

Report: AAPI Parent Guided Conversations on Education

Coalition for Asian American Children and Families

April 2022

Introduction

Asian American & Pacific Islander (AAPI) students and parents in the New York City (NYC) public school system continue to face system-wide issues that include overcrowding, bullying, lack of quality language accessible and culturally-responsive services, underfunding of programs for multilingual learners, and more. 25% of the NYC AAPI population is low-income, 70% are immigrants, and nearly half of NYC AAPI adults have limited English proficiency, while AAPI students make up 16.5% of NYC public school students, attend over 95% of our public schools, 19.6% are English language learners (ELLs), and 8.5% have disabilities. Navigating the NYC school system is especially difficult for those facing language and cultural barriers or lack of historical education access. However, many of these problems are ignored because of the harmful effects of the model minority myth, and AAPI parents and their children, especially those most marginalized, continue to be excluded and have their needs ignored on these critical issues.

Given this dearth of AAPI voices, CACF's overarching goal is to connect AAPI parents, especially low-income, limited English proficient, and/or immigrant parents, with more opportunities to inform and engage in the fight for educational equity. Last year, CACF released a comprehensive, long-term [agenda](#) on AAPI educational equity, informed by students, parents, educators, advocates, administrators, and CACF member organization staff; this year, we aim to ensure that the recommendations we put forward are anchored in the responses shared with us. In order to do this, we needed to hear directly from parents— to better understand their needs,

concerns, hopes, and dreams regarding their children's education and identify the challenges they face in the New York City public education system.

In the past year, CACF held six parent guided conversations with participants connected to five Asian-led and -serving community-based organizations (CBOs) that are part of CACF's membership, with special efforts toward facilitating the inclusion of parents who typically face the most barriers to involvement in these discussions (more details are included in the following Methods section).

This report does the following:

- **Shares our findings on families' perspectives**
- **Demonstrates that the AAPI community holds a variety of views on education**
- **Expands the range of voices included in conversations about education policy to better represent impacted and marginalized communities**
- **Highlights the New York City Department of Education's (DOE) failure to properly educate and inform families, and address continued systemic barriers necessitating a more deliberate approach to engagement**
- **Provides recommendations to the DOE aligned with parents' reflections**

CACF thanks all of the parents, families, students, facilitators, interpreters, and those involved in the process for their participation and collaboration.

Methods

We endeavored to reach out to communities that are often overlooked in education policy

decisions, and to hear from respondents representing a variety of backgrounds under the diverse AAPI umbrella. Although the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated some discussion of its impacts on education, and resulted in scheduling and logistical challenges limiting our ability to comprehensively cover AAPI ethnic groups in NYC, we ultimately find these conversations to be representative of wide-ranging key issues. Simultaneously, these quotations provide a snapshot reflective of a moment in the middle of the pandemic, which continues to affect our students and families.

We held six conversations; five in-language, and one in English. Each conversation was 1-2 hours in length, and we spoke to anywhere between one and five participants per call, depending on availability. (Interpretation was arranged by CACF membership organizations, and some of the quotes in this report have been slightly edited for grammar, clarity, or syntactic consistency.) Participants were able to leave and/or return to the conversation at will. They could speak as little or as much as they wanted (with the knowledge that we would prompt further if necessary), and were not required to answer any questions. They were also permitted to view the questions ahead of the conversation. All conversations were co-facilitated by a CACF staff member and a staff member from the host CBO, and recorded with participants' consent. Each CBO also received a financial mini-grant to support their programming or compensate the parent participants as they chose. **In short, we strived to ensure that our attendees, who gave us their time and shared personal reflections and important insights with us, felt as comfortable as possible and could benefit from these sessions as much as we did.**

Guided conversation participants were ethnically diverse and spoke Mandarin, Cantonese, Bengali, Punjabi, Pashto, Urdu, and English. (Parents are identified by their ethnicity/language when speaking on their own culture, diversity, or ELL matters, in order to provide context. In all other cases, identifiers are omitted to maximize anonymity.) They had a range of immigration

experiences, from recent immigrants to those who had lived in the United States for many years. Their children varied in age from pre-kindergarten to high school, and included ELLs and students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) receiving special education services. At the time the conversations took place, some students were learning in-person, others were remote, and still others were hybrid. **The majority of parents we spoke to had never taken part in a conversation about education policy or been asked to reflect more formally on their own families' experiences in New York City public schools.**

Questions in the following four categories were asked: 1) choosing a school, 2) learning and assessment, 3) family engagement, and 4) needs and concerns. These were chosen in an effort to encourage participants to imagine an ideal school environment for their children, describe a school system they would feel empowered to engage with, and reflect on their own experiences and perspectives to identify what works well and what gaps still exist. **We sought to find common ground, cultivate environments where participants felt comfortable sharing openly, and listen to understand**, especially given the sometimes contentious nature of education-related discussions. The full list of questions can be found in the Appendix.

