

**The Squeaky Wheel Gets the Grease:  
The Differential Impacts of Caregiver Advocacy  
in the Elementary Classroom**

Nellie May Building Equity Bridges Grant  
Cambridge Public Schools  
Cambridge, MA  
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# OUR STUDY

## Background

We are both white, cis-gender, female, middle-class, native English speaking Cambridge Public School District (CPSD) educators deeply invested in creating a more equitable and just school system. Over the 2018-2019 school year, we worked as participatory action researchers through the Nellie May Building Equity Bridges grant. We were charged with examining root causes of inequity in our district, and making recommendations for action to address those disparities.

Rose has been teaching fifth grade in Cambridge for five years, and Nili has worked in the district first as a classroom teacher and later as a building math coach for a combined total of eight years. Both of our elementary schools, like most in CPSD, are attended by a heterogeneous mix of families. We teach students from a variety of racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, as well as a wide range of socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds. In Cambridge, it is not unusual for a student whose family owns multiple million-dollar properties to sit next to a student whose family struggles with homelessness. Some students' parents are deans at Harvard, while other students' parents work hourly shifts at convenience stores. A classroom of twenty might contain students who speak eight different native languages, practice five different religions, and hail from twelve different countries.

We were both drawn to work in Cambridge in part because of the rare opportunity to teach in classrooms that reflect the diversity of the United States. While our city and schools still struggle to resist the forces of economic and racial segregation, conscientious efforts here have resulted in classrooms that are significantly more diverse than many in the country. But even though our classrooms may appear harmoniously multicultural, we know that non-segregation does not itself lead to integration, or equitable practices. We are all too aware of the achievement and opportunity gaps that open up early in elementary school and widen as students move through our system, leading to disparate--and stubbornly consistent--outcomes.

Rightfully, there has been great attention in our district focused on improving outreach to families of color, low-SES families, and English Language Learner (ELL) families as a means of closing achievement gaps. We fully support these efforts to help schools and educators identify implicit biases that impact our work with families, reach out to families in creative ways, offer accommodations to support the needs of working families, and find ways to help all families feel a greater sense of belonging in our schools.

However, we believe there is an equally important factor in perpetuating inequities within our schools, one that has been largely ignored by district initiatives: the outsize investment of time,

resources, and energy dedicated to supporting the demands of privileged families in Cambridge. We are particularly interested in how communication with these families plays out with our youngest students, when families are the most involved in day-to-day classroom life.

While we had ample anecdotal evidence from our schools that parents with privilege demand a larger investment of teacher time, we recognized that our own experiences might not reflect those of others in the district. Therefore, we wanted to survey a larger sample of Cambridge elementary teachers to determine whether the trends we observed in our buildings applied more broadly to the district as a whole. Guided by the work of Amanda Lewis and John Diamond (2015)<sup>1</sup> and Margaret Hagerman (2018)<sup>2</sup>, we set out to explore the classroom impacts of opportunity hoarding among privileged sub-groups in CPSD.

### Opportunity Hoarding

Pamela Barnhouse Walters (2007) defined opportunity hoarding as “a behavior that reserves for one’s own children the best possible educational opportunities, the inevitable flip side of which is excluding others from those same good opportunities” (p. 17).<sup>3</sup>

### Research Questions

We hoped to address the following questions through our research:

- In what ways, if any, do classroom teachers in CPS elementary schools talk about the words and actions of parents?
- How, if at all, do these teachers perceive parents’ words and actions to influence their classroom practices and relationships?
- How, if at all, do these teachers perceive the words and actions of white middle- and upper-class parents as distinct from the words and actions of families without racial or socioeconomic privilege?

To address these questions, we narrowed our focus to a particular type of caregiver/teacher communication: the “parent-initiated contact.” This included communication in-person, on the phone, over email or text message, **initiated by the parent or caregiver** rather than by the

<sup>1</sup> Lewis, A. & Diamond, J. (2015). *Despite the Best Intentions: How Racial Inequality Thrives in Good Schools*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Hagerman, M. (2018). *White Kids: Growing Up with Privilege in a Racially Divided America*. New York, NY: NYU Press.

