



A Parent's Perspective

*How can we better support parent & caregiver engagement
to improve children's educational outcomes?*

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LIFT is a national nonprofit dedicated to working with – not for – low-income families to design solutions to end intergenerational poverty. We help provide the skills, tools and resources individuals need to meet basic needs and work toward long-term aspirations. LIFT's work is focused on parents and caregivers of young children because we know the early years are the most critical in determining lifelong health, happiness and success. LIFT believes that by investing in the power and potential of parents we can ensure economic opportunity for children.

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Introduction

Despite the tremendous gains made by the education reform movement over the last several decades, too many students from low-income families are still falling behind their higher income counterparts, and we must ask ourselves how we can do better.

While we know all too well that classroom environment, teacher quality and school testing are critical inputs to a strong education, we also know this isn't the whole story. Research has pointed to more than 100 variables within the school, classroom and home that impact a student's ability to thrive.¹ Recognizing that home is a critical part of the educational success equation, schools across the nation have invested substantial resources in parent engagement efforts. The simple fact is, when parents are more involved, students do better. This manifests in better GPA's, higher test scores, stronger attendance and the development of critical social-emotional skills that prepare students to prosper in school and beyond.² For children who are at greatest risk of poor academic achievement – those living in poverty – parental engagement "can serve as a powerful protective factor for students."³

Yet despite the increased attention – and funding – that has targeted parent engagement efforts, we aren't seeing commensurate progress.^{4,5} So what's standing in the way? LIFT posits that increasing parental awareness or interest is only part of the solution; what is missing is a comprehensive understanding of the barriers that parents face and a set of responsive, holistic solutions that effectively engage not only the K-12 system, but also social service providers, local government and communities to provide parents with what they most need to help their kids achieve educational success.

LIFT set out to explore this question and went straight to the source: parents themselves. We asked the parents we work with every day to share with us their aspirations for their children, the barriers that get in their way and the solutions that would most help them realize those aspirations. This report is a summary of what they shared with us. Our hope is that based on parents' stories and insights we can open a broader conversation about what is missing in the current discussion around parent engagement. From this discussion we can source and collaborate on solutions that will truly move the needle on educational achievement for some of our nation's most underserved students.

¹ Huitt, W., Huitt, M., Monetti, D., & Hummel, J. (2009). A systems-based synthesis of research related to improving students' academic performance. Paper presented at the 3rd International City Break Conference sponsored by the Athens Institute for Education and Research (ATINER), October 16-19, Athens, Greece.

² Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*. Austin: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

³ Lyman, J. (2014). *Impact of Parental Involvement and Poverty on Academic Achievement*. (Electronic Thesis or Dissertation). Retrieved from <https://etd.ohiolink.edu/>

⁴ Watson, G. L., Sanders-Lawson, E., & McNeal, L. (2001). Understanding Parental Involvement in American Public Education. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 2(19), 41-50.

⁵ Child Trends. (2013). *Parental Involvement in Schools*. Retrieved from <http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=parental-involvement-in-schools>

Who are LIFT parents?

LIFT's Listening Tour

A core component of LIFT's model has always been listening to our members. Whether personal, financial or career goals, we hear directly from parents and caregivers about the aspirations they have for their children and how they personally want to succeed so they can build a better future for their children. We believe that part of the problem is that parents are talked *to*, not *with*. This results in solutions that often miss the mark because they were designed without any actual parents at the table. We believe that parent engagement in education can be improved by addressing this critical oversight; by truly recognizing that low-income parents want to be involved and by engaging parents in conversation around the obstacles they face daily.

In January 2016, LIFT launched a listening tour in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York and Washington, D.C. to hear directly from nearly 100 parents about what they need to achieve their families' goals. Then in July, we spoke to a dozen additional parents with children in pre-school and K-12 to ask follow-up questions based on the results of the listening tour.