Choosing a School

To start off, we asked parents about how they approached the first step in accessing education—enrolling in a school. We wanted to know what kind of information they looked to to base their decisions, given the complexities of the public school system and the limited availability of accessible, in-language, and comprehensive resources to aid families, particularly those who are unfamiliar with or new to the school system.

The parents we interviewed predominantly choose schools based on advice from relatives, as well as friends, neighbors, or other parents in the district. Recent immigrants especially depended on the members of their community who had lived in NYC longer than they had. To a lesser

extent, parents also used information from online research on the DOE's website, reading online reviews of the school, and, if possible, a visit to the school to inform their decision.

Many parents were strongly influenced by the **school's location** and were reluctant to attend a school in another borough because of **transportation difficulties**.

- "It was close to our house and it was easy for me to pick up and drop off my kids."
- "Before, we went to a private school. But now we go to public school because it is close to our house."
- "It has been a challenge since moving from Brooklyn to the Bronx. Surprisingly the high schools in the Bronx are not that good. So I talked with some neighbors and most of them said not to put their kid there and maybe to travel 1-2 hours to Brooklyn or Queens. That put me in a really bad situation and my older one is pretty good in studies, so I didn't want to compromise her education. I borrowed money and put her in a private online school."
- "Distance is an important factor because we work so we depend on the grandparents to pick up our kid if they get sick."
- "We picked that school because we moved from Brooklyn to Staten Island. Our kids were accepted into a talented and gifted class for another school in Brooklyn but didn't go because we moved."

However, it was not always as simple as finding a school that happened to be nearby. For some parents, location was just one of many factors under consideration when looking for a school. Other factors included feeling a **sense of belonging, language accessibility, and safety**.

- "Finding a public school was about the location, what types of people are in the school—is there similarity to myself? Can I relate? Is there going to be a language barrier? And so I'm looking at those aspects. Then I look at, how does the school score? We look at the statistics at the DOE." (Chinese (Cantonese-speaking) parent)
- "The first thing I look for is distance, I'm looking for something that is kind of close. The second thing I look for is if it's safe and the third

thing is whether they have accommodations for languages because my child is an ELL so that's my priority." (Chinese (Cantonese-speaking) parent)

However, the prioritization of nearby schools is not shared by everyone. One parent answered, "Location doesn't seem to be an issue...making sure the child is getting the best education is more important than the distance." Other parents emphasized the importance of choosing not only a good school, but a school that **suits their child's individualities**:

- "We would think about the child first and match the school—if the child likes the school, that's the first important part."
- "School size does matter....If they're independent, you might choose a bigger school for them, but if not, they need extra support, you need a smaller school."
- "So first of all, I look at the child's future with how the future will look when he steps out of school...the school where I could see my child succeeding."

One mother of a high schooler spoke on **taking her daughter's input**:

- "I'll first give my child an opportunity and talk to her so she knows what the school is. First, I have to do my research on the school and then talk to my child. Give her all the opportunities and all the festivities. Talk to her and take her opinion, take her advice. And then, I would pick a school for her. My child would also like to give her decision about her school."

Many of the parents we interviewed also conveyed that **the school's makeup and cultural capabilities** are also important:

- "The school itself, when I was choosing it—to see the school and make sure my daughter didn't have a language barrier. Speaking and relating to the teachers—and them relating to my story and journey—has made for meaningful conversations. That's what's made it successful for me." (Chinese (Cantonese-speaking) parent)
- I really like the people. I can see people of my own background there, so it's kind of like a home

feeling for me.” (South Asian (Urdu-speaking) parent)

- “I look for a school that has diversity and a diverse environment that is suitable for my son. And I also look at academics so if my son is performing well I look at schools that have a good academic standing.” (Chinese (Cantonese-speaking) parent)

- “I like the type of people. I pick up my kids from the school, so every time I’m there, I look at the various diverse amounts of kids there, and I really like that.” (South Asian (Urdu-speaking) parent)

We also asked parents to share how they determined if a school was “good,” or if their child was receiving a “good education.” Some of the parents we interviewed prioritized **education quality**, which they interpreted as their **child’s grades**, or the **skill of the teachers**.

- “By seeing her grades, marks, report card... That’s how we’ll confirm that she’s getting a good education by meeting or calling her teachers. That’s how I know she’s getting a good education.”

- “Let’s say the teachers are good. The students are going to get good grades. This shows the school is good too, so my child is going to get a good education.”

- “Teachers, teachers are the most important. Right now the environment doesn’t matter because we are doing homeschooling. The main thing is teachers, and she feels this is the most important because they have two teachers for math. The first teacher, the way they taught was a blessing, she knew her son would pass.”