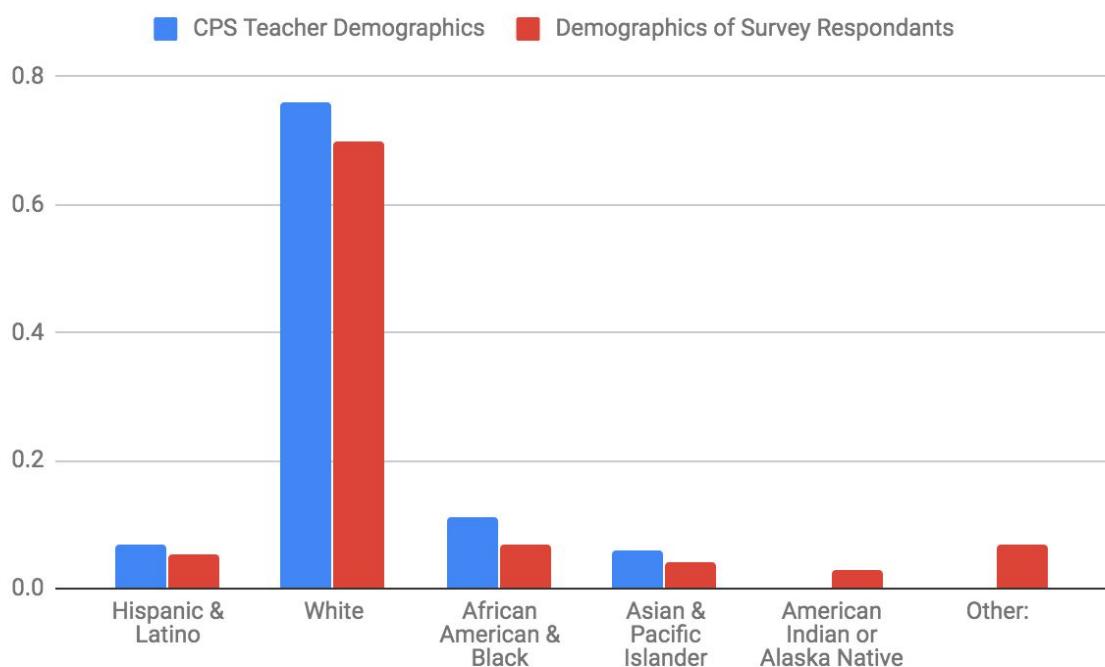
<sup>3</sup> Walters, P. B. (2007). Explaining the durable racial divide in American education: Policy development and opportunity hoarding from Brown to vouchers. In Paper Presented at Conference on the Social Dimensions of Inequality sponsored by the Russell Sage Foundation and Carnegie Corporation, UCLA.. See also, Sattin-Bajaj, C. & Roda, A. (2018). Opportunity hoarding in school choice contexts: the role of policy design in promoting middle-class parents’ exclusionary behaviors. *Educational Policy*. Download from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0895904818802106?journalCode=epxa>

educator. In looking closely at these types of interactions, we hoped to better understand the similarities and differences in how families approach their children's teachers.

## Sample and Methodology

Using an electronic survey<sup>4</sup>, we reached out to all 267 lead elementary classroom teachers across the twelve elementary schools in Cambridge. Our survey was detailed and required a commitment of time; despite this, 99 teachers began the survey and about 70 (26%) completed it. Responses were distributed evenly across the grade level bands (JK-2 and 3-5). The racial and ethnic diversity of the survey respondents also mirrored that of Cambridge Public Schools as a whole.

Demographic Comparison of Cambridge Public School Teachers<sup>5</sup> and Survey Respondents:



## Caveats & Limitations

Our data, and interpretations thereof, should be considered preliminary. Due to the accelerated timeline of the project, we haven't yet analyzed the data as deeply as we would prefer. We hope to build on these initial findings over the course of summer 2019.