PARENTS' ASPIRATIONS

Time and time again at LIFT we have heard parents elevate their children's success as their primary goal, so it was no surprise to hear this resounding theme during our listening tour. Parents repeatedly expressed a desire to provide their children with a safe living environment, healthy and nurturing relationships, strong physical and mental health and



83%
are female



36 is the
average age



30%
are African
American/Black



62%
identify as Hispanic
or Latino



53%
are fluent in English



40%
speak basic to
no English



50%
are single or
never married



36%
are married or in a
domestic partnership



72%
have at least one
dependent 8 and under



45%
have received their
high school diploma,
GED or equivalent



65%
are unemployed

high quality education that would provide them with a good job and a shot at a better life. Specifically, parents want to:

- Provide secure and stable housing in safe neighborhoods
- Foster healthy parent-children interactions
- Be strong role models for their children
- Build strong social networks for themselves
- Have access to physical and mental health services and healthy food
- Guarantee high quality education for both themselves and their children

When it comes to their children's education, parents are even more specific with their goals. They want to enroll their children in safe and high quality childcare and K-12 schools. They want their children to be able to access affordable educational enrichment programs and they want to help their children go to and succeed in college. More importantly, parents say they want to be able to support and engage in their children's education. "I want to help them a little bit with whatever I have. I want to give them what I can so they can keep studying and reach their goals. I do my best to get whatever they need for school because I know it's important," said Orlando, a father of two.

WHAT PARENTS SAID ABOUT SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

While research has shown that parent involvement levels ebb and flow, especially in low-income communities, the parents we've encountered over the years at LIFT challenge this notion. These parents see their role in setting their children up for success as crucial, express a strong desire to be involved in their children's education and recognize it's just as much their responsibility – if not more – as it is the schools' to support their children's learning. "It's a collaboration. We are a team," said Edna, a mother and grandmother from Chicago. As a result, these parents make every effort possible to connect with their children's schools and to support their children's learning at home. While there are many different ways to define parental engagement, our conversations with parents focused on communication with teachers and the school administration at-large, involvement in school related activities and support of education and learning at home.

Communication with teachers: Parents frequently initiate communication with their children's teachers. Because many of the schools don't offer transportation to and from school for students, parents check in almost daily with teachers when they drop off or pick up their children. A number of parents also have the cell phone numbers of their children's teachers and are comfortable reaching out to them via text message or phone call when they have any concerns about what is going on in class or questions about homework. In addition to initiating contact, all parents have one-on-one meetings with teachers a few



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times throughout the year to discuss their child's progress. These meetings include parent-teacher conferences and report card releases where parents discuss where their children are doing well, where they are facing challenges and how parents can help.

Communication with school administration: Typically parents have more direct contact with their children's teachers and less with the school administration, though a few parents directly communicate with the school principal. Most of the interaction between parents and school administration happens through written communication in the form of newsletters and announcements sent through the mail, email or in their children's backpacks.

Involvement in school activities: Many of the parents we spoke to are also involved with school activities in their free time. When parents have time after work, school and/or household chores they often serve as classroom volunteers, chaperone field trips, sit and observe the class or participate in school-led workshops for both parents and students.

Support of education at home: All of the parents we spoke with do their best to support their children's learning at home. Parents spend time talking to their children about how the school day went, often on the way home from school. They also provide support and encouragement. Edna repeats personal affirmations every morning on the way to school with the granddaughter she is currently raising: "I can, I will, I must be on green. I will do my best the first time, I will do my best at all times." When they get home, most spend whatever time they can helping their children with homework. If parents can't help children with their homework because they lack the time or face gaps in knowledge, they typically find other

resources. This often includes reaching out to their children's teacher, family members and/or tutors. Families that have access to a computer with internet connection at home often utilize online resources to access additional learning opportunities or find support in areas parents aren't familiar.

WHAT PARENTS SAID ABOUT BARRIERS

While the parents we spoke to are typically involved and engaged in their children's educational experience, many spoke of a number of barriers that prevent them from providing the type of support they would like to offer.

Time: Lack of time is a challenge all parents encounter, but for low-income parents with few resources and time intensive day-to-day activities, time scarcity is exacerbated. Low-income parents with multiple children have to juggle different drop off and pick up times at different schools, often relying on not-so-reliable public transportation. Parents with part-time jobs work unpredictable hours making it hard to plan their time effectively. For the unemployed, searching for and applying for jobs is itself a full-time job, as is attending class and completing assignments for those parents in school. Since many of the parents we spoke with are single parents, they are often doing all of this on their own. This does not include the other responsibilities that come along with being a parent, nor does it leave much time for parents to take care of themselves. When we asked Ruby, a mom of six, what she would change about her life if she could, she said she'd give herself more time. With that time she would "spend it with the kids, relax and get to enjoy myself, which is something I never get to do."

