access to key school announcements and information, as well as to more personalized information, such as their child's grades, through various forms of online Parent Portal platforms.

Positive Steps Wellness Center

Both the Aliquippa School District and the New Brighton Area School District offer counseling services at their schools, in collaboration with Western Pennsylvania Psych Care. Services include individual therapy, family therapy, and group therapy. Counseling can be school, family, or self-referred. Sessions are provided for students during the school day ("For Parents & Students," n.d.; "Positive Steps Wellness Center," n.d.).

Key Initiatives

Online Learning Services

Several of the districts included in Table 1 offer online learning options for students. The Brentwood Cyber Academy, Keystone Oaks Cyber Academy, and Northgate Online Learning Academy provide students with K-12 online learning platforms, in which courses are taught and overseen by local, certified teachers ("Brentwood Cyber Academy," n.d.; "Keystone Oaks Cyber Academy," n.d.; "Online Learning Academy," n.d.).

Through the New Brighton Lions Online Academy, eligible students can choose to enroll in a "blended" schedule which combines both traditional classroom and online courses on campus, a "hybrid" schedule which combines traditional classroom courses and online classes that take place off campus, or an exclusively "cyber" schedule in which all classes are virtual. These online learning services are designed to offer students flexible and innovative learning opportunities while still maintaining access to the services available in traditional school environments ("Mission and Vision of LOLA," n.d.).

Remake Learning

The Avonworth, Keystone Oaks, and New Castle Area school districts are members of Remake Learning, a network of people and organizations in the Southwestern Pennsylvania region dedicated to sharing best practices for 21st century teaching and learning ("Remake Learning Network Members," n.d.). The Remake Learning mission statement reads: "Remake Learning is a network that ignites engaging, relevant, and equitable learning practices in support of young people navigating rapid social and technological change" ("About Remake Learning," n.d.).

SURVEY OF PARENTS

From June 29, 2020 to August 8, 2020, CUE distributed a 34-item online survey to parents and caregivers of students enrolled in the Southwestern Pennsylvania schools. A total of 1,674 primary caregivers responded to the survey. To collect data representative of the population in Southwestern Pennsylvania, we determined our sample sizes before commencing data collection by assuming that the student population in this jurisdiction was equal to the parent population, thus using a conservative approach, which dismissed the possibility of siblings. We set our confidence level at 95% and margin of error at 5%, according to guidelines for research activities (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). Based on our prior calculations, we aimed to collect 384 responses from primary caregivers in Southwestern Pennsylvania. All survey items were optional such that respondents could choose to provide a response to a question without having responded to a previous question. As a result, the response proportions per survey item options do not always sum to 100%.

SURVEY AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST

A selection of survey responses is presented below. The order in which the results are presented here does not reflect the order in which the respondents completed the questions on the survey. However, CUE will share the survey instrument upon request. Please send inquiries to: leapfrogging@brookings.edu.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank our project collaborators at The Grable Foundation and the districts of Aliquippa, Avonworth, Brentwood, Butler, Chartiers Valley, Duquesne, Fort Cherry, Hampton, Hopewell, Keystone, New Brighton, New Castle, Northgate, South Fayette, and Western Beaver, without whom we would not have been able to conduct this survey.

SURVEY FINDINGS

Parents' beliefs on the purpose of school and perceived alignment with teachers

I believe that the most important purpose of school is:
(sample size=1402)

Times Chosen (%)

- 31% — To prepare students for post-secondary education through rigorous content knowledge across all academic subjects
- 22% — To prepare students with the skills and competencies needed for the workforce
- 6% — To prepare students to be good citizens who are prepared to lead their political and civic lives
- 33% — To help students gain self-knowledge, find their personal sense of purpose, and better understand their values
- 7% — Other

I believe that my child's educators believe that the most important purpose of school is:
(sample size=1312)

Times Chosen (%)

- 48% — To prepare students for post-secondary education through rigorous content knowledge across all academic subjects
- 14% — To prepare students with the skills and competencies needed for the workforce
- 8% — To prepare students to be good citizens who are prepared to lead their political and civic lives
- 20% — To help students gain self-knowledge, find their personal sense of purpose, and better understand their values
- 10% — Other

Parents' indicators of quality and perceived alignment with educators

I am satisfied with my child's education when my child is:
(sample size=1335)

Times Chosen (%)

Getting good scores on state/national standardized tests	Achieving at or above grade level	Being prepared for post-secondary education	Developing friendships and social skills	Being given opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities aligned to their interests	Enjoying school
10%	20%	17%	18%	14%	20%
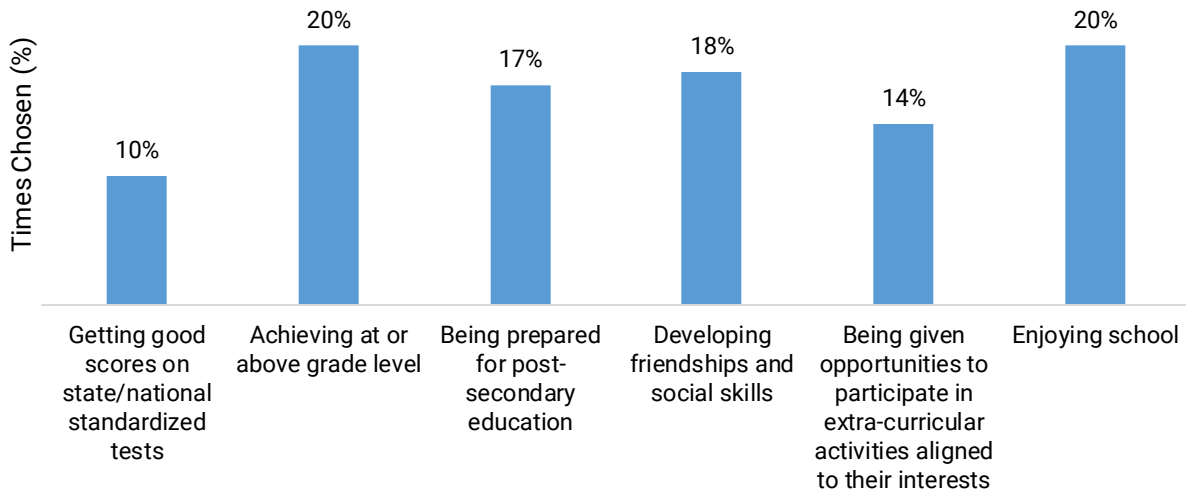
Parents' sources of information

How do you react when something about your child's education bothers or upsets you?
(sample size=1247)

Times Chosen (%)

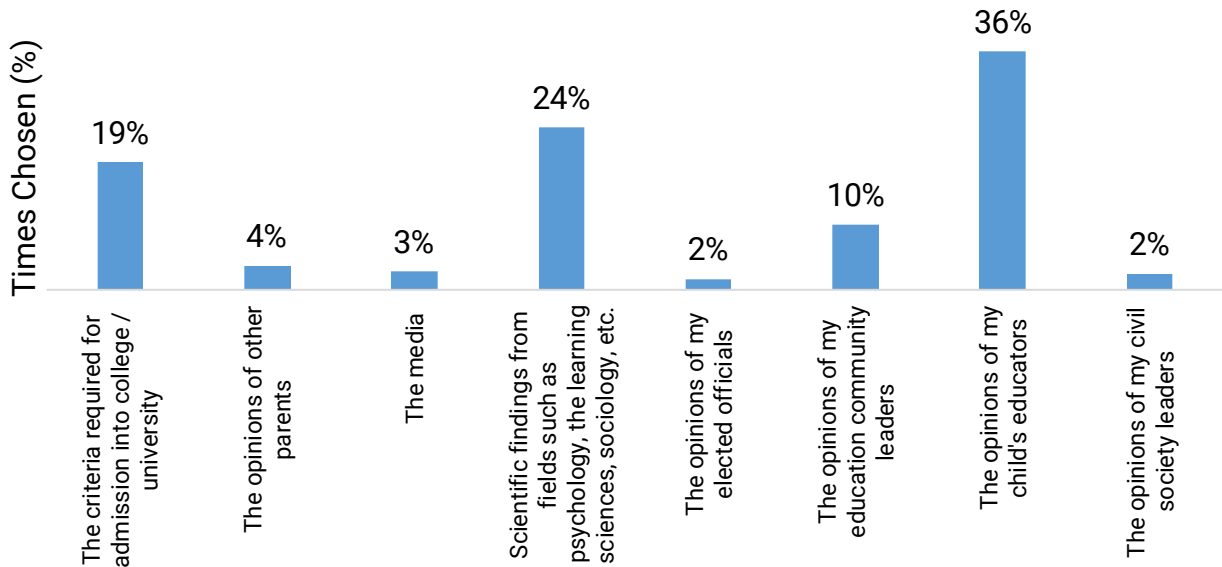| Response	%
I contact my child's teacher to voice my concern	31%
I contact my child's school administator to voice my concern	7%
I contact my child's school board	1%
I contact my local government officials	0%
I discuss my concern with other parents at my child's school	8%
I discuss my concern with my child	24%
I discuss my concern with my spouse/partner, other family members, and/or close friends	25%
I post my concern on social media	1%
I don't do anything about it	1%
Other	1%