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 1

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cpsd.us/cms/One.aspx?portalId=3042869&pageId=33736973>

One area in particular that calls out for further interpretation and analysis is the interaction between educators (primarily white, female, and native English-speaking) and families from differing backgrounds. While our focus in this report is on the disparities in communication and advocacy among different types of families, we acknowledge that educator identity and bias (implicit and explicit) is likely a driving force in families' comfort reaching out to schools.

We also must acknowledge that demographic data about families, and inferences drawn from those data, are based on teacher perception in this study. We intentionally chose to survey teachers (rather than families directly) because we suspected teachers would have a broader perspective on the differential impact of a range of family communication approaches. One shortcoming of this methodology, however, is that educators are sometimes unsure about the demographics of families in their classrooms. For example, a teacher might inaccurately identify a family as lower-SES or might not know the racial self-identification of a multiracial parent. Where there are gaps in our understanding of demographic patterns among families in this study, they are often due to incomplete information from teacher reports.

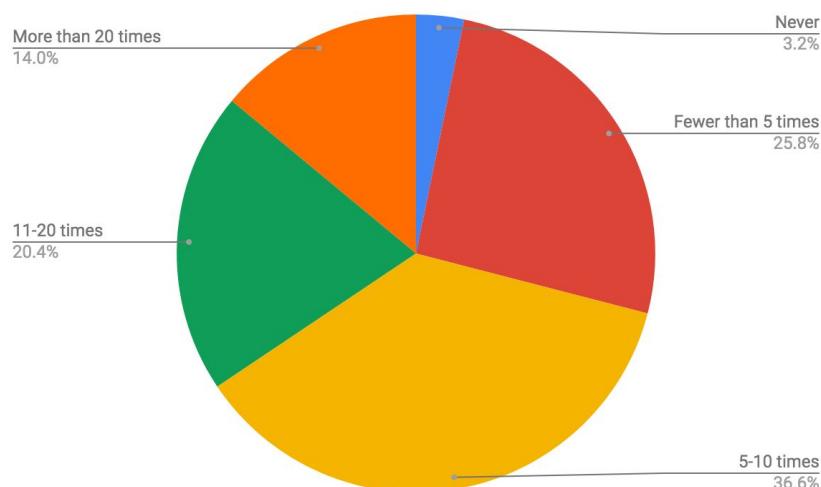
Lastly, we acknowledge that while we were able to achieve a fairly high response rate among our survey-takers, we have no way of knowing whether these seventy responses are representative of trends in every school building. In order to increase teachers' sense of anonymity and safety, we opted not to have them identify in which building they worked. So while our respondents are demographically representative of our elementary teaching force, it is possible that trends vary building to building. For this reason, we recommend individual schools consider using our survey, or a modified version thereof, to reflect on patterns within their building.

# QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

Our survey results contain a wealth of quantitative data which we are continuing to analyze. Here are a few data points that stood out during our first analysis.

## Frequency of Parent-Initiated Contact

Teachers were asked to estimate how often parents/caregivers had initiated contact with them over the previous month. A typical month contains approximately 20 school days. Over a third of the teachers estimated that parents had reached out to them more than 11 times during the previous month, i.e. at least every other day, and 14% of teachers estimated that they had been contacted more than 20 times over the past month, or more than once per school day.