One (Chinese) parent observed that **Asian American parents are misconstrued** as solely valuing academic achievement:

- “There’s this misconception for Asian Americans that they only look at academics. It’s not the only thing but it is important. You know when the school is good when the kids are hardworking and have goals that they reach and work hard to do their assignments. And there is healthy competition so the students don’t give up so easily. Also having kids with similar academic levels so they can create a community and make

future goals/plans together. It is also important to have good teachers. If they’re good, professional, have experience, and communicate. So you can see there is communication in the school and good leadership.”

“...To see the school and make sure my daughter didn’t have a language barrier. Speaking and relating to the teachers—and them relating to my story and journey—has made for meaningful conversations. That’s what’s made it successful for me.”

— Chinese (Cantonese-speaking) parent

For many, school quality is not strictly academic. Parents are just as likely to value **non-academic extracurriculars, enrichment opportunities, and the general school atmosphere**:

- “I am concerned about the environment in the school and if the school has a playground or not.”

- “I feel like currently kids are very adaptive to technology. They start coding very early. They come up with unique solutions that we as parents are way behind. So I think that any school that equips with a current trend would be a plus.”

- “Extracurriculars are very important to my child. She likes to be involved in all activities, like the dance and gym classes. Many more activities she’s interested in. I want her to balance her activities in school so she can get more opportunities with those extra activities.”

- “In a school, I would like my child to have a good education and some extra activities that she’s interested in.”

- “Every time I see all these kids in a program or event, it makes all the kids very happy, and that’s the thing where you can see how joyful the kids are. That makes me happy.”

Recommendations:

- Expand well-resourced and inclusionary local schools to every neighborhood, especially in

northern Queens and southern Brooklyn, where many AAPI populations are concentrated.

- Utilize language accessible and culturally appropriate outreach through families' preferred channels of communication to ensure that they are not only informed about the full range of school options available, but also fully understand and feel secure about the options that best meet the needs of their children.
- To broaden the ways the DOE presents "school quality," include a metric that measures schools' extracurriculars, such as the number of extracurricular offerings or the percentage of students who participate in an extracurricular activity, on every school's School Quality Snapshots page and factor this into the overall rating. This would allow families who are able to access this tool when selecting schools to more easily consider multiple factors, such as the school atmosphere and the opportunity to participate in non-academic activities.
- Disaggregate NYC School Survey data by ethnicity, home language, ELL status, ability, and socioeconomic status to identify patterns among AAPI communities that may be experiencing school culture differently.

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– Parent

Learning & Assessment

Next, we asked a set of questions on what parents wanted their children to learn in school, how they knew their child was learning, and their thoughts on the ways in which their children were assessed.

Multiple Afghan parents emphasized the need for their children to **learn English** as their priority for surviving in NYC.

- "When they first came, my kids did not know how to speak English. Now they are good enough to really help themselves."
- "If [my daughters] learn English, they'll be able to work and start helping the family with their father. That's my concern."

Parents of younger students in particular valued **play** over only academics:

- "My child is only 4 so I am looking for where my son is able to play and learn at the same time. I think when kids go into kindergarten they expect them to know things already and it puts a lot of pressure on the child. In daycare, he was able to play and learn at the same time and come home and share it with me."
- "I want them to learn social skills, academics, sports, and everything. Just to show that they can be ready for their next grade." (Parent of kindergartener and fourth grader)
- "I want my kids to not just learn academics, but I want them to get the experience." (Parent of kindergartener and second grader)

Other parents elaborated on the significance of **deeper learning, critical thinking, and problem solving**.

- "...That keenness to get the things, learn the things, [my daughter] coming up with her own thoughts. It's more important than just memorizing stuff. And luckily she is getting all those things from her current school, at this age they are doing vinegar, baking soda experiments and all those things. They are doing a lot of hands-on- even online."
- "Learning how to problem solve and being able to think out of the box. Not just be sticking to a type of curriculum. At the end of the day, do they help to adapt to society and work out problems? Being able to have a lot of imagination and think on their own."
- "Problem solving and critical thinking. Creativity is important and also maximizing the child's full potential. Have their own judgment skills and also being able to interact with the teacher. Being able to go back and forth and challenge each other."

Parents stressed real-world skills as key. One parent described the concept as “**world train**”:

- “I, aside from education of course, want the kid to learn skills and essential “world train” to face challenges in the real world. That’s most important for me as well. They are the future and we would have to look after him. They need to develop these skills.”

- “Whatever he or she is learning has to be implemented in her real world as well. Like, I want my child to have talking skills not just at home but in public. Whatever... the kids are learning from the school can be implemented in the real world.”