Money: Many of the parents we spoke with lack family-sustaining or stable income. Many are unemployed and those who were employed typically hold part-time jobs or jobs that schedule them on an as-needed basis. As Diamond, a single mom of three, noted, “The job that I have, I’m just working to have some change in my pocket. I’m not making anything really.” The lack of high wage job opportunities and job training resources make it difficult for parents to find better jobs or jobs at all. For young children, the lack of income is a hard thing to understand. “[Two of my kids] are 6 years old right now, so they aren’t really understanding when I say mommy doesn’t have it right now,” said Diamond. Limited income impacts parents’ ability to provide all of the financial resources needed to support their children fully, whether to pay for tutoring services, books or a summer camp. It also means that parents aren’t always able to choose where they live and subsequently where their children go to school.

Information: For a number of parents, lack of information is another barrier they often face. Many confront difficulties trying to navigate the school selection and enrollment process, especially in areas that use a lottery system. “I don’t know who came up with [the lottery system], but I think they need to talk to the parents,” said Kesara, a mother of four from Washington, D.C. The inaccessibility of information often makes it difficult for parents to make informed decisions about where their children go to school, or means that they spend a lot of their already limited time searching for information they can’t easily find. In addition, because so many services for children and parents operate in silos, some parents aren’t aware of all of the different support services that are available to families whether through schools, nonprofit organizations or government agencies.

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– Diamond, a single mother of two

Support networks: Many of the parents we spoke with lack strong social networks and connections to others who could provide them with physical support, encouragement, information or advice. Almost all the parents we spoke with about their children’s school said that they have little to no interaction with other parents. If they do, it is typically in passing in the school halls or in the neighborhood. Very few have support from family members aside from the one or two immediate members they might live with, such as their own parent(s) or grandparent(s). One mom from Chicago explained that one of the reasons she couldn’t regularly attend school meetings when her kids were growing up was because she had no one else to watch them. “In the evenings at the time they had these meetings, I had to feed these kids. Get their homework done. There were four of them...I’m a single parent,” she said.

Stress: Lack of time, money, information and support causes a lot of stress for parents. Even though many of the parents choose to remain optimistic, they often talk about how overwhelmed and exhausted they get because of everything they are juggling. They are constantly having to make difficult choices about how to spend their limited

resources, balancing between taking care of themselves and their first priority – their children. Many don't know of, or are unable to, access the resources necessary to help them cope with that stress.

WHAT PARENTS SAID THEY WANT

Confronting barriers on a day-to-day basis, parents think a lot about what would help them provide the support children need. Listening to parents in our networks we learned that having more consistent school-initiated contact, stronger support networks and more resources for parents would be three tangible areas to focus on in order to improve engagement.

Regular school-initiated communication with parents: Parents recognize the importance of working together with schools to stay informed about what's happening with their children's education. However, many parents we spoke with feel they are initiating the bulk of the direct or one-on-one contact with schools. Often parents spoke of how teachers and school administration only reach out to them on an as-needed basis – when it's time for a parent teacher conference, report card, to fill out paperwork or when their child is in trouble. While parents appreciate these touch points, they often feel they come too late or don't happen regularly enough. "If you have to send me a text, if you have to send me an email, find a way to communicate with us as parents," says Marqueeta, a single mom of three. Even if communication isn't always face-to-face, parents appreciate when teachers regularly keep them informed. This type of communication not only helps parents feel informed about what's happening with their children, but also signifies

that the school and teachers value them and see them as an important part of their children's education. This also makes parents feel like they can turn to the school when they have questions or concerns about what their children are learning or ways to support them at home.

Strong networks: While networks can serve many different purposes, parents often spoke about wanting connections that could provide physical support, like quality affordable child care or family and friend help in an emergency. They also want to connect their children with people who can help them accomplish their goals and serve as mentors and strong role models. Parents want someone else around who can do things like help their children with their homework when they aren't equipped to do so or don't have the time. Because many LIFT members are single parents and/or recent immigrants, they have limited social networks and often don't have much support.