What influences your perspective about what makes for a good quality education for your child?
(sample size=1147)

Times Chosen (%)

| Influence	%
The criteria required for admission into college / university	19%
The opinions of other parents	4%
The media	3%
Scientific findings from fields such as psychology, the learning sciences, sociology, etc.	24%
The opinions of my elected officials	2%
The opinions of my education community leaders	10%
The opinions of my child's educators	36%
The opinions of my civil society leaders	2%

Parents' trust of and perceived alignment with teachers
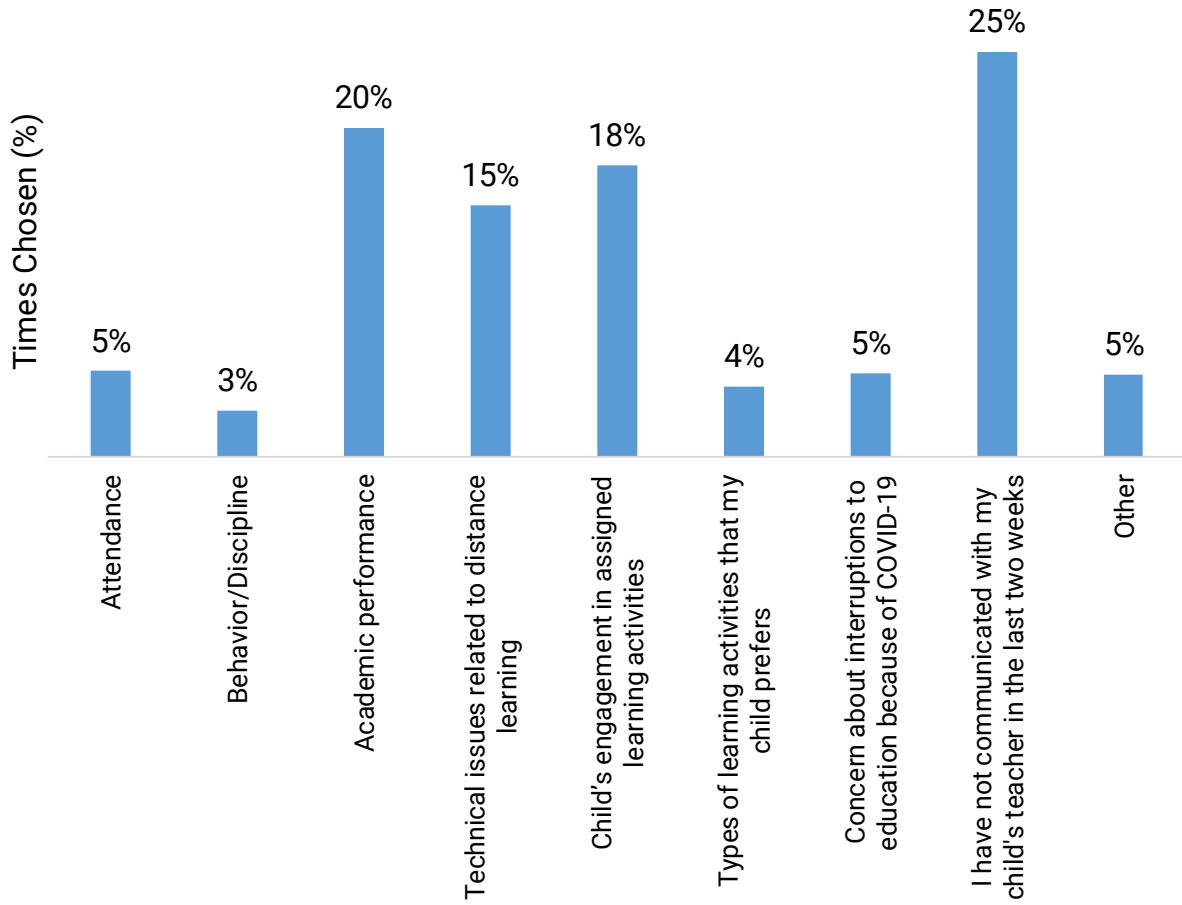
My child's teachers share my beliefs about what makes a good education.
(sample size=1231)
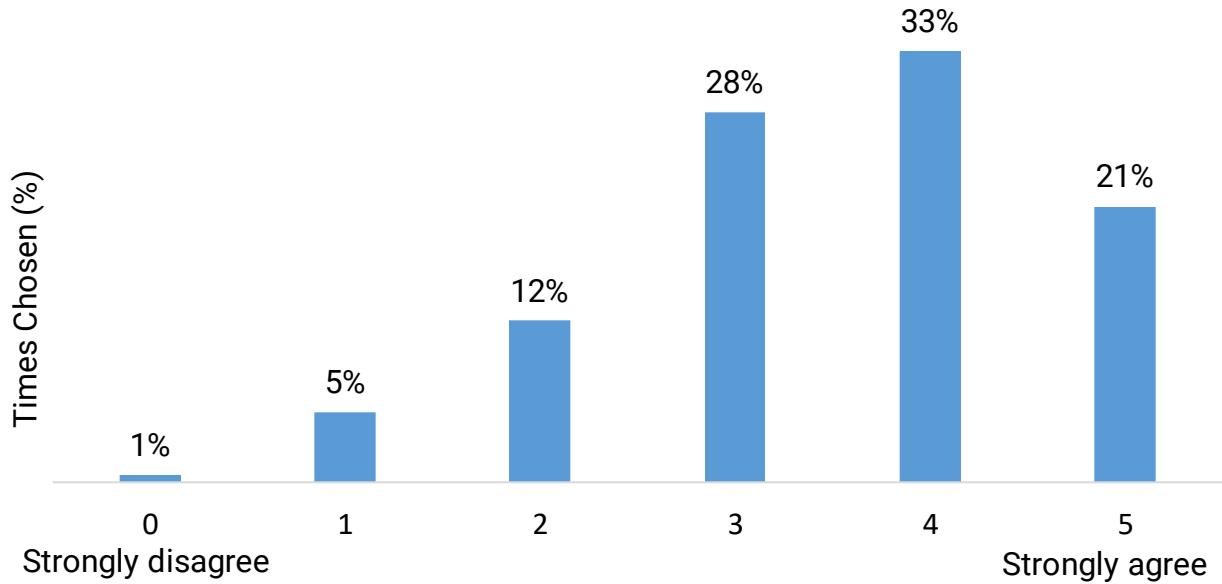
My child's teachers are receptive to my input and suggestions.
(sample size=1241)
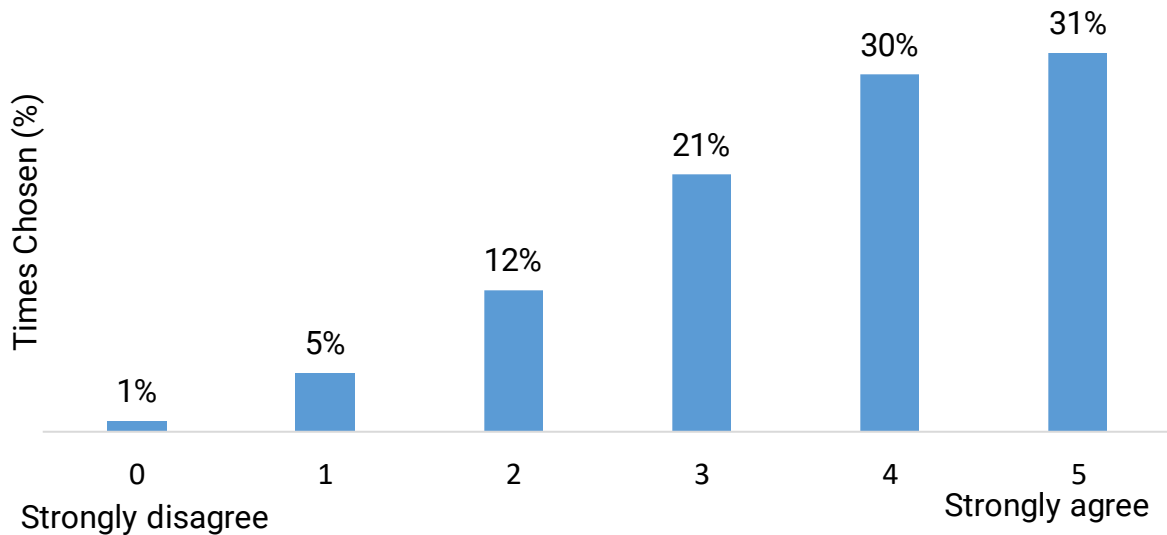
In the last two weeks, what have you communicated to your child's teacher about: (sample size=1253)