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– Parent

Others spoke about **character, behavior**, and other skills they felt were necessary in life.

- “First of all, respect for parents and elders is very important for a child to learn in school. Secondly, a child should know how to take care of his or her own health. That’s very important, as in what kind of food to eat and what benefits are for their own health. It’s important for a child to know how to spend time at home. At school there is studying, so how do you spend time at home where you don’t spend too much time on computers?”

- “Good manners. Good education. Discipline. Honesty.”

- “Without learning the basic behavior, humanity, education is useless. We want children to learn intellectual, emotional, behavioral science from these schools. We want them to learn about the humanity and kindness in them. These are very important. We say that students are most concentrated on learning academic things. Lots of crimes are increasing in society — this is the main

reason for that since we are teaching them the books but not the human mind, as far as I can attest.”

We also asked, “How do you know when your child is learning?” Parents largely answered that they saw when their child was learning through their **behavior** and when the student showed excitement for or dedication to school.

- “When my kids come home, I understand from my kids’ behavior if they are learning something good or bad.”

- “Now my daughter’s very excited to do her homework or any other work that the school gives. She tries to do it in the most excellent way possible. She stays up late at night to get everything done that she’s forced to and actually wants to do.”

- “I can tell that my child is learning if they come home from school in these scenarios and classes are online, after classes, if they’re putting in the time to do homework and other tests and actually following up with what they have learned, that’s one of the key things I can tell — oh, if a child’s spending more time outside of class, he/she is actually learning.”

- “My child comes home and does homework and if it’s time for different tests, that’s how I can tell that when he or she comes home, I can see that what’s been taught is actually being implemented.”

- “When he is engaged and responding. And you can tell by looking at him that he’s not in space.”

Parents also appreciated being able to **hear from and connect with their children’s teachers**, in addition to receiving grades.

- “The engagement for a high school child is a little different. He can’t really pick out whether or not she likes the course. In person, it is definitely report cards and parent-teacher conferences. In high school there is an app where parents are able to check grades whenever they want to.”

- “I even get calls from the school saying my child is doing great, which is very important to me.”

- “Her work is up to date, her work is on time, and whenever I talk to teachers, I always get

appreciation. They say, “we are very grateful to have her in class.”

- “I’m relying on the teacher to let me know if my child has improved.”
- “For high school, they’re really punctual for the class. They make sure the students are on time and they post the grades online. There are regular parent-teacher conferences and there is also the PTA. When there are big issues the teachers will personally call. The problem right now is that I can’t directly talk to the teachers or principals, there’s no leadership meetings.”

Parents **preferred grades over test scores** as measures of their child’s academic standing and growth, noting that, while grades are cumulative over a semester, tests are only taken once.

- “According to grades, I am able to tell how my child is being assessed.”
- “I am more focused on the grades because that reflects the whole year...The tests, one can go bad or one can go good. Also, tests can be repeated.”

One parent related it to her own experience, having had a test-focused education at the expense of extracurricular activities, and questioned the utility of end-of-year exams in the first place.

- “I’m from India. They have a board exam for 10th-12th grade and the focus was on the exam. I was a basketball player and I stopped doing that. I was the best in the league and they told me not to do that because 25 years ago sports were not that dominant. It was an extracurricular activity. I was put out from all my activities so I could do my best in the 10th grade but not a single person in the school will have yet seen my 10th grade report card. So what were they used for?”

We also wanted to know what parents thought of **mastery-based grading**, and many responded that it would be an ideal grading and assessment system. However, they also doubted it could realistically be implemented across schools.

- “I would love individual mastery. I would be the first to support that and stop all standardized tests. I like formative assessments instead of summative. There can be some but the future of the child should not depend on it. For example,

they have high school parents, and they have reasons. If on some particular day that child is feeling too low and could not do very well in that region, he should not suffer to repeat it again and prepare to take it 6 months later. Children have to do a lot.”

- “I would love to have individualized assessments. In a perfect world it would be like having a one-on-one but it takes a lot of resources. So I’m just gonna stick with standardized assessments because it’s more realistic. Yes we want our children to be different, but there are standards to prepare them for the future or job readiness. There’s a benchmark we all need to follow, that’s life.”

- “In a perfect world, we would love for everything to be individualized for their child’s growth. But you also have to take into consideration everyone’s nurture, so you would want to see the standards at a specific grade level. There’s common core, critical thinking, and memorization. For him, it was all memorization and when common core came it was very awkward. Teachers that were used to one way, taught the old way. They teach their child the way that they were taught and are told there is a new way in math. From that standpoint, we would like to get more one-on-one instruction but in a public school setting that’s not going to happen.”