Resources for parents: Parents feel empowered when they know where to find, and can access, the information they need to make informed decisions in all aspects of their lives – whether where to live, where to send their children to school or which jobs to apply for. Some of the schools the children attend, particularly early education centers, offer a wealth of information for parents through parent and family resource centers. These centers not only provide information on things like how parents can help their children with their homework, study for tests or simply continue learning at home, but also resources to help parents find jobs, apply for school and learn about government benefits available to them. Parents value these centers not just because of the information they provide but also because of their convenience.



Through our listening tour we learned all parents want their children to be successful. They want them to get a good education and experience better opportunities than those that were available to them. Parents also recognize that they play a critical role in providing the foundation that their children need to succeed. Countless parents we spoke to know that in order for their children to do well, they need to do well. Parents want to accomplish their own goals, like furthering their education and securing jobs that enable them to financially and physically support their families. They want to have work schedules that allow them to be home with their children after school, they want to have the knowledge to help their children with their homework and they want to be able to provide all the financial resources they need to succeed. For parents,

accomplishing *their* goals means being able to remove some barriers for their children.

While parents recognize that schools may not be able to provide this level of support to parents, they appreciate being linked to other providers who can. And even without the support they most need, parents still try to make it work. The parents we spoke with frequently reach out to teachers, help their children with their homework and do what they can to supplement their learning at home. But sometimes it still isn't enough. In the next few pages you'll learn more about the lives of five parents from Chicago, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., and will hear in their own words how these interconnected elements play out in real life.

Meet the Parents

MARQUEETA

 CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

"I just want my kids to be successful. And it starts with me." As a 28-year-old single mother of three – ages 10, 4 and 2 – Marqueeta just wants the best for her children. When we asked her what she wanted to see in the future, her answer was simple: "I want them to be what they want to be...I want them to do what they want to do and I want to be able to support them financially and physically." The last part, however, is where she is struggling.

Marqueeta has been working as a certified nurse's assistant since 2014 and a home care aide since 2010. She likes the medical field because it allows her to help people, which she says is her calling. While she loves the flexibility she gets working through an agency, lately she hasn't been able to put in the hours she wants. While she requests a 40-hour shift each week, it doesn't always happen. The week prior to our conversation, she had only been scheduled for one 12-hour shift. That's not enough to support a family of four.

But even with modest means, Marqueeta does everything that she can to support her children and their education so that they can succeed. Her oldest son goes to a Chicago public school and her younger two children are enrolled at Educare, an early education center. She has a great relationship with her oldest son's teacher and talks to her three to four times a week about his learning and behavior, but she doesn't love his school. The school is underresourced and she feels that the administration could use more training in communicating with parents. She gets frustrated when her son comes home with sheets of paper instead of textbooks and when she isn't treated with respect. "Acknowledge someone. Let me know that you see me...It's just like you're

walking in somewhere and you're looking for service...how do you want to be treated? Do you want to be acknowledged?" she says, recalling experiences with his school's front office.

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With more income however, Marqueeta could not only move to a better neighborhood with better schools, but she could also provide her children with more resources to support their learning at home. When her oldest son has questions about his homework she helps where she can, but as she says, "I only know so much. I can only teach so much...I'm not the best at math, never was, but I was great at English and biology. That was my thing." Currently she can't afford to get him a tutor, but she's hoping now that she'll finally have a computer and internet connection at home they'll be able to turn to the internet for help – and not just through her smartphone.

For now, Marqueeta's working towards financial stability. She's applied to go back to school, which she hopes will help her get a better paying job. In her free time she goes to Educare's family resource center and applies for jobs. Ultimately she hopes that not only will she get a better job and increase her income, but that her work schedule will allow her to be home when her children are home so that she can be there to help them with their homework, eat dinner together and spend quality time. In the end, her goal isn't really about her, it's about her children: "I want to be financially secure so my babies can be secure."



ALBERTO

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

Alberto is a single father of three children – ages 14, 12 and 9 – and he has big plans for them. He wants them to achieve all the things that he hasn't been able to achieve in life. Having only received formal education through the third grade in Mexico, and being a monolingual Spanish speaker in the United States, Alberto has found it difficult to provide all the financial and educational support he wishes he could offer his children. He doesn't want his barriers to become his children's barriers, and he's doing everything in his power to try to prevent that. What Alberto wants for his children is not only for them to finish high school, but also to go on to college and become lawyers and doctors.