Times Chosen (%)

- Attendance: 5%
- Behavior/Discipline: 3%
- Academic performance: 20%
- Technical issues related to distance learning: 15%
- Child's engagement in assigned learning activities: 18%
- Types of learning activities that my child prefers: 4%
- Concern about interruptions to education because of COVID-19: 5%
- I have not communicated with my child's teacher in the last two weeks: 25%
- Other: 5%

Parents' opinions on pedagogy

How are your child's teachers continuing to teach right now?
(sample size=1529)

Bar chart — "Times Chosen (%)" on the vertical axis with the following values:

- Homework packets for students to complete on their own: 10%
- Virtual classrooms, where teachers and students video conference together to learn in ways that would happen in live classrooms: 6%
- Virtual check-in meetings: 14%
- Recorded lessons by video or audio for students to review on their own: 17%
- Education websites for students to use on their own: 23%
- Educational TV or radio programs: 2%
- Education games either online or offline: 10%
- Hands-on activities: 8%
- Teachers are not teaching during school closures: 1%
- Teachers are providing normal classroom instruction as schools are not closed: 1%
- School is offering extracurricular activities: 1%
- Teachers are offering individual sessions and/or office hours with each student: 5%
- Other: 3%

How is your child spending the majority of their time right now?
(sample size=1492)
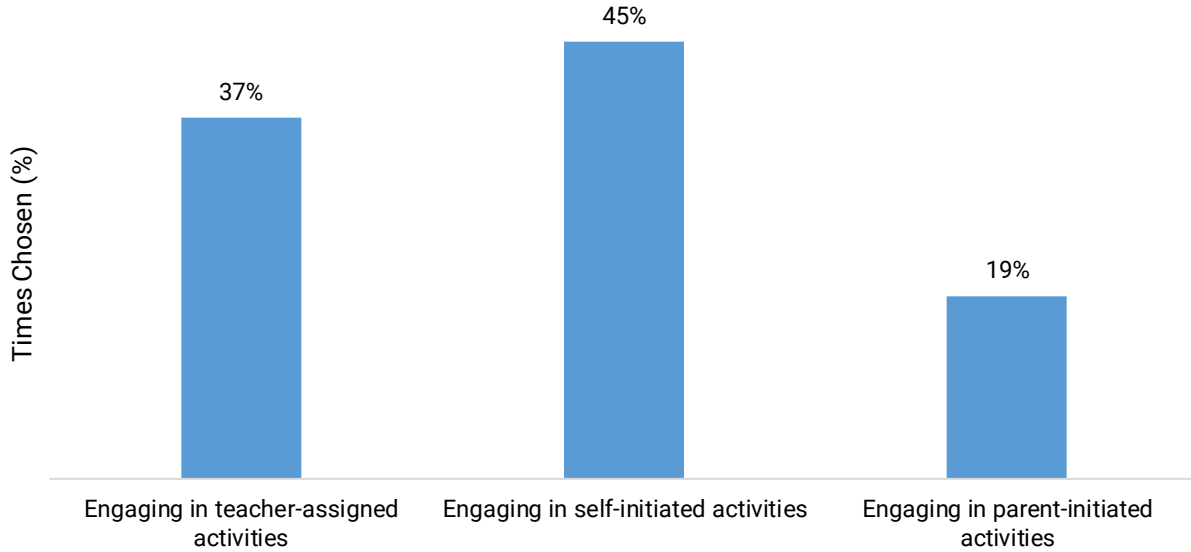
Times Chosen (%)

- Engaging in teacher-assigned activities: 37%
- Engaging in self-initiated activities: 45%
- Engaging in parent-initiated activities: 19%

When you think about the different ways in which your child is learning right now, which are you the MOST satisfied with.
(sample size=1418)

Times Chosen (%)

- Completing homework packets: 7%
- Engaging in virtual classrooms with teachers and classmates in real time: 7%
- Engaging in virtual check-in meetings: 10%
- Engaging in recorded video or audio lessons from teachers: 9%
- Learning by online or offline games: 7%
- Learning through hands-on activities assigned by teachers: 7%
- Learning through playing: 6%
- Learning by shows on TV or radio: 2%
- Learning from education-focused websites: 11%
- Learning from helping at home: 15%
- Engaging in discussions with their parents, siblings, and/or other family members: 16%
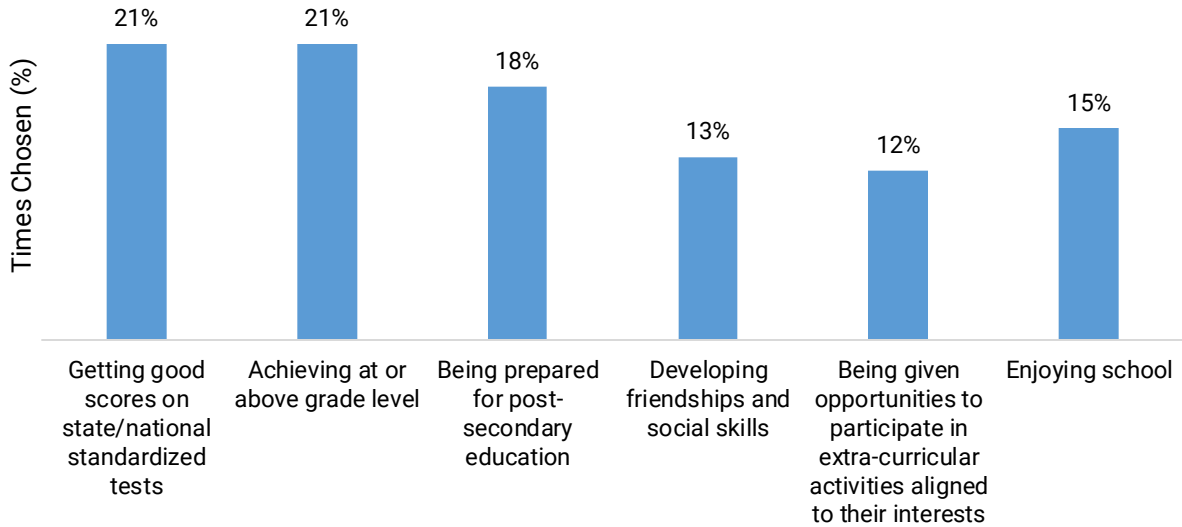- Other: 3%