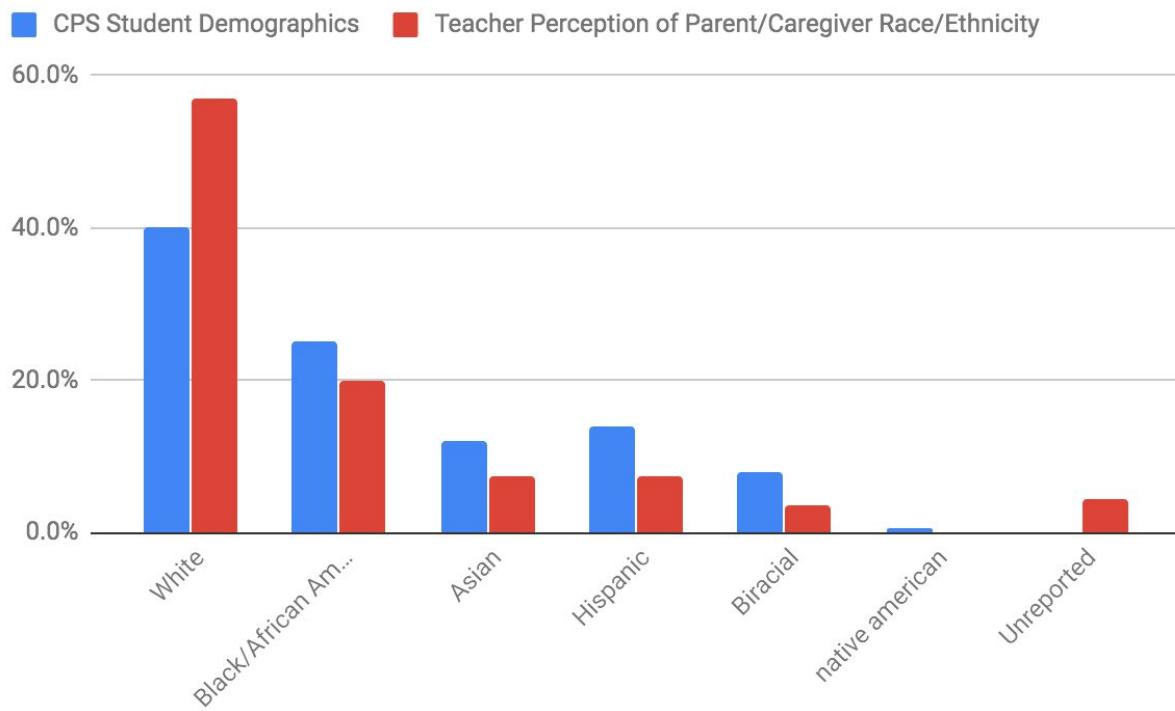
## Demographics of Parent/Caregiver Initiated Contact

### Race/Ethnicity:

On the survey, teachers were asked to describe the *three* most recent contacts that parents/caregivers had initiated. Teachers described the nature of the contact as well as their perception of the demographics of the parent/caregiver. Through this question, information about 200 parent/caregiver initiated contacts was obtained. The data make clear that parents of all racial/ethnic groups reach out to teachers. This is important to note as it argues against the cultural myth that families of color do not reach out to teachers. However, the percentage of parent/caregiver initiated contacts from white families was *disproportionately high*. According to the Massachusetts Department of Education, 40% of Cambridge students identify as white.<sup>6</sup> In

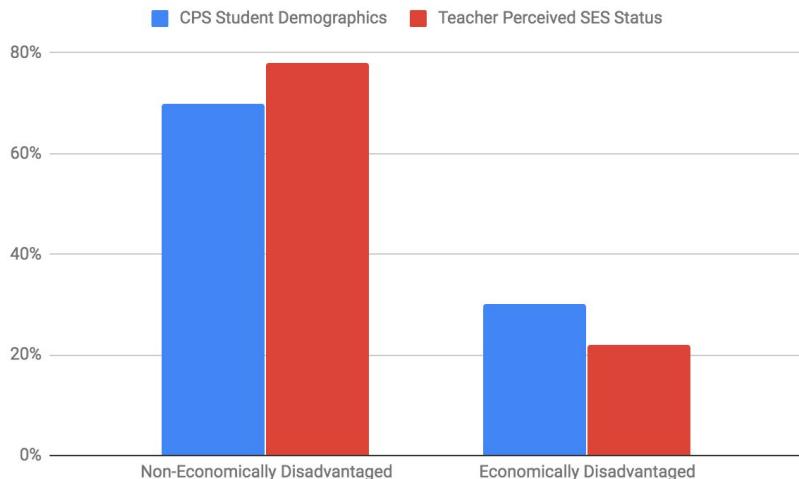
<sup>6</sup> <http://reportcards.doe.mass.edu/2018/DistrictReportcard/00490000?Length=8>

comparison, teachers described 57% of the parents/caregivers who reached out to them as white.