A challenge for Alberto as a non-English speaker is getting all the information he needs to support his children. "I do not feel confident about making decisions. We don't even know the information for ourselves. We don't know what we need sometimes or what our children need. We need support," he says. For this reason he is trying to build his network so that he can learn about all the different opportunities available for his children. Opportunities to support their education outside of school and opportunities to get them scholarships so he can afford to send them college. He wants to be able to connect his children to successful people so they can learn from others' experiences about how they got to where they are. This is one of the many reasons he is very involved at his children's school.

Despite the language barrier, Alberto has volunteered at their school for four years. He participates in parenting classes, attends the monthly coffee meetings with the school's director and has never missed a parent-teacher conference. He does his best to get to know everyone at the school from the administration to the security guards. "It's not just about the teacher, I reach out to the cleaning crew, the kitchen crew, everyone. I want everyone to look out for my kids and share information with me," he

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says. The relationships he has built have helped him stay aware of what's going on at the school and in the neighborhood – including when his children might be engaging with the wrong crowd. They have also served as a great resource during difficult times for Alberto. When his wife left four years ago it was an emotionally difficult time for both him and his children. He was able to reach out to the school to get tools and tips on what he needed to do to ensure his kids did their homework and succeeded in school, despite everything going on at home. When he was injured, a member of the cleaning crew gave Alberto a check to help ease his financial burden.

In addition to building relationships and networks that his children can benefit from, he also recognizes that communication will continue to be a barrier as long as he doesn't speak English. "I want to learn English," he says. "Because I know I can help them more if I can speak the language...Things would be better, I would feel more confident." Alberto has been actively looking to participate in classes but so far they have conflicted with his children's after school and summer programs. Until he is able to find a class that fits with his schedule, he will continue to utilize his network, and the resources available to him, like translators and interpreters to support his children any way that he can.

KESARA

 WASHINGTON, DC

Kesara's first priority for her four children – ages 7, 5, 3 and 1 – is to get them a good education. She wants them to go to good schools so they can master the skills they need to graduate high school and build successful lives for themselves. While Kesara is confident that she can support her children in reaching their goals, the journey doesn't come without challenges.

Navigating the D.C. school lottery system has proven to be a stressful experience for her. "I can't win the regular lottery, now you're making me play with my children's education?" she laments. Finding a school that provides quality education, meets her children's dietary restrictions and fits with her work schedule has been tough. She's put in a lot of time and effort researching and applying to schools but she rarely gets her first pick. And when they do get into a school, she has to make sure that pick up and drop off times for the different schools align so that she can get all her children to school on time, all while relying on frequently unreliable public transportation.

Kesara's days start early and end late. Every morning she wakes up at 5 a.m. to get her family ready. Between relying on the bus, Washington's Metro System and walking to get her children to two different schools, her mornings are

hectic. Once she gets her children to school she often runs errands, completes household chores or volunteers at Bright Beginnings, the early education center her two youngest children attend. Her older kids get home closer to 6 p.m. If she's

not working that night, she eats dinner with her family and helps them with their homework. On the nights she works, however, she typically doesn't get home until midnight.

Managing her hectic schedule is challenging for Kesara. As a parent she knows that she has to be around to support her children, to make sure they are doing their homework and understanding what they are learning. But as a bartender with fluctuating shifts, it can be difficult to find the time. "My job is never the same time. That makes scheduling time with my kids difficult. Do I have time to help them with their homework? Or do I have time to volunteer in the classroom to see what's going on?" she says.

With careful planning, Kesara manages to find some time for both. When she receives her work schedule for the week, she plans out when she can help her kids complete their homework, volunteer at their schools and fit in any additional educational activities. And the school helps too. Her oldest child's teacher uses an app called Classroom Dojo to keep parents informed about how their children are doing, when there are tests coming up and how parents can help prepare their children for class. Even if she doesn't have time to come to the school, she knows what's going on through the app. The school also offers Saturday School, which caters to both parents and children. While the kids are in their session, the parents are learning about different resources they can use to support their children's learning at home, tips on how to manage stress and a number of other topics related to parenting.

But at the end of the day Kesara says, "I wouldn't say it's enough time, but we make it work." If she could change one thing about her life, she says "I would find a job that would start after I have to drop them off and it would end before I had to pick them up, so I would have time to do homework, eat dinner with them, and you know, end the day with them."