When you think about the different ways in which your child is learning right now, which are you the LEAST satisfied with?
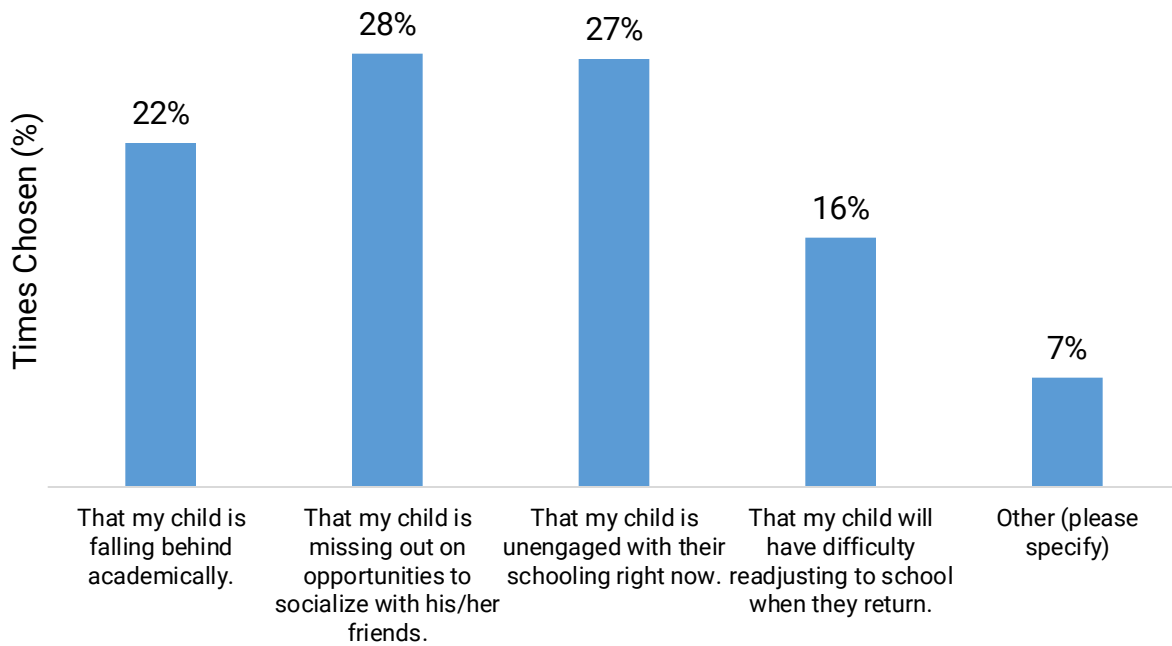**(sample size=1257)**

How engaged is your child with the activities their teacher has assigned?
(sample size=1253)
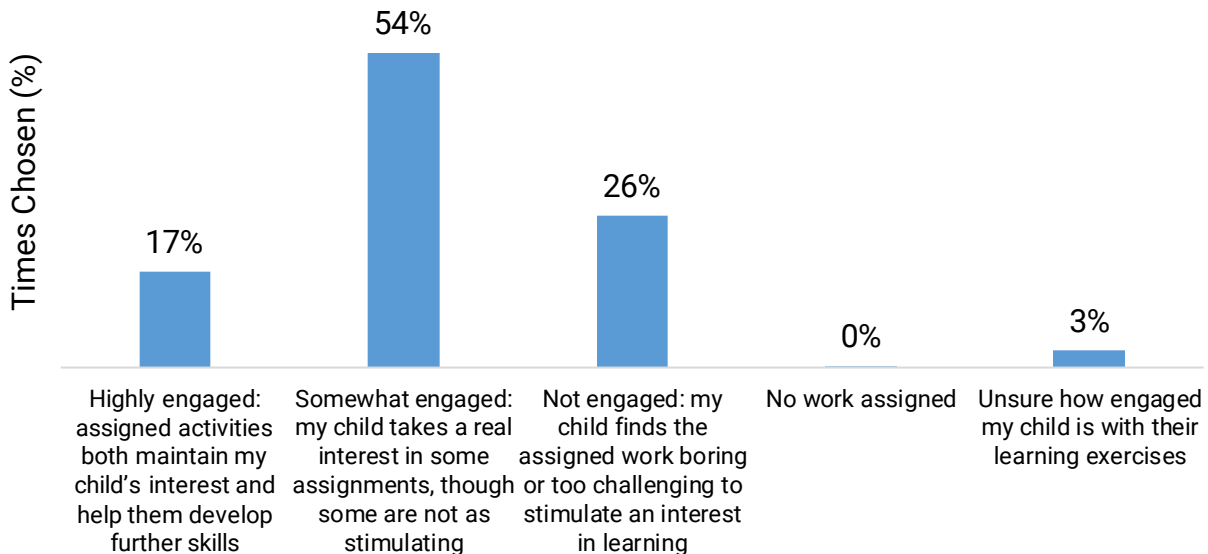
I believe that my child's educators are satisfied with their students' education when their students are:
(sample size=1249)

Bar chart — Times Chosen (%):
- Getting good scores on state/national standardized tests: 21%
- Achieving at or above grade level: 21%
- Being prepared for post-secondary education: 18%
- Developing friendships and social skills: 13%
- Being given opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities aligned to their interests: 12%
- Enjoying school: 15%

With regards to your child's education right now, what worries you the MOST?
(sample size=1263)

Bar chart — Times Chosen (%):
- That my child is falling behind academically.: 22%
- That my child is missing out on opportunities to socialize with his/her friends.: 28%
- That my child is unengaged with their schooling right now.: 27%
- That my child will have difficulty readjusting to school when they return.: 16%
- Other (please specify): 7%

Are you your child's primary caregiver?
(sample size=1174)

- Yes: 98%
- No: 2%

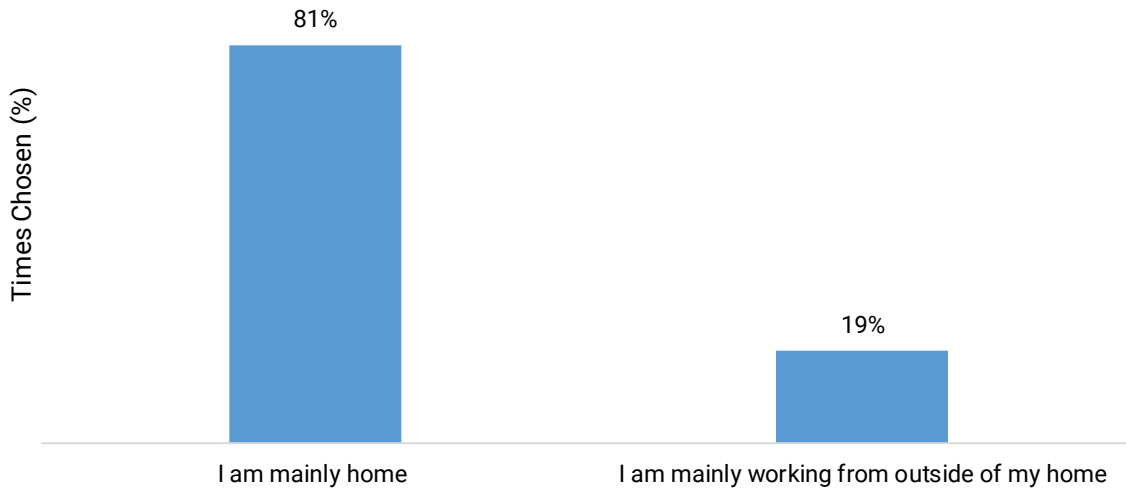Times Chosen (%)

How many children do you have who are currently in preschool through grade 12 in school and live at home with you?
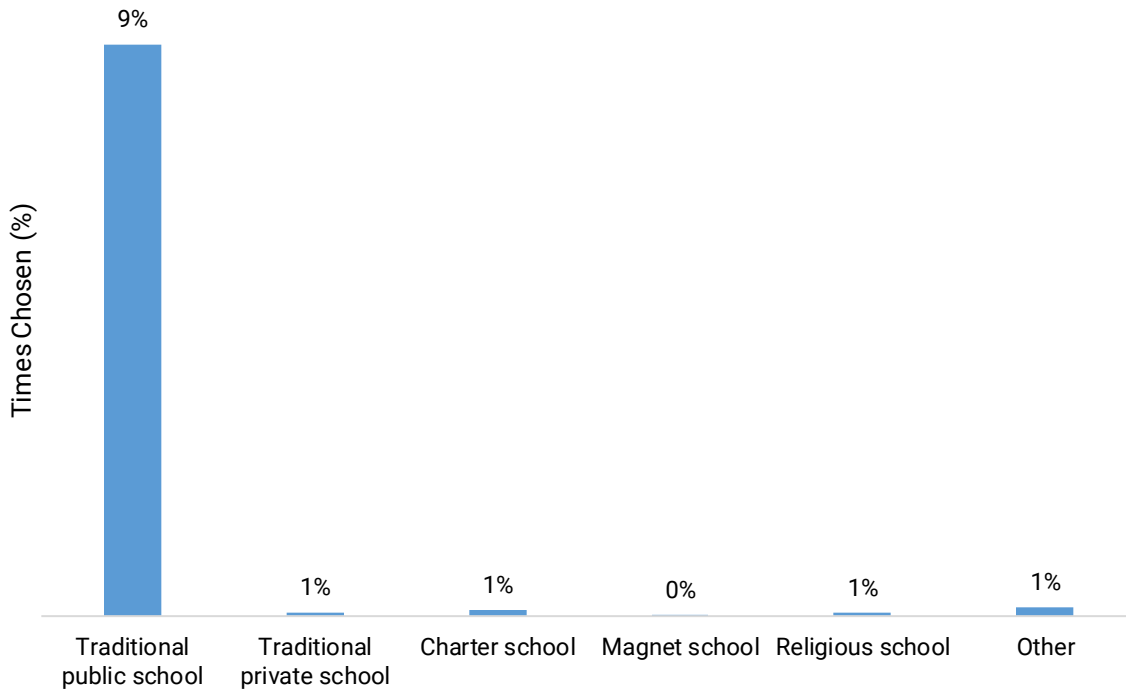### (sample size=1629)

