

Toward Better Family and Educator Engagement: Lessons from COVID Relief Dollars

Georgia Heyward
Ashley Jochim
Heather Casimere

Despite [decades of research](#) that points to the [importance of family and staff engagement](#), the average school district in the United States is not designed to empower families and teachers to shape school improvement.

The COVID-19 pandemic offers an opportunity to change that.

Pandemic-fueled disruption helped seed ideas with families and educators about how to improve schools, and stimulus funding requirements for public input [gave them an opportunity](#) to communicate their vision as part of historic federal investments in K-12 education.

However, absent better approaches for involving families and educators, school systems risk losing valuable supporters in the work of school improvement and COVID-19 recovery.

Between January 2020 and September 2021, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) conducted interviews with parents and teachers in four New England high schools and analyzed district communication in 86 New England school systems (see inset, Data Collection and Methods).

Echoing [national trends](#), few school systems communicated their plans to engage families and educators around stimulus investments. Where they existed, engagement strategies were often inequitable and failed to give families and teachers the support they needed to offer actionable input.

School systems interested in better approaches to engaging the public must not start from scratch. Past experiences of including educators, families, and communities in the work of school improvement offers many lessons and suggests new, creative strategies worth trying.

Future state and federal efforts to encourage family and educator engagement must do more than simply require school systems to engage stakeholders. They must empower school systems with tools and creative strategies to reach families and other community members and to effectively translate their input into action—and they must hold systems accountable for doing so.

Data Collection and Methods

From January 2021 to June 2021, in partnership with the Barr Foundation, CRPE conducted longitudinal interviews with ten teachers and seven parents across four school systems in the states of Connecticut, Rhode Island, Maine, and Massachusetts. Our sample was composed of three school districts and one Charter Management Organization (CMO). These school systems were selected because they had a higher percentage of students receiving free- and reduced-price lunch than the average district in their respective state, and a higher than average percentage of students of color. Educators in our sample taught a range of subjects, including math, English, science, srt, library science, and career and technical education. Three of the seven parents in our study had a high school student with a disability. Researchers interviewed families and educators for 30 minutes each month using a semi-structured protocol.

CRPE also maintains a regional district response database that tracks 81 districts and five charter schools in New England. Our sample, though not statistically representative, includes the largest districts by enrollment in each state and a representation of high-poverty, rural, urban, and suburban districts. The average sampled district has 18% of students living in poverty, and 40% of the districts have more than 20% of students living in poverty. Sources include publicly available information from district websites, social media, and news media reports. The data we used for this report were collected in April 2021 and September 2021.

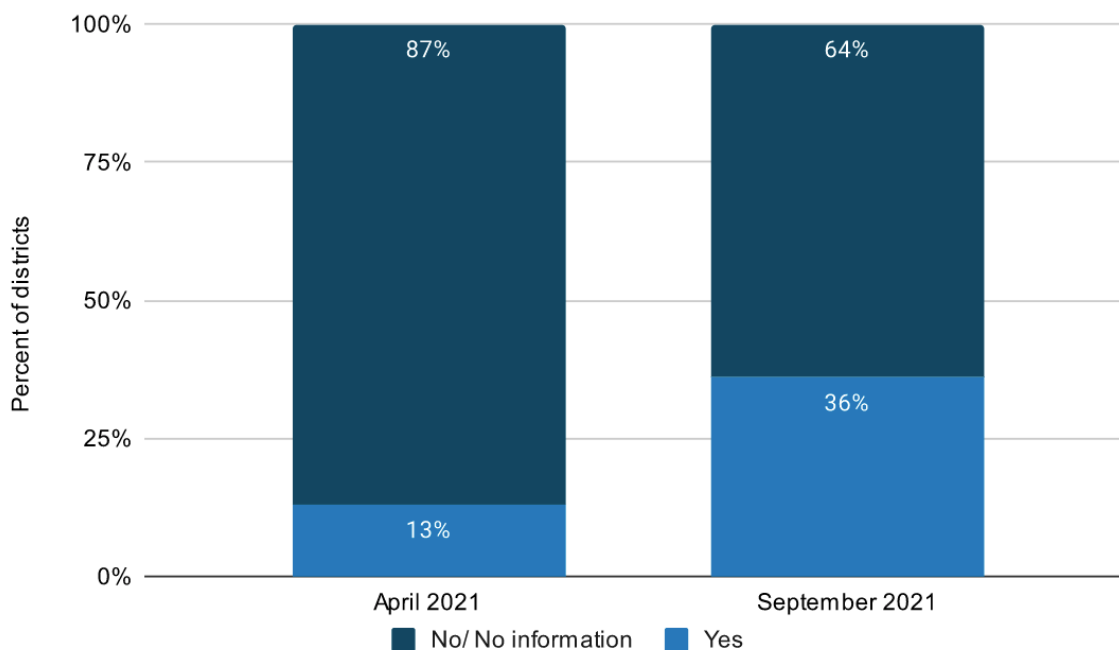
Few districts are taking full advantage of stimulus funds to engage families and educators around their school priorities