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CARLOS

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

Carlos and his wife want their two sons, ages 7 and 17, to excel in life. By providing what they believe to be the basics – housing, food, connections to school and support – they want to help their sons avoid the financial hardships they've faced in life. They want them to get a good education, graduate from college and even obtain advanced degrees.

Carlos and his wife are both employed but Carlos' schedule aligns better with the kids' school schedule, so he's the one who transports everyone. This means waking up at 3 a.m. to take his wife to work and then getting up again at 6 a.m. to get himself ready for work and his kids ready for school. After he drops them off he heads to his job at a sewing factory at 8 a.m.

He likes that that his job provides him with a schedule that allows him to be home when his kids are home and to participate in school related activities. However, his experiences interacting with his children's schools are starkly different. He feels his younger son's elementary school does

a good job of communicating with and engaging parents in their children's education. They send letters home, host coffee nights for parents and even invite parents to see their children's projects displayed in the classroom. "We can volunteer, we help, they invite you participate. We don't have the same experience at [my older son's school]...we are never invited to anything," he says. At the high school his son attends he always has to seek out his son's counselor to see how he's doing.

Another big barrier for Carlos is that he speaks very little English. While his younger son's elementary school has resources to support and engage Spanish-speaking parents, including a website and bilingual teachers, the high school feels like it's at the opposite end of the spectrum. If his son or another Spanish-speaking student isn't around to translate, Carlos can't participate in discussing his son's performance in the few meetings he's invited to attend.

He also feels that the high school doesn't academically support the children enough which is an important point for Carlos, given that he and his wife can't always help at home. "There is not enough support offered to the youth if they did not understand something about homework. Teachers are busy and they don't have time," he says. Carlos only received formal education through elementary school, which makes it hard for him to even support his oldest son's advanced Spanish language class. Carlos would also appreciate more access to information for all parents, regardless of what language they speak. These resources could help him fill in the gaps where he and his wife can't provide the best support.



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ANASTASIA

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Anastasia is a full-time student and a single mother. While completing the final 18 months of her bachelor's degree in business management and entrepreneurship, she is also raising two young children ages 5 and 3. Though Anastasia remained overwhelmingly optimistic throughout her interview, she admitted that it's difficult – "I'm exhausted, I'm tired. It's like, I'm balancing, I'm playing five different roles...I'm just doing so much by myself." But she does it all because she wants to be a good role model for her children. She wants to show them the importance of getting a good education and how that will set them up for success later in life. And so far it seems to be working, her kids are walking around the apartment with her periodic table and asking her to give them homework.

When we asked her what her goals are for her children, she laughed and responded, "I have so many goals for them!" For her 5-year-old, who has hearing and behavioral problems, she wants to get him up to speed so that he can excel and enter a gifted program. For her 3-year-old daughter, she wants her to explore her talents in creative ways. As they get older she wants to better understand and encourage their interests, and ultimately she wants to see them go to college, enter the workforce or become entrepreneurs, like she hopes to become. While she is confident her children will accomplish these goals, she knows it would be easier under different circumstances.

"Sometimes it's kind of hard right now, not having a car and being financially strained, and my schedule is just so so busy," she says. With so much on her plate, Anastasia's day never really ends. She wakes up between 5 a.m. and 6 a.m., goes to sleep around 10 p.m. with her kids, then wakes up again at 1 a.m. or 2 a.m. to catch up on school work. Then, she may sleep an hour before her alarm wakes her up again. While her children are at

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school, she's at school, running errands and doing household chores. When her kids get home she wants to spend time with them, which means she can't do her work until they're asleep. Keeping up with her kids' teachers and making sure that her son is getting the attention and support he needs at school also takes time. And things will only get busier this coming school year: Anastasia will transition to a four-year college, her daughter will begin Head Start and her son will enter kindergarten.

The lack of time that Anastasia faces is compounded by her lack of income while enrolled full-time in school, which means she is unable to hire additional help and must rely on public transportation. "If I had a baby sitter and housekeeper I'd be good...and a car," she says. This would allow her to spend more time with her children, focus on her school work or simply relax.