- **1** - 41%
- **2** - 41%
- **3 -** 14%
- **4+** - 5%
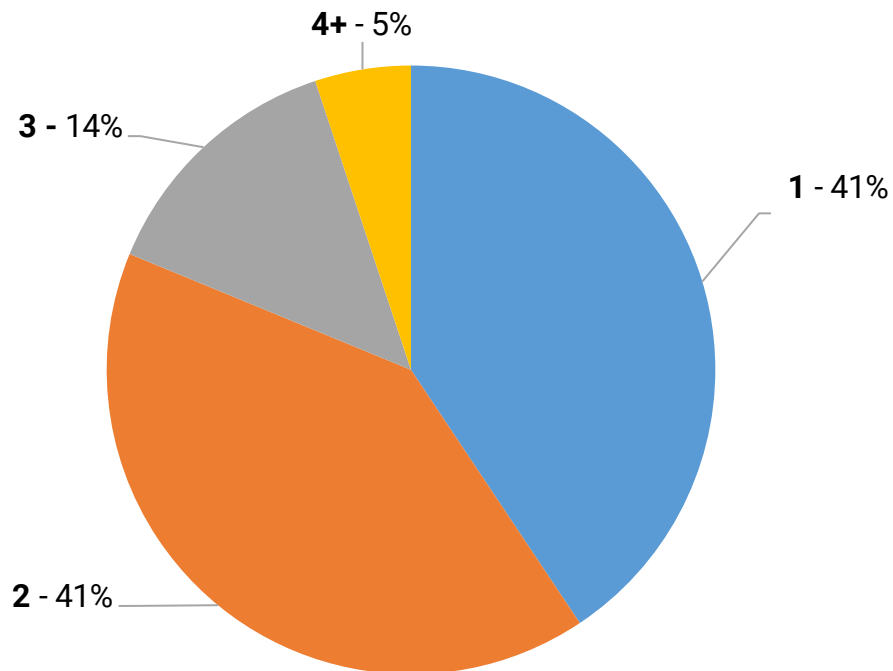
In which grade is your oldest child who is enrolled in school (preschool to grade 12)?
(sample size=1611)

Bar chart showing "Times Chosen (%)" on the vertical axis with the following values:

- Preschool (typically 4 - 5 years old): 1%
- Kindergarten (typically 5 - 6 years old): 6%
- Grade 1 (typically 6 - 7 years old): 8%
- Grade 2 (typically 7 - 8 years old): 7%
- Grade 3 (typically 8 - 9 years old): 8%
- Grade 4 (typically 9 - 10 years old): 7%
- Grade 5 (typically 10 - 11 years old): 7%
- Grade 6 (typically 11 - 12 years old): 8%
- Grade 7 (typically 12 - 13 years old): 8%
- Grade 8 (typically 13 - 14 years old): 8%
- Grade 9 (typically 14 - 15 years old): 10%
- Grade 10 (typically 15 - 16 years old): 10%
- Grade 11 (typically 16 - 17 years old): 10%
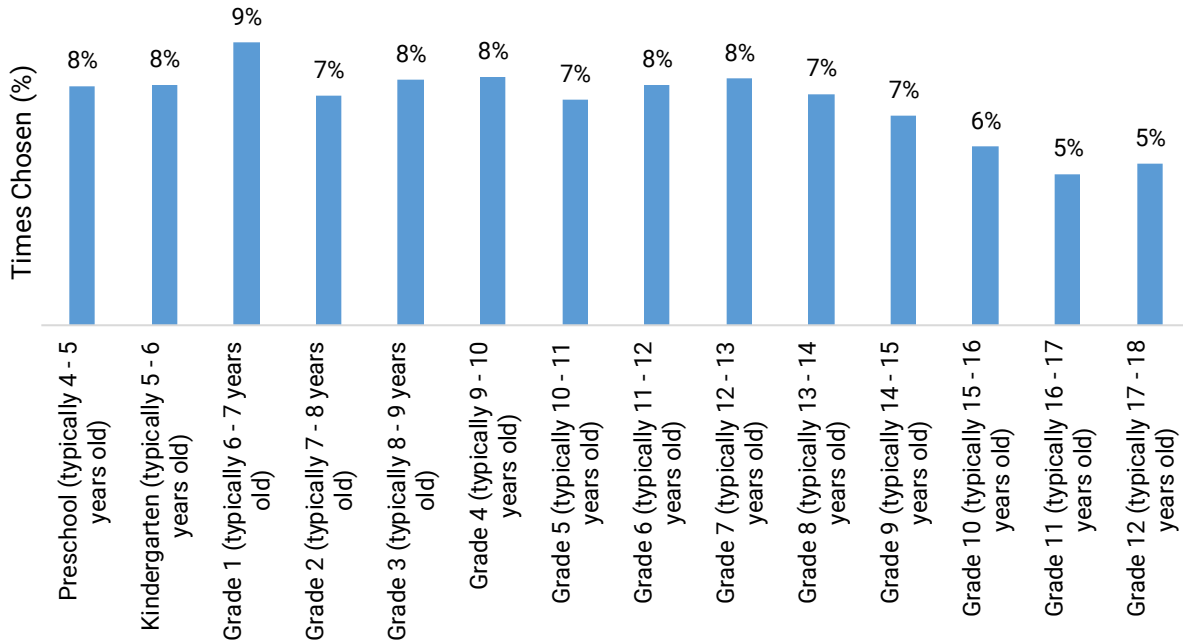- Grade 12 (typically 17 - 18 years old): 9%

During your child's school closure, are you mainly home (whether employed or unemployed) or are you mainly working from outside your home?
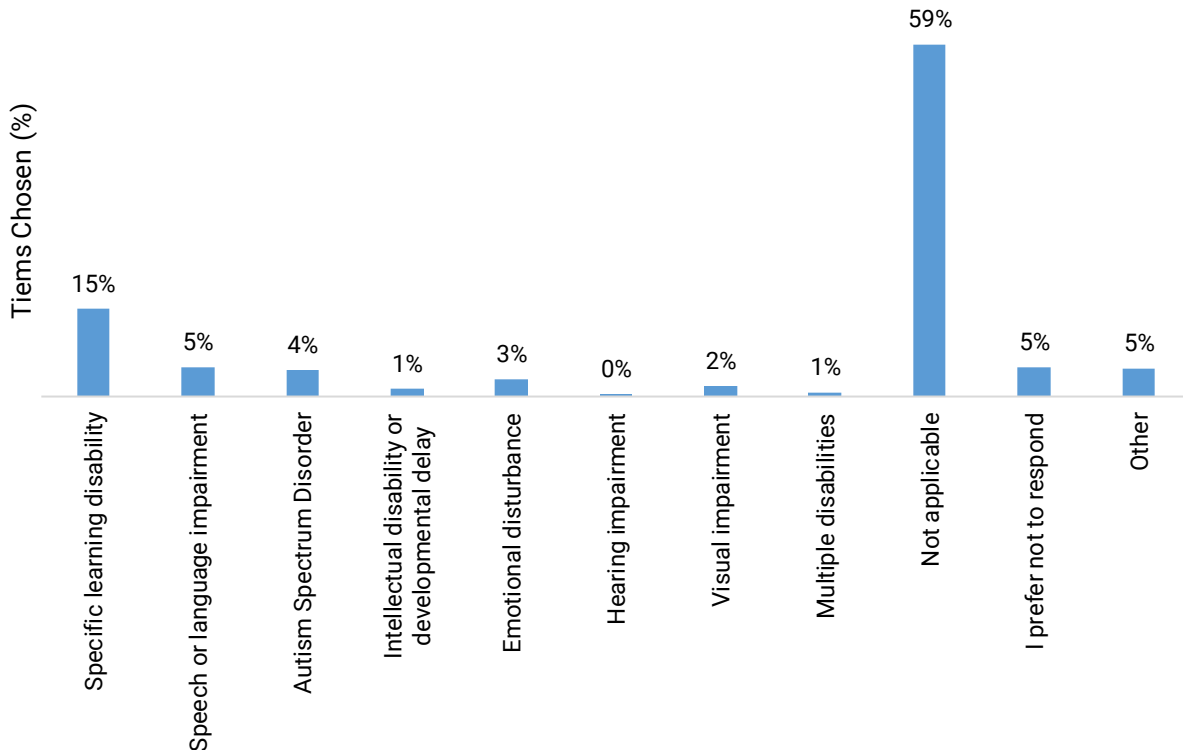## (sample size=1181)