Recommendations:

- Partner with CBOs to build trust in the school system and support families who may be deeply unfamiliar or uncomfortable criticizing school environments by intentionally sharing in-language school- and learning-related information of interest in a culturally responsive way. For example, the practices and benefits of mastery-based learning and grading– the fact that families believe this is a more desirable assessment system, but either do not fully understand it or do not believe public schools can offer it, when many do, is in itself telling of the gaps in communication between the DOE and the families it serves.
- Across the school system, transition to a performance-based assessment of learning, through mastery teaching and grading, which measures a student’s competency based on the

attainment of specific skills and content across disciplines rather than averaging arbitrary test scores and grades.

- Eliminate the use of standardized testing as the sole measure for school admissions.
- Communicate with families through multiple means, including phone calls, emails, mail, and other methods, and take into account digital literacy levels.

Family Engagement

The next set of questions inquired about the parents' beliefs on school-parent relationships—and whether their schools lived up to those ideals. Our interviewees shared a variety of perspectives on the role they as parents took in their child's education. Some parents were highly involved; others emphasized that they were more hands-off.

Some parents emphasized **parents' centrality to children's education**.

- "Parents are the first teachers from childhood. When children are here, we have to be their friend. We have to understand and appreciate them. Parents have a very big role in their child's future and support system."
- "I agree that the parents' involvement is a must. They must get involved in their kids' education and the school, what's going on and what they have. If they don't then they don't know what's going on or what their kids are up to."
- "If the parents don't pay attention, then the children don't care. They will do whatever they want, parents should help them because of the situation and spend a lot of time with their kids."

One way parents assisted their children was by **advocating on their behalf** at school. For older students, parents also served as a source of guidance.

- "The parent's role is extremely important. The consensus overall seems to be that schools are basically daycare where it becomes the schools responsibility to raise the child. However, parents provide influence...a lot of schools are politics-driven but as parents you can influence politics by being participants."

- "I give advice to the best of my abilities to my daughter. Now that she'll be moving on to college pretty soon, I give advice on what classes or subjects to take. The mom is basically a guide to her child."

Other parents also had a variety of motivations, including **cultivating independence** in their children, who could travel back and forth from school alone and study without being told.

- "We don't have to say much. We check that they go to school, do their homework, and I've seen a lot of changes in learning from school. He does his own work by himself."
- "I like the fact that my child can come home and just do most of the things by themselves with just the supervision and that they don't need to be told much."
- "I do the maximum— whatever is possible— like dropping them off or picking them up from school. We have trained the child so well now that they don't have to do anything. They can do everything on their own now."

One (Pashto-speaking) mother also said her son, who spoke English, was well-equipped to make decisions for himself. Another parent commented, "Nowadays kids can't skip school because you know they are online right in front of you attending their classes."

We also wanted to know if parents felt that the school cared about their opinions and. Parents were in agreement that **communicating with the school— as in mutual understanding and working together with the school for the benefit of the child**— was important, and most felt that their school did succeed in that regard. One parent answered:

- "Sometimes, when teachers give assignments, they do not know the home situation, while the family does not know the school situation. That's why communicating with school and home are so important. Becoming like partners is so important for the school and child."

Several parents noted that their schools were **communicative in terms of emails, calls, and sending forms**, which instills a feeling of

confidence in the school. **Soliciting families' feedback—and actually implementing it—is the sign of a very receptive administration** that parents appreciate.

- “The school cares a lot. They take our opinions and have changed a lot of things reflecting on the parents' opinions. They take our advice and are virtuous....The school increased the number of college fairs recently. There's lots of sports events having increased in the school.”

“Sometimes, when teachers give assignments, they do not know the home situation, while the family does not know the school situation. That's why communicating with school and home are so important. Becoming like partners is so important for the school and child.”

– Parent

However, many parents also expressed **dissatisfaction** with the DOE and are frustrated when the department fails to heed parents' wishes or work in conjunction with teachers and families:

- “Schools, teachers, principals do hear parents. It's that top level of whether or not DOE hears. Schools and principals are caught in the middle with what they can change and what they can't change.”

- “Right now the problem is that there is too much politics going on in the DOE and the DOE should move away from listening to the politicians and let the parents work with the principals to make these decisions. They're not directly working with the children but the teachers have this experience and they really work hard to advocate for the families.”

- “Right now, the DOE is taking advantage of the pandemic and making these rules the parents don't really have a say in. For example they made the rule about COVID testing. If you don't agree to it and don't sign the letter you can't go to

school. But then they don't tell you when they're doing it, they don't let you bring the kid to the pediatrician to do it.”

Sometimes, communication between the parent and school was hindered by **language & cultural barriers**.