Across New England, federal requirements for districts to seek input on how stimulus funds would be used spurred schools to engage families and teachers around their priorities. But while the number of districts seeking public input did increase, our data suggests limited reach and ineffective methods.

In New England, district engagement was limited and inequitable

Between April and September of 2021, the number of districts seeking public feedback on Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) dollars from families and community members nearly tripled (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Percent of districts publicly communicating about efforts to engage their community over stimulus spending nearly tripled between April and September 2021

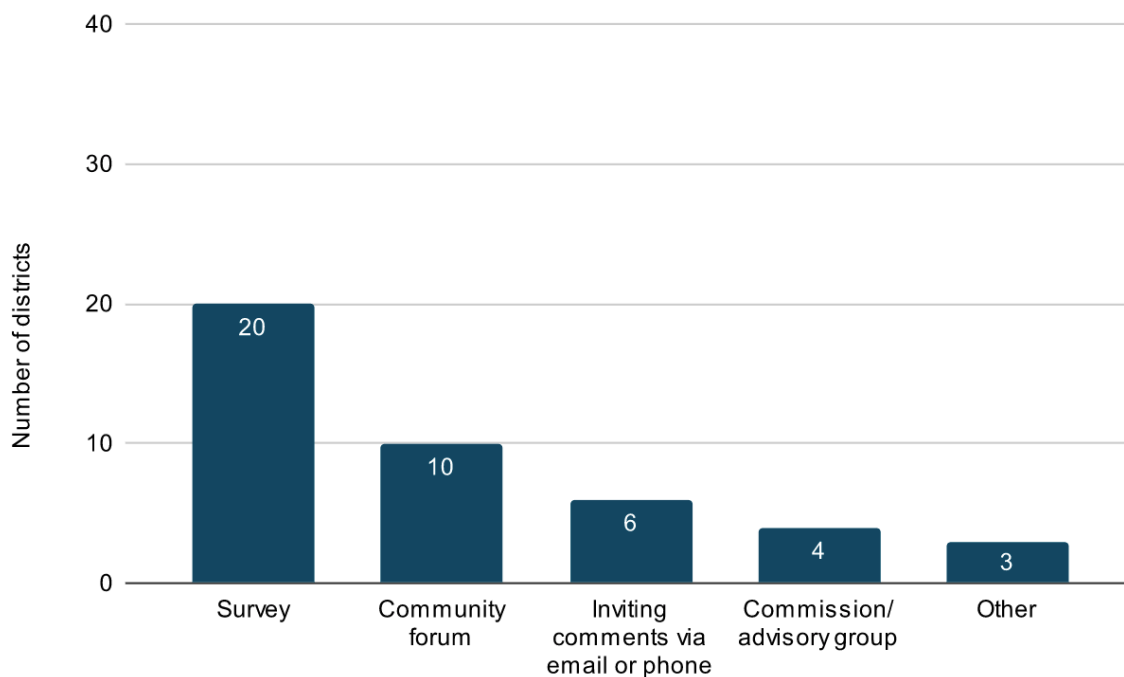


Source: CRPE analysis of publicly available information for 81 public school districts and 5 charter schools in the six state New England region.

While federal COVID relief funding legislation required districts to seek public input, two-thirds of districts in our database sample offered no public information about how they fulfilled this requirement. As one parent in a rural Maine district noted, “Parents were not informed, let alone engaged.” A [national survey](#) found this parent’s experience was all too common: Just one in five parents said schools sought their input on how they planned to use COVID relief funding.