Times Chosen (%)

81% — I am mainly home

19% — I am mainly working from outside of my home

In what type of school is your child enrolled?
(sample size=1165)

Times Chosen (%)

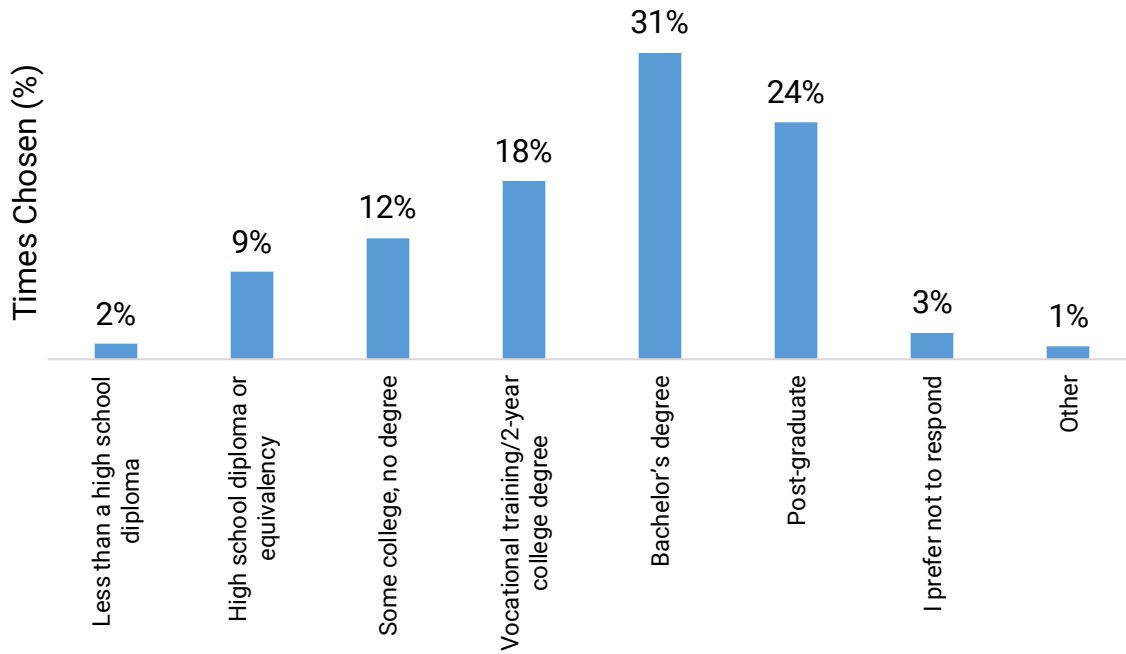| Traditional public school	Traditional private school	Charter school	Magnet school	Religious school	Other
9%	1%	1%	0%	1%	1%

In what grade(s) is/are all your school aged children? For this question, please consider all your children.
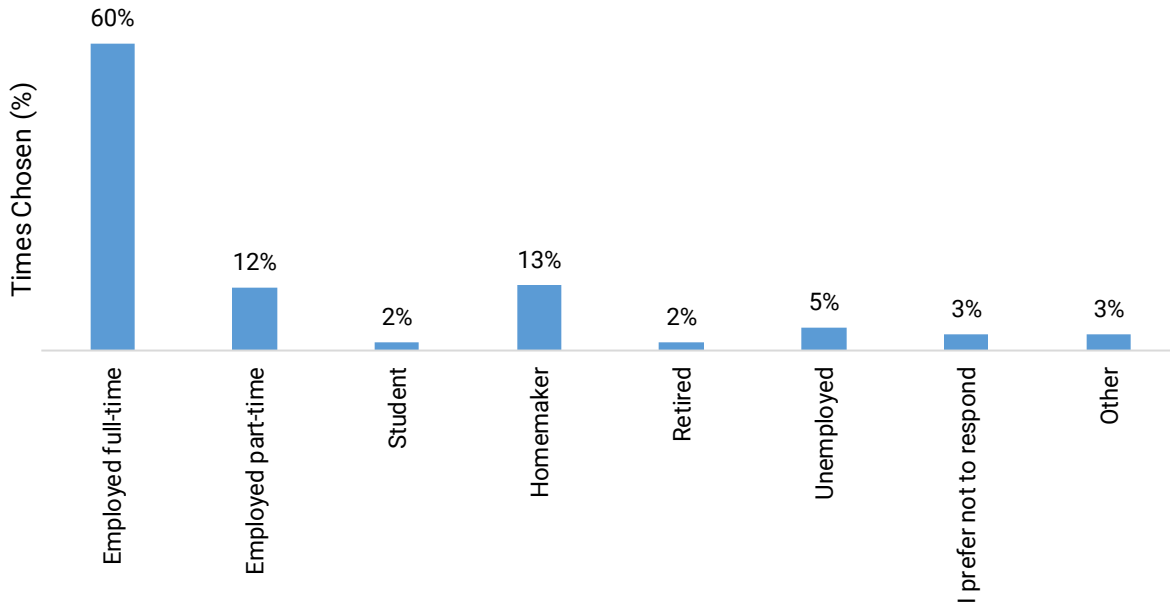### (sample size=1167)

Bar chart — Times Chosen (%):
- Preschool (typically 4 - 5 years old): 8%
- Kindergarten (typically 5 - 6 years old): 8%
- Grade 1 (typically 6 - 7 years old): 9%
- Grade 2 (typically 7 - 8 years old): 7%
- Grade 3 (typically 8 - 9 years old): 8%
- Grade 4 (typically 9 - 10 years old): 8%
- Grade 5 (typically 10 - 11 years old): 7%
- Grade 6 (typically 11 - 12 years old): 8%
- Grade 7 (typically 12 - 13 years old): 8%
- Grade 8 (typically 13 - 14 years old): 7%
- Grade 9 (typically 14 - 15 years old): 7%
- Grade 10 (typically 15 - 16 years old): 6%
- Grade 11 (typically 16 - 17 years old): 5%
- Grade 12 (typically 17 - 18 years old): 5%

Has your child been diagnosed with any of the following?
(sample size=1011)

Bar chart — Tiems Chosen (%):
- Specific learning disability: 15%
- Speech or language impairment: 5%
- Autism Spectrum Disorder: 4%
- Intellectual disability or developmental delay: 1%
- Emotional disturbance: 3%
- Hearing impairment: 0%
- Visual impairment: 2%
- Multiple disabilities: 1%
- Not applicable: 59%
- I prefer not to respond: 5%
- Other: 5%

What is your highest level of education attained?
(sample size=1175)

Times Chosen (%)

Less than a high school diploma	High school diploma or equivalency	Some college, no degree	Vocational training/2-year college degree	Bachelor's degree	Post-graduate	I prefer not to respond	Other
2%	9%	12%	18%	31%	24%	3%	1%

What is your current employment status?
(sample size=1177)

Times Chosen (%)

Employed full-time	Employed part-time	Student	Homemaker	Retired	Unemployed	I prefer not to respond	Other
60%	12%	2%	13%	2%	5%	3%	3%

When thinking about social issues, do you consider yourself to be:
(sample size=1172)

Times Chosen (%)