- “A lot of schools didn't have an open door policy where you could go in and talk to the teachers right there and then, and it's hard to get relayed information timely to them, if there's a situation that arises in the classroom. They don't know whether to believe fully what the child is saying, but they don't get to hear from the other side. That becomes a worrisome burden to them, and there's a language barrier to helping them understand where the teacher's aspect is on their spectrum. That's why they want teachers with cultural competencies in their own culture so they know where their worries are, how to relay that information timely, and to connect to somebody in the school. That would help a lot more.” (Chinese (Cantonese-speaking) parent)

- “It's just being able to connect with someone—language barrier is very significant for us. That's a major concern. If the teacher were able to understand our perspective, it'd be a lot easier across the board.” (Chinese (Cantonese-speaking) parent)

Parents had **mixed experiences with teachers** themselves as well. One prevalent concern was whether the teacher was communicative and responsive or not. Helpful teachers assisted the parents in having their questions answered, via interpretation or otherwise, and responded when parents reached out in person, by email, or on calls.

- “We've been lucky individual teachers have been very receptive, and because they're the first line in being the connection for the school, when we're thinking about the interactions or if we're being heard, it's how receptive the teacher is to our child. We feel lucky to have receptive teachers.”

- “I've met with some of the teachers and I've heard very good feedback about my kid, which is very important for me. I've heard my kid is excelling very well in academics.”

- “When I meet teachers that appreciate my brother very much, it feels very good.”
- “I always found them very helpful. They always helped me a lot every time I went to this school. Also, whenever I struggled understanding something, they got an interpreter and helped me to understand better.” (South Asian (Bengali-speaking) parent)

Unfamiliarity between educators and families, though, led to **skepticism and lack of trust** on the part of the parents.

- “Unless the teacher knows the child, how can they contribute to the child’s learning?”
- “I don’t really see the teachers that often. I only see them when they have a parent-teacher conference and it’s only for 15 min. So I don’t really know how the teacher is teaching my kids, I’m just hoping that the teaching style works for the kids. I don’t really have any advice to give to the teacher because I don’t know.”

For parents with limited English, **interpretation services** are crucial in forming a good relationship with the school and accessing information, and while most parents are aware that they are legally entitled to an interpreter, often they are not provided one unless they ask, if at all. Many parents also find reliable interpretation through CBOs, who fill the gap between translation needs and services.

- “It’s important for me to understand what the teacher is saying. If I don’t understand what the teacher is saying, then I can’t comprehend the feedback given for me.” (Punjabi speaker)
- “Whenever we went to school, they did not offer an interpreter and I never thought that there would be, so I take someone with me. (Pashto speaker)
- “The translation service sucks, you call and nobody comes.” (Mandarin speaker)
- “I know they have the machine translators, call translators- it’s not the same.” (Cantonese speaker)
- “My school asked me to fill out a demographic form and it had Cantonese listed. After, I found out the school only provides Spanish and

English.”

Furthermore, even when an interpreter is available, other forms of communication problems sometimes persist due to **cultural gaps**. Parents who lack knowledge about NYC’s education system encounter difficulty in accessing resources and getting involved in the school community, and would be greatly helped by dedicated staff or parent roles. Some parents may also be reluctant to get involved due to previous experiences or the cultural norms in their home country.

- “There was definitely a need for a Chinese teacher or Chinese parent coordinator to unite all the Chinese parents together. And they can also educate the parents about how this education system works and introduce them to more resources. I did want to go to the school to advocate for myself and contacted other Chinese parents. But other Chinese parents worry if they talk to the school it will hurt them.”

And while parents valued their children learning English, they sometimes **doubted the school’s capacity to actually provide the representative and multicultural environment they desired**.

- “I feel like the school didn’t do a good job. There are a lot of Chinese students, but the school didn’t even hire a Chinese teacher. So there is a need for a Chinese translator. I also feel that since the US is an immigrant country, I would like my children to learn their own culture’s language. The school doesn’t even offer that kind of communication to bridge the problems between the parents and the school. [My son] is just totally immersed in English language and culture, but there’s no way to bridge between the two.”
- “My daughter’s school right now has a 90% Chinese population and that’s why the Chinese services are really good. I’m satisfied with the Chinese teacher and translation services. But we are moving far from Chinatown and there might be much less Chinese population so I am concerned about running into a situation...where they don’t have Chinese teachers or Chinese translation services at school.”