#### *Socio-Economic Status:*

When describing the demographics of their recent contacts, teachers were less likely to share their perceptions of parent/caregiver socio-economic status than they were to share their perceptions of race/ethnicity. For approximately 30% of the recent contacts, teachers did not provide any descriptor of a parent/caregiver's SES. This could have been because teachers weren't sure or because it felt more challenging to describe this aspect of parent/caregiver demographics. When teachers did include information about a parent/caregiver's SES, they used a variety of words to describe this perception. Descriptors that indicated teachers perceived a parent/caregiver as economically disadvantaged included words and phrases such as: free or reduced lunch, low income and low socioeconomic status. Descriptors that indicated teachers perceived a parent/caregiver as economically advantaged included words and phrases such as: high SES, paid lunch, professional family, academics, and wealthy, among others. Of the 139 contacts for whom teachers provided some kind of SES descriptor, we again see that a disproportionately high number of families who are economically advantaged initiated these contacts, though the difference is not as great as it is for race/ethnicity.

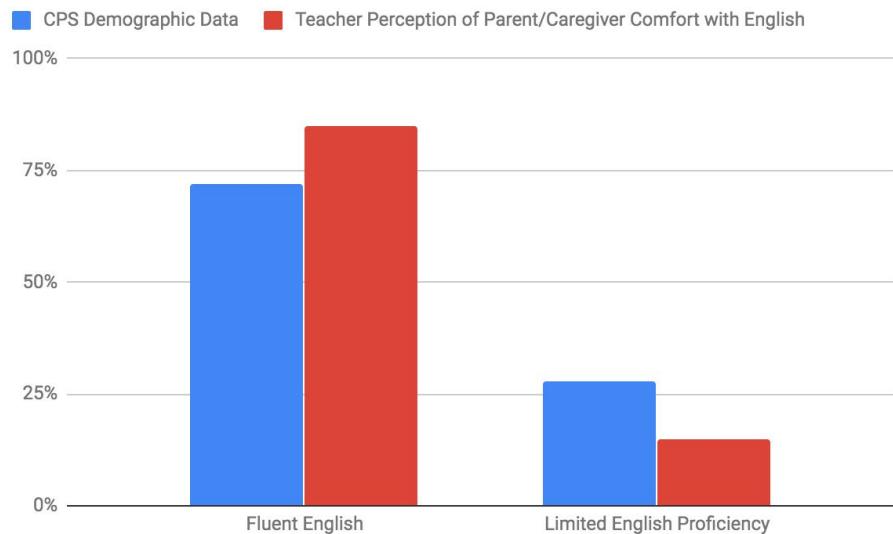


#### *Language:*

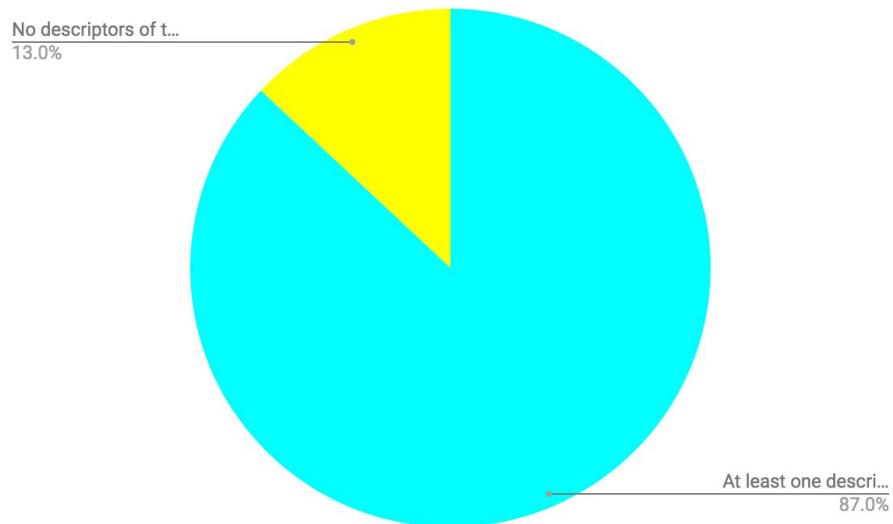
A third category we analyzed was that of language, which we know is critical to strong communication. Parents/caregivers who speak fluent English are likely to have an easier time communicating with their children's teachers. As with SES information, this data was missing from a substantial number of the contacts: 19%. Therefore the percentages below reflect the data only for the 162 contacts that did include primary language information. Teachers used a variety of ways to indicate that parents/caregivers had limited English, typically either stating that the student was ELL or listing the language that the parent/caregiver spoke. As of 2014-2015, the most recent data we were able to find, 28% of Cambridge students had a first language other than English.<sup>7</sup> We are assuming that if the students' first language is not English, then the parent/caretaker is likely to have limited English proficiency. While this may not be true in every case, it seems the best data we have about parents/caregivers' language rather than the students'. As with the other two areas of analyses, a disproportionately high number of English speaking parents/caregivers initiated contact with teachers.

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<sup>7</sup> 2014-2015 Student Data Report Cambridge Public Schools:  
[https://www.cpsd.us/departments/office\\_of\\_elementary\\_education/student\\_data\\_reports](https://www.cpsd.us/departments/office_of_elementary_education/student_data_reports)