Thirty-four out of 86 districts posted information about seeking input on the use of stimulus funds in either April or September. The most common method was via a survey (Figure 2). Only five districts explicitly included teachers in their community outreach.

Figure 2: Outreach methods varied, but districts most commonly used a community survey



Notes: (1) Of the 34 districts that communicated how they gathered input, four used multiple methods. Our count is by method, not district. (2) “Other” refers to focus groups and outreach to community-based organizations

Source: CRPE [analysis of publicly available information](#) for 81 public school districts and 5 charter schools in the six state New England region.

While surveys can be a good instrument for collecting feedback, other district [approaches were not designed to equitably reach](#) all families and community members. [Past experience suggests](#) that forums, requests for families to contact district leadership, and advisory groups only reach a limited number of families. These methods are less likely to capture input from families who do not trust the education system, families who are not already closely engaged with the school, or families who speak a language other than English.

Ideally, districts would use [multiple outreach methods](#) to capture feedback, but this was only true among four out of the 34 districts that communicated how they conducted outreach. One of those four, [Windham Public Schools](#) in Connecticut, sought community input using a survey, a dedicated email address, and public forums. The district created a webpage and used social media to let families know about the opportunity to provide feedback.

Only five out of the 34 districts that communicated their outreach methods sought input from both families and teachers. [Champlain Valley School District](#) in Vermont used the same survey for parents and teachers. Also in Vermont, [Windsor Central](#) created family, student, and teacher advisory groups to provide input in the spring of 2021, informed by a needs assessment the district conducted in February of that year.

Teacher interviewees in our study said that school leaders asked their opinion about stimulus funds and planning for the 2021-22 school year informally via email or during hallway conversations. In general, however, planning was centralized at the district level. This created inequities in how funds were distributed. In one district, the first round of ESSER funds was used primarily for new outdoor flood lights for the athletic field at the high school in the wealthiest part of town (ostensibly for social distancing). Even though successive funding decisions were more transparent, there was only, “a [weak] attempt at involving teachers,” as one teacher put it.

Neither interviews nor a review of district communication identified any New England district that informed people how their feedback was incorporated—or why it wasn’t. Communicating this is a [common best practice](#) when seeking input about a person’s experience, and failure to do this during past education reform efforts has [fostered community mistrust](#).

Districts didn’t structure engagement to capture actionable feedback

Whether or not teachers and families said they wanted to offer input about the use of stimulus funds or about 2021-22 school year planning, they all said they had limited time and energy for such an endeavor. [Lack of capacity](#) is a common barrier to engagement in school improvement efforts, and families and teachers are [especially burned out](#) going into a third school year defined by COVID-19.

As one teacher in Boston put it, “I think we’re kind of conditioned to not plan for the future anymore. I think what this year has taught us is that two weeks is about as far out as we can actually see.”

Parents and educators we interviewed also noted that when they were asked for input, they were not given parameters for what kind of information administrators were seeking. We could see the pitfalls of this approach. When we asked open-ended questions about how stimulus funds could be used or what their school should be thinking about for the 2021-22 school year, the ideas could be disconnected from a larger strategy to support COVID-19 recovery or school system transformation.

At one school, teachers insisted that funds should be spent on updating classroom furniture. Another common request was for smaller class sizes. Said one teacher in Rhode Island, “I would probably hire one or two teachers per core class...an additional math, an additional English, science, and social studies teacher.” But when pressed, this teacher admitted that there was no one to hire—a common issue across the nation as school systems [face historic staffing challenges](#). And several teachers wanted their district to continue support for family housing, food, and health, even though districts had no funds or infrastructure to continue such programs.

One district that did set some boundaries around its request for input was Holyoke Public Schools in Massachusetts. The district [created a survey](#) with information about initial ESSER investments and then asked for suggestions about ways to invest additional funds. The district offered categories of ways it was willing to spend funds and families were asked to select the top five. There was also a write-in option for families to capture common themes the district had not foreseen.