- 7% — Very conservative
- 18% — Somewhat conservative
- 36% — Moderate
- 17% — Somewhat liberal
- 9% — Very liberal
- 12% — I prefer not to respond
- 1% — Other
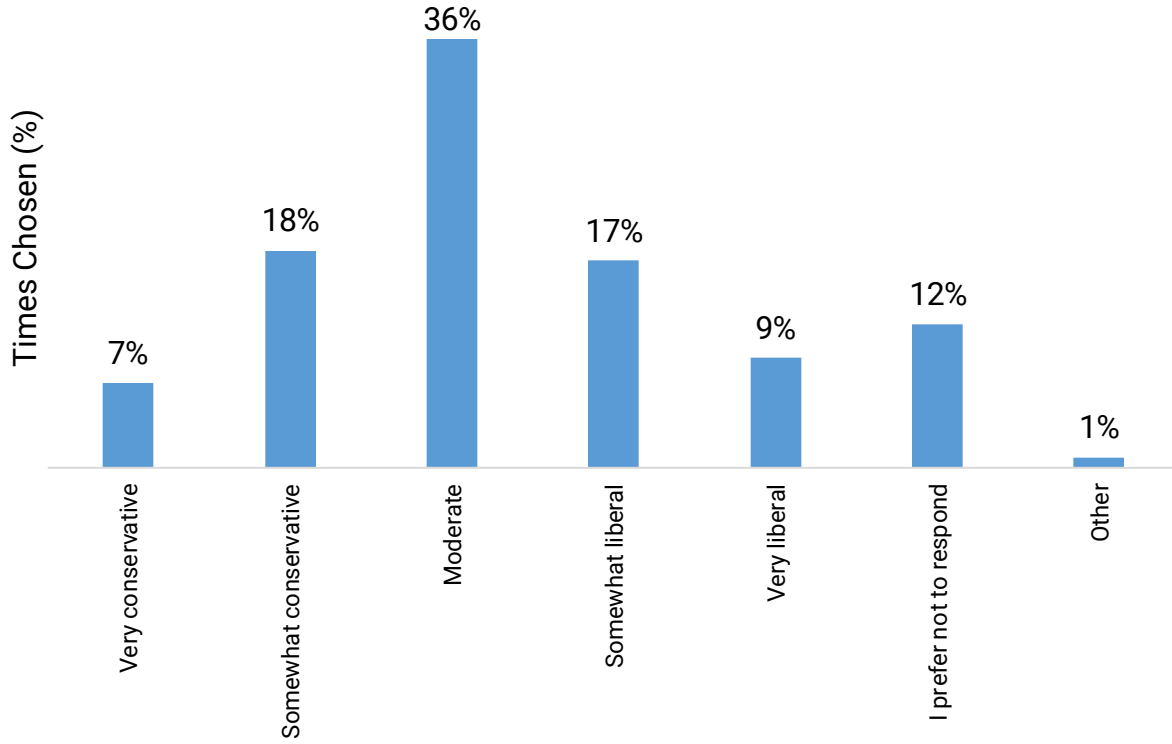
Parents' satisfaction with their children's education

How would you rate the education that your child is getting from their school right now?
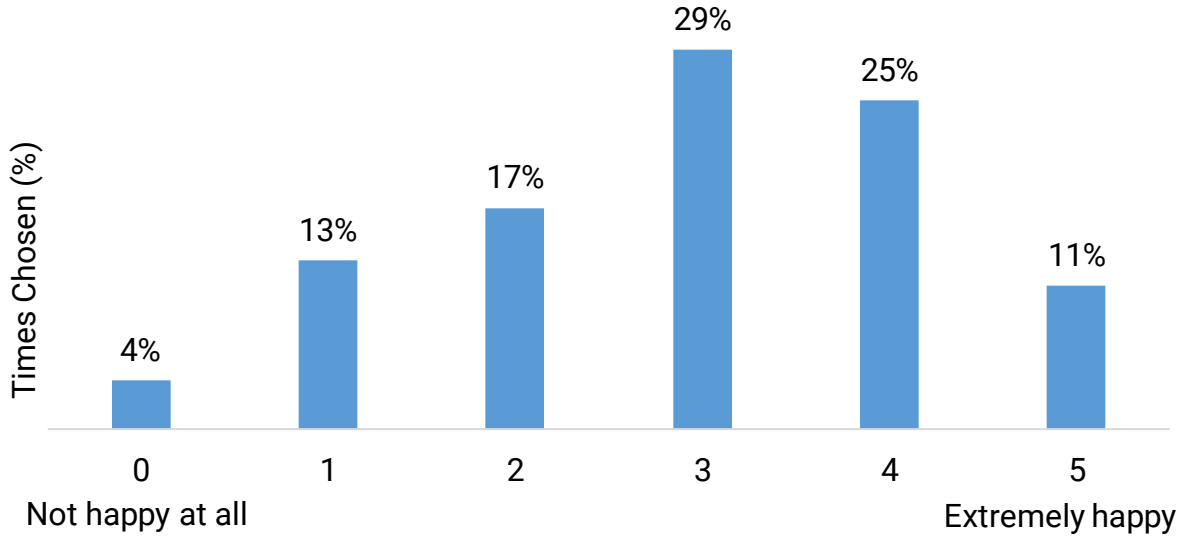### (sample size=1589)

Not so good - 6%
Poor - 2%
Excellent - 16%
Just okay - 28%
Pretty Good - 48%
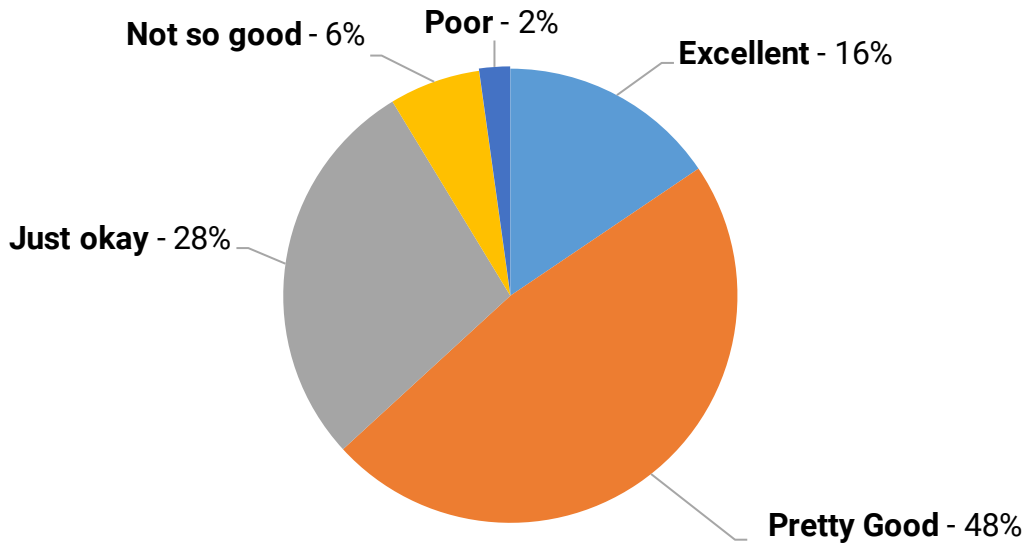
At the time of this survey, how satisfied are you with your child's education?
(sample size=1400)

Times Chosen (%)

0 — 3%
1 — 13%
2 — 16%
3 — 32%
4 — 26%
5 — 10%

Not satisfied at all

Extremely satisfied
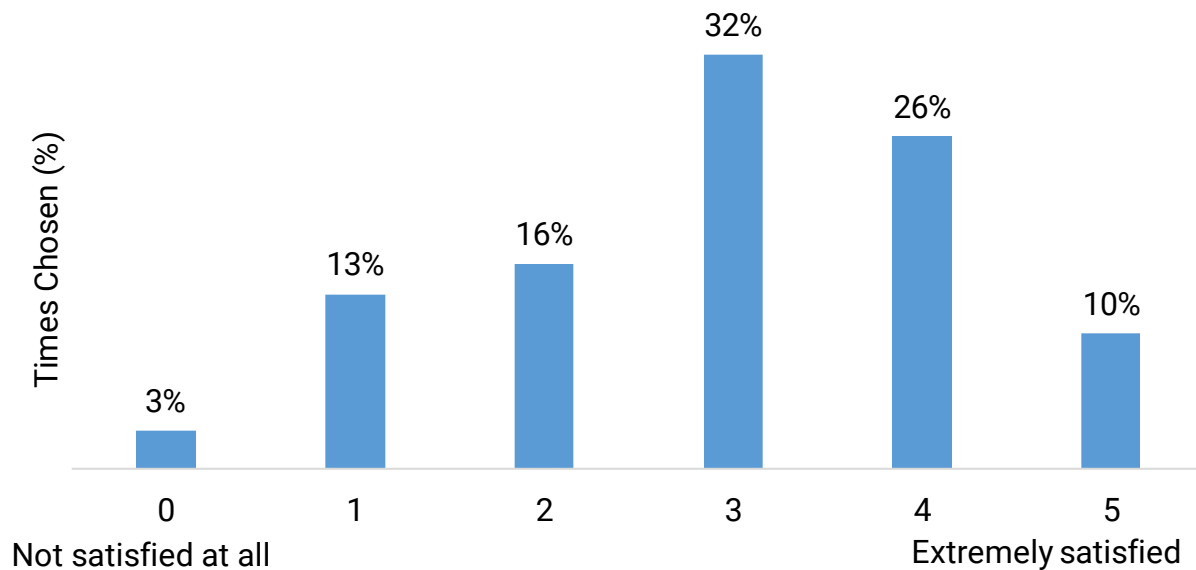
At the time of this survey, how happy is your child with their education?
(sample size=1390)