However, Bengali, Pashto, and Cantonese speakers also reported **positive experiences where an interpreter was easily reachable and quickly provided.**

- “I always found [my children’s teachers and school staff] very helpful. They always helped me a lot every time I went to this school, and also if, whenever I struggled understanding something, they got an interpreter and helped me to understand better.” (Bengali-speaking parent)

Recommendations:

- Educate and equip AAPI parents to approach school staff and/or the DOE with concerns, feedback, or complaints. Ensure that families, in light of aversions to voicing their opinions on schools, are informed that those who do are protected by the [Chancellor’s Regulations on Anti-Discrimination and Anti-Harassment](#) (also in Spanish, Chinese, & Bangla) prohibiting retaliation against individuals.
- Center diverse AAPI experiences in all aspects of the [culturally responsive & sustaining education \(CRSE\) framework](#), including incorporating AAPI curricular materials into standard academic courses across all subjects and infusing CRSE into accountability measures.
- Allocate additional funding for schools to expand language access support to better reach limited English proficient parents and students. One program that can be particularly effective at schools with smaller AAPI populations is developing a professional pipeline by compensating parents to train and serve as language liaisons for their communities.

Needs & Concerns

We wanted to know what concerns were at the forefront of parents’ minds, and whether their schools were addressing those concerns. In these parent guided conversations, we asked what they hoped their schools would provide for them, as well as what things that were important to them that the schools should keep.

Parents whose children required ELL services largely said those needs were being met, and viewed them a high priority, crucial to the students’ personal and academic success.

“When my child was in pre-k, they gave something called the culture card which waived the fees to zoos, museums, and botanical gardens. Then in 1st and 2nd grade, I asked if they still had it, and the teacher said no because there was no more money for that... I think schools should have more field trips. At least once a month so the kids can learn outside. I also like field trips because the school organizes it so kids can go with their classmates and play with each other and interact.”

– Parent

Academic support – homework help, extra classes, college and career advice, and more resources in general – is also desired, especially in cases where the parent has difficulty helping the student with assignments or guiding them in the college application process themselves.

When it comes to supplementary, co-curricular programs, and programs that are not strictly academic, parents expressed their wishes for a variety of programs, including **emotional supports:**

- “I just wanted to include anti-bullying. I think it’s important to have that topic discussed because again, technology-wise, we as parents may not be aware our kids are being bullied at school... Also, addressing cyberbullying. Now, everything is technology, so making sure there are ways to deal with cyberbullying and protect how kids grow and how kids understand you shouldn’t be bullying each other– I think that’s important.”

- “When my child was in middle school they had this program called peer mediator where the students learn how to mediate and help out their peers. And I believe they should add self-

defense.”

One parent emphasized the value of **cultural experiences, group activities, play, and learning outside the classroom.**

- “When my child was in pre-k, they gave something called the culture card which waived the fees to zoos, museums, and botanical gardens. Then in 1st and 2nd grade, I asked if they still had it, and the teacher said no because there was no more money for that... I think schools should have more field trips. A lot of parents don’t have time to take the children to go so if schools could do it it’d be great. At least once a month so the kids can learn outside. I also like field trips because the school organizes it so kids can go with their classmates and play with each other and interact.”

Most parents who brought up books and supplies also said that their needs were met. As for electronic devices, while most parents said they received the necessary devices, sometimes involvement beyond tech support is necessary due to troubles with remote learning. In 2021, the pandemic and virtual learning created stressful situations for families.

- “One worry I have is that this child isn’t able to go in-person in classroom due to COVID. It’s all around the world, but it just sucks since that in-person learning is a different experience for him. They’re missing out a little bit on that. But other than that, the school’s doing a good job on online learning as well.”
- “I love technology but nothing replaces the human contact interaction. And the only way they can learn that is in a social setting by going back to school when it’s safe.”
- “With school online, I’m not happy. The kids don’t care, the teacher tries to explain and the kids are goofing around. Sometimes the laptop is on their stomach or chest or legs and they are not paying attention.”

In 2021, parents saw virtual learning as less than preferable, but necessary due to the spread of the virus. Schools should use classroom time to the fullest advantage while continuing to protect students’ physical and mental health. The

pandemic adversely affected children and adults, particularly AAPI New Yorkers’. In 2021, Chinese Americans had the highest mortality COVID mortality rate of all patients in New York City, dying at a 44 percent higher rate than white patients, and South Asians had the second highest positivity and hospitalization rates in New York City public hospitals. Moreover, parents are worried about the pandemic’s long-term effects on children’s **mental and emotional health.**

- “I wish we can, like, after the pandemic, our school can provide mental health for the kids, after staying home for more than a year. And they have a lot of issues with remote and the computer. It’s so important to them.”
- “Because of the pandemic, a lot of children and students may have some depressive or behavioral problems so mental health services are really important. And so more should go into that and not cut out social workers.”
- “Before the pandemic, we still have a lot of meetings for the parents. Like mental health.”
- “I keep talking to my kids, I know you have a lot of issues with remote. We have to solve it. We need to make a solution for our problem. Hopefully, the school will provide the mental health for our kids to figure out our problem.”
- “I can see my younger daughter who came into daycare in person, her definite growth. She’ll tell me things she learned at school. With my older child, I sat next to her during classes online, so I know exactly what she learned. But whether she actually took in the information, I can’t tell. I feel it wasn’t as much as if she was in person. That interaction to me feels that’s the reason my younger was able to blossom so much more.”