How school systems can leverage ideas and energy to catalyze recovery from the pandemic

While the pandemic and accompanying stimulus funds offer new motivation to engage in conversation about improvement efforts, previous experience suggests that school systems need to put strategic effort into making family and community engagement effective and equitable. School systems that want to be more inclusive of and capitalize on the good ideas of families and teachers should consider the following strategies

Align engagement with district priorities: When school system leaders ask families and teachers to engage in any school improvement effort, it is important to [lay the groundwork](#) by establishing common visions and expectations. [Recent research](#) suggests that teachers and families have slightly different priorities for their education coming out of COVID-19—and they believe they are at odds with each other even when they are actually aligned. This makes structured communication even more important for school systems as they seek to incorporate input from across the school community. School systems can implement surveys or other methods of collecting input using a set of vetted priorities that align with district priorities and research-backed practice. Asking families and teachers to rank a set of vetted priorities, like Holyoke Public Schools did, can be a good way to solicit input that is likely to be used. Adding an open-ended question can help system leaders identify good ideas or common concerns that they didn't consider.

Keep asking families and teachers for input: Not everyone will have the desire or capacity to deeply engage in setting priorities or making resource decisions. But there will be those who do. Schools should consider [ongoing family and community engagement strategies](#), such as standing committees composed of school leadership, research staff, parents, teachers, and community-based organizations that work together to design methods of getting input, analyzing findings, and deciding how to respond. Boston Public Schools offers an [example of this](#). [Closing the feedback loop](#) is also critical for building trust with members of the public who invested time and resources into providing input. [They will want to know](#) how their input was used or given the courtesy of an explanation as to why it couldn't be.

Use cultural brokers to make family engagement efforts more equitable: Despite a district's best intentions to engage families, this is often not an area of expertise—[schools typically lack](#) staff, knowledge, and capacity to effectively engage families and teachers, especially when it comes to [engaging families from marginalized communities](#). School systems can consider using existing staff, parent volunteers, or a community-based organization to act as a [cultural broker](#) between the school and families, [especially for those most under-resourced](#) or least likely to feel comfortable providing input. Cultural brokers can help pass information between the school system and families, increase awareness of engagement efforts among families, and elevate input from families about how to make engagement efforts more convenient or accessible. Existing community-based organizations can be especially effective. In Maine, Portland Empowered sponsors the [Shared Space Cafe](#), which empowers families to participate in small group discussions with other families and school staff about education. The organization plans to use the model to support action-oriented community engagement around stimulus spending.

Empower families: In some cases, organizations that act as cultural brokers to empower low-income families and families of color by providing the knowledge and skills to effect change in their schools and districts. This can effectively encourage buy-in by placing these families in the driver’s seat, rather than the [allowed-in](#) dynamic that shapes many engagement efforts and often excludes families from historically marginalized communities. New England organizations like [Faith Acts for Education](#) and [Massachusetts Parents United](#) empower families to advocate for change in their school and state education systems. Even without an existing nonprofit to facilitate these programs, school systems can still invest in [similar efforts](#) to empower families as advocates.

Leverage school leaders: Principals can be a powerful vehicle for directly engaging families and teachers by surfacing priorities and possible solutions and closing feedback loops. Schools that have flexibility in how they use financial and staffing resources are in a better position to gather public input and adjust their plans in response. Some large urban districts [have done this](#)—setting aside a portion of stimulus funds for school discretionary use. Our interviews suggest that teachers would appreciate more transparency, which would make it easier for them to engage in ongoing discussions. Using [established, research-backed frameworks](#) can help school leaders understand their roles as chief engagement officer, as well as support teachers and families in working with one another.

Use states to build capacity: While federal requirements ask districts to engage community stakeholders, states can do more to set a new, higher bar for public engagement around education spending by requiring evidence and supporting examples that ensure districts do more than the bare minimum. States can actively support more effective strategies by identifying national or local examples and provide assistance to implement them. States can also seed innovation through competitive grant programs and sharing results of promising efforts.

The mandate for family and educator engagement in federal stimulus programs represents the latest in a long line of efforts to increase opportunities for families, educators, and other members of the public to influence school improvement efforts. Learning from past experience and leveraging creative new approaches is essential if school systems are to be more inclusive of and fully utilize the ideas of families and educators for the future of education.