Times Chosen (%)

4% — 0 — Not happy at all
13% — 1
17% — 2
29% — 3
25% — 4
11% — 5 — Extremely happy

How well do you believe your child is doing academically right now?
(sample size=1573)

Times Chosen (%)

2% — 0 — My child is struggling academically
4% — 1
8% — 2
24% — 3
38% — 4
25% — 5 — My child is excelling academically
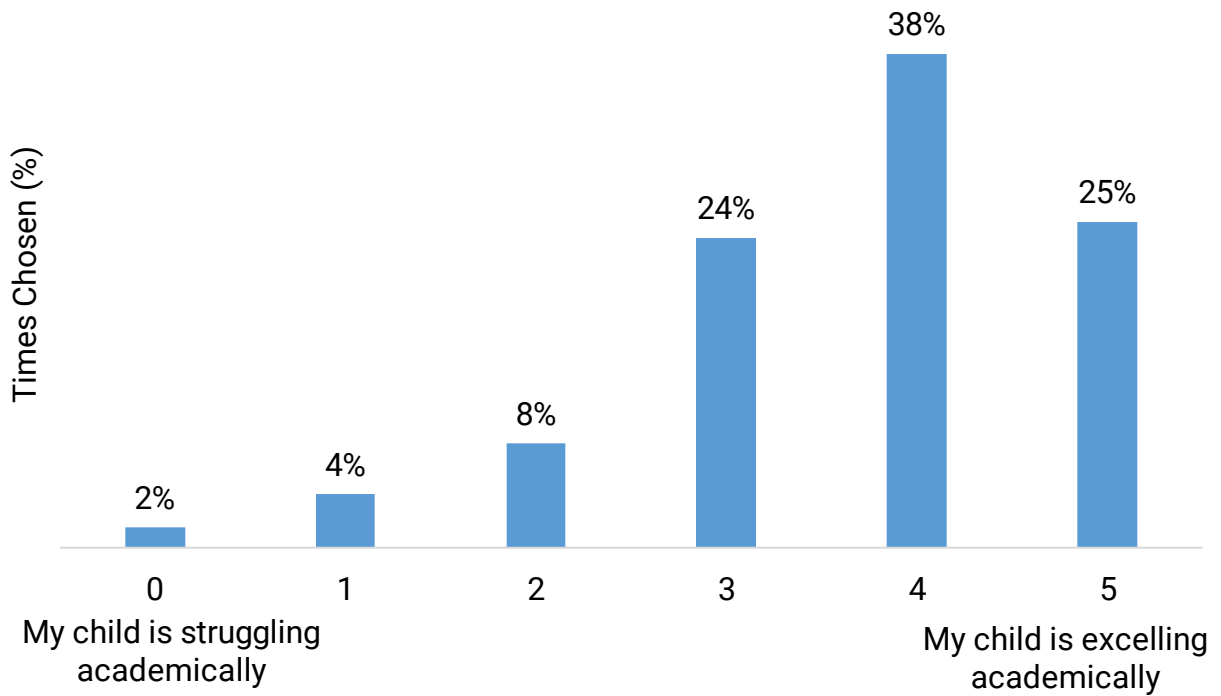
References

Aliquippa School District. (n.d.). *For Parents & Students.* Retrieved July 21, 2020, from http://www.quipsd.org/ForParentsStudents.aspx

Aliquippa School District. (n.d.). *Schools*. Retrieved July 8, 2020, from http://www.quipsd.org/Schools.aspx

Avonworth School District. (n.d.) *AMS Parent Network.* Retrieved July 22, 2020, from http://www.avonworth.k12.pa.us/AMSParentNetwork1.aspx

Avonworth School District. (n.d.). *Schools*. Retrieved July 8, 2020, from http://www.avonworth.k12.pa.us/Default.aspx

Brentwood Borough School District. (n.d.). *Brentwood Cyber Academy*. Retrieved July 22, 2020, https://www.bb-sd.com/BrentwoodCyberAcademy.aspx

Brentwood Borough School District. (2020). *District.* Retrieved July 6, 2020, from https://www.bb-sd.com/District.aspx

Census Reporter. (n.d.). *Pittsburgh, PA Metro Area.* Retrieved July 22, 2020, from https://censusreporter.org/profiles/31000US38300-pittsburgh-pa-metro-area/

Fort Cherry School District. (n.d.). *Welcome to Fort Cherry Academics.* Retrieved July 8, 2020, from https://www.fortcherry.org/domain/432

Hopewell Area School District. (2020). *Schools.* Retrieved July 8, 2020, from http://www.hopewellarea.org/Schools.aspx

Keystone Oaks School District. (n.d.). *Keystone Oaks Cyber Academy.* Retrieved July 22, 2020, from https://www.kosd.org/KeystoneOaksCyberAcademy.aspx

Keystone Oaks School District. (2020). *Schools.* Retrieved July 8, 2020, from https://www.kosd.org/Schools.aspx

Krejcie, R. V., & Morgan, D. W. (1970). Determining sample size for research activities. Educational and Psychological Measurement, 30, 607-610.

New Brighton Area School District. (n.d.). *About NBASD.* Retrieved July 8, 2020, from https://www.nbasd.org/about

New Brighton Area School District. (n.d.). *Mission and Vision of LOLA*. Retrieved July 22, 2020, https://www.nbasd.org/lolamissionandvision

New Brighton Area School District. (n.d.). *Positive Steps Wellness Center*. Retrieved July 30, 2020, from https://www.nbasd.org/positivesteps

New Castle Area School District. (n.d.). *Schools*. Retrieved July 8, 2020, from http://www.ncasd.com/Default.aspx

Northgate School District. (n.d.). *Online Learning Academy*. Retrieved July 22, 2020, https://www.northgatesd.net/academics/online-learning-academy

Northgate School District. (n.d.). *Our Schools*. Retrieved July 8, 2020, from https://www.northgatesd.net/our-schools

Pennsylvania Department of Education. (2019). *English Learners: 2018-19 EL Student Counts by LEA and School*. Retrieved July 6, 2020, from https://www.education.pa.gov/DataAndReporting/EnglishLearners/Pages/default.aspx

Pennsylvania Department of Education. (2019). *Public School Enrollment Reports: Public School Enrollments 2019-2020*. Retrieved July 6, 2020, from https://www.education.pa.gov/DataAndReporting/Enrollment/Pages/PublicSchEnrReports.aspx

Pennsylvania Department of Education. (2019). *Public Schools Percent of Low-Income Reports:2018-2019 Public Schools Percent Low Income*. Retrieved July 6, 2020, from https://www.education.pa.gov/DataAndReporting/LoanCanLowIncome/Pages/PublicSchools.aspx

Public School Review. (n.d.). *Aliquippa School District*. Retrieved July 22, 2020, from https://www.publicschoolreview.com/pennsylvania/aliquippa-school-district/4202130-school-district

Public School Review. (n.d.). *Avonworth School District*. Retrieved July 22, 2020, from https://www.publicschoolreview.com/pennsylvania/avonworth-school-district/4202820-school-district

Remake Learning. (n.d.). *About Remake Learning*. Retrieved July 22, 2020, from https://remakelearning.org/about/

Brookings Institution

Remake Learning. (n.d.) *Remake Learning Network Members.* Retrieved July 22, 2020,

    from https://remakelearning.org/members/?fwp_member_type=organization&fw

    p_member_category=school

Winthrop, R. (2020, October 30). Parents, education, and cross-border sharing:

    Introducing our Family Engagement in Education project collaborators. Brookings

    Institution. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus-

    development/2020/10/30/parents-education-and-cross-border-sharing-

    introducing-our-family-engagement-in-education-project-collaborators/

Winthrop, R., Barton A., & McGivney, E. (2018, June 5). Leapfrogging inequality:

    Remaking education to help young people thrive. Brookings Institution Press.