“Because of the pandemic, a lot of children and students may have some depressive or behavioral problems so mental health services are really important. And so more should go into that and not cut out social workers.”

– Parent

Recommendations

- Implement the recommendations from CACF's [agenda](#) and [Mental Health and Well-being Letter](#) that address the unique needs of AAPI students.

Conclusion

These conversations further demonstrate the fact that the AAPI community is not a monolith descriptively or substantively. **It is an oversimplification, and a disservice to the community, for the DOE to operate under the assumption that all AAPI parents are in agreement on policy** when the reality these responses indicate is vastly different. Although taking the perspectives of those with the loudest voices as those of the whole population is easiest, it disregards those who struggle the most, who are the ones who stand to benefit the most from new policies and investments.

Indeed, AAPI families' greatest needs – for translation, cultural responsiveness, and more – often go unconsidered, especially given the context of the model minority myth, the misconception that Asian American students and families do not need help. Although these families may not always have the language or feel free to name the issues they see, this does not necessarily mean that the school system is doing well by them. After observing this reluctance in our conversations, CACF is interested in exploring how to continue supporting families with unpacking their experiences. Still, hosting conversations like these can help bring underrepresented AAPI voices into education policy discussions, provide learning opportunities for facilitators and participants, and begin to bridge the gap between impacted communities and systems change.

These conversations illuminate compounded barriers that prevent many parents from knowing what they do not know, while the DOE lacks an understanding of these diverse communities and of what questions to ask them. As a result, many families go through great efforts to access information that should be easily apparent, or else

go under- or misinformed. These deficits represent imperatives to communicate better – in language, via accessible mediums, and with an eye towards cultural context – in order to equip families to navigate NYC's complex school system. Through these conversations, we have identified that the DOE is not doing its part to meet families where they are. While these families do their best with what they know, the DOE has neglected to inform and engage them, and in doing so has effectively excluded these marginalized AAPI parents from the body of parents they aim to serve. **Perfunctory public engagement is not true, inclusive public engagement. Ultimately, the DOE must actively consider who is missing from the tables they convene, and do more to reach those populations, for their engagement efforts to be worthwhile and truly representative of the AAPI community.**

Fundamentally, a healthy school system that serves the public good must center and prioritize students who have historically been the most neglected in the school system– which includes the families in this report. Ineffective or unthoughtful “engagement” sessions that don't lead to structurally beneficial and legitimately community-informed actions are damaging to the education system and erode families' trust in the DOE. Our participants were clear about the necessity for a partnership between schools and parents in which the school is responsive (in words and action) to families' needs. As an extension of this, **we urge the DOE to enact our recommendations, which benefit our most marginalized families. The DOE must put the needs of these students first in all decisions, and define their well-being as the measure of the school system's success.**

Appendix

Below are the questions under four categories that we prepared for each of our conversations. Depending on the direction of the conversation and our time constraints, we prioritized some questions over others in some of our conversations.

Choosing a school:

- What do you look for in a school for your child? What have you looked for in the past?
- How do you pick a school?
- How do you know if a school is “good”?
- What do you like about your children’s school?
- What resources does the school provide?

Learning and assessment:

- What do you want your children to learn in school?
- How can you tell if your child is learning?
- What are your thoughts on how your children are assessed in school (grades, test scores, etc.)?
- Some schools use mastery-based grading, instead of traditional grades. This means that students move forward when they show independent mastery of learning goals. These goals are made clear to students at the start, and they receive feedback at each step toward achieving these goals. Some differences between this system and the traditional system are that learning is more individualized, with students being instructed based on their needs, and also that assessment is different from high-stakes tests and is more about growth. Would this kind of system appeal to you? Why or why not?
- Do you think it is important for schools to help children deal with stressors in their lives, or to help them learn about how to make good decisions, how to manage their emotions, and how to form positive relationships?
- Do you think that your children’s level of comfort in their school affects their learning and academic progress?

Family engagement:

- How do you view your role in your children’s education?
- Do you feel that your school cares about what you think?
- Have you met your children’s teachers and/or other staff? If so, did you feel comfortable meeting them? What were they like? If not, why not?

- Do you know about the availability of translation or interpretation at your school?
- Do you get translated communication in your language from your school? Who do you go to if you need an interpreter?

Needs and concerns:

- What is your number one worry when it comes to your children’s education?
- Have you ever expressed your concern(s) to your school? Why or why not?
- What do you really want to see your school do for you and/or your children?
- What are the vital resources and/or services that you need your school to provide? Are they providing those services adequately? If not, why not? What can they do better?

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