More than two years into the pandemic, family engagement has taken on a whole new meaning in education. Parents (this one included) witnessed firsthand how children were learning, what they were learning, and perhaps what they weren't learning, which has largely shaped parents' interaction with schools and teachers. In fact, 93 percent of parents said they will be as or more involved in their children's education, according to results from a 2021 Learning Heroes' survey.1

Yet while parent engagement does not always translate to constructive collaboration, there are ways that it can. Despite the pandemic, parents' expectations remain high in their children's academic achievement. Nine in 10 believed their child was performing at or above grade level, even though only 44 percent of teachers thought most students would show up prepared for grade-level work this school year.

This disconnect may be partly due to the information parents receive about achievement and interpretation. "Parents believe grades are a reflection of grade-level achievement, whereas teachers equate grades with effort more than grade-level mastery," said Learning Heroes' Windy Afflito-Lopez during a session at this year's NASBE Legislative Conference. Yet parents need—and want—access to multiple measures of achievement. They desire a clear picture of their child's achievement.

Learning Heroes' findings showed that building trust and teamwork is critical to meaningful, lasting family engagement. But a strong minority of vocal parents that are working against such principles has overshadowed this, said Kentucky state board member and teacher Allison Slone during the session. "We must create the space to bring diverse voices together, ensure they are heard, and have a conversation to change mind-sets and bring to light the fact we are working towards the same goals," she added. Lori Morrow, Maryland State Board of Education's parent member, echoed that sentiment: "Let's keep students at the center of our work. We cannot get distracted by politics."

Additionally, Learning Heroes' Eyal Bergman presented three pillars for designing effective family engagement:

- **Build trust.** Nurturing trust and centering teamwork in home-to-school relationships are essential to effective family engagement strategies. Trust, like oil in a car engine, is the "lubricant that helps all the moving parts of the education system work together collaboratively," said Bergman.

- **Anchor student learning.** Families and educators care about the same thing: student success and learning. Often, though, student learning is only tangentially related to family engagement in schools. To better support strong engagement, provide parents a holistic and accurate understanding of the situation and invite them to contribute.

- **Invest in systems.** Most educators have not witnessed excellent family engagement and have little pre-service training or ongoing professional development to support it. What infrastructure can we design to support the learning journey of educators and ensure better family engagement?

Creating systems that are centered around inclusivity and building teamwork and trust will eventually quiet the divisive rhetoric that dominates today's headlines and prevents policy leaders, educators, and families from being true partners in providing excellent education for all students.  

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1Learning Heroes, "Parents 2021: Going beyond the Headlines" (December 2021), https://beallearninghero.org/research/.