Until that time comes Anastasia is making it work, trying to strike a better balance and manage her stress. She will remain focused on investing in her own education and becoming an entrepreneur. Ultimately, it's all for them. "School is giving me the foundation that I need to pursue those goals further, so that I can have the time to be there for my children. To be a part of their activities. To be more interactive with the development of both of my children," she says.



We believe that in order to crack the code on parent engagement, we must begin where this report started: by listening – deeply and systematically – to parents' aspirations for their families, the barriers that get in their way and the solutions that they propose.

A Way Forward

Listening to the experiences of Marqueeta, Alberto, Kesara, Carlos, Anastasia and so many other parents like them, it is clear low-income parents want to – and do – play active roles in supporting their children’s education, and they do it in the face of nearly insurmountable odds. Heroically sacrificing their own needs in order to put their children first, these parents conduct a high-wire balancing act every day. They juggle inflexible work schedules, insufficient income, unreliable transportation, limited childcare and tutoring options and language barriers. They doggedly pursue information from schools when it’s not forthcoming, and they work to engage with schools and their children’s after school needs as much as their schedules permit. In short, these parents do their best, and yet even they say that’s not enough. They want to do more, provide more, so that their children are ensured of a better future.

So what can we do better to ease parents’ loads?

To begin, we believe that we must ground our work in a steadfast assumption that parents want what’s best for their children. They **want** to be engaged. And they have good ideas for how schools and the broader community might support them in helping their own children. While many in the movement to provide better education to low-income children are deeply committed to this belief, too often LIFT parents tell us that they do not feel heard or valued by their children’s schools, and in some cases they even feel disrespected. How might parent engagement look different if all relationships with schools began from a place of mutual trust and respect? What does it mean to fully embrace the slogan that “parents are their children’s first and best teachers?”

We also believe that in order to increase parent engagement, we must also push ourselves to think more holistically about the context of kids *and* parents. What is getting in the way of parents engaging more fruitfully? What is going on in families and communities that is creating an environment that detracts from, rather than supports, success in school? Too often conversations around parental engagement begin and end with what the actors within the four walls of the school are or aren’t doing – how principals are involving parents, what information is or is not shared or how teachers are communicating to parents. While all these are important to deepening parent engagement, a school-based focus alone does not explore the underlying reasons, outside the school’s control, that prevent parents from being able to fully engage in and support their children’s academic growth. Time scarcity, financial insecurity, job and housing instability, lack of support networks and inadequate information are all barriers that impact more than just parent’s ability to support their children’s education. They become obstacles their

children must overcome as well. So how can we, as a community of providers that includes schools and other stakeholders like LIFT, think more comprehensively about families' needs? How can we better equip and resource parents? How might we knit together a web of community support that is more seamless than siloed?

We believe that in order to crack the code on parent engagement we must begin where this report started: by listening – deeply and systematically – to parents' aspirations for their families, the barriers that get in their way and the solutions that they propose. While surveys can help us understand parents' perspectives in a more representative dataset, the results are often best interpreted through open, nuanced conversations, where trust is engendered. Through these conversations, we can uncover the root causes that prevent parents from engaging and also identify solutions that resonate more fully with low-income families' realities. As our stories revealed, some educators and early care providers are already doing just that. Many bright spots shone through – technology that connects parents to their children's progress and weekend school hours that offer supports to kids and parents, or even the opportunities for relationship building with a whole host of school staff that provide parents with a wider net of advocates for their children. These details lend an important texture that listening can uncover. Aided by this information, providers like LIFT, along with others, can adapt our solutions to better meet families' needs.

To close, LIFT is no expert in parent/school engagement, and we recognize much good work is already underway that aligns with some of the ideas we raise up here. However, our LIFT parents *are* experts in the lives of their children and they have told us there is more work to be done to effectively engage them and their communities. We also know that these low-income parents are ready and willing to roll up their sleeves to partner with schools, social service agencies and others in the community to do better for their kids. But they need all of us to meet them where they are. Our hope with this report is that we are able to spark a conversation that brings together K-12 educators, youth development organizations, adult-facing social service providers, local government and funders who care about families to discuss the remaining gaps and opportunities for parent and community engagement and school success. Together, and in partnership with parents and caregivers, we are optimistic that we can bring to bear better solutions that will create brighter futures for all kids.

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