A slightly finer-grained analysis of the teachers' demographic descriptions of parent/caregiver-initiated contacts reveal another important trend. Of the 200 contacts, 87% of them included at least one descriptor that indicates privilege. In other words, 174 of the contacts were described as white, economically advantaged, and/or English speaking. While we do not have district data to compare this to, given our knowledge of the Cambridge Public School population, this indicates that some of our most vulnerable families, non-English speaking families of color living in poverty, may be severely underrepresented among the parents who typically contact educators.



## Reasons for Parent/Caregiver Initiated Contact

We asked teachers to indicate the reason(s) that the parent/caregiver initiated contact. Teachers were provided with a checklist of reasons as well as the option of an “other” category and the opportunity to check as many reasons as applied. The table below lists the reasons provided on the checklist as well as data about how often that reason was chosen. The total sums to more than 200 since teachers could check more than one reason per contact.

**Table 1**

<b>Reason: The parent/caregiver wanted me to...</b>	Number of contacts that this reason described	Percentage of contacts that this reason described
<i>Be aware of a child's need</i>	80	40%
<i>Follow up on something that happened in school</i>	70	35%
<i>Provide information about their child</i>	99	50%
<i>Schedule a meeting outside of the regular conference time</i>	40	20%
<i>Provide an accommodation for their child</i>	18	9%
<i>Excuse their child from a classroom expectation</i>	15	8%
<i>Other</i>	33	17%

Several reasons stand out as most common. Approximately 50% of the parent/caregiver initiated contacts requested that the teacher provide some kind of information about the child, 40% of the parents/caregivers wanted to inform teachers about a child’s need, and 35% of the contacts were following up on a school incident. All three of these indicate a desire among some parents/caregivers for a high rate of information exchange with teachers.

It is notable that 20%, **one out of every five** parent/caregiver initiated contacts, requested that the teacher meet with the parent or caregiver **outside** of the regular conference time. Our data does not show whether each teacher accommodated the request and, if he or she did, the length of the resulting meeting, but these types of requests have the potential to use an enormous amount of a teacher’s scarce time resources.

# EMERGING THEMES

As we began to sort through the reams of stories and reflections from classroom teachers, a number of themes emerged. *For most of the themes we identified, there were 10-20 teacher quotes that reflected the theme.* The quotes we share below are representative but in no way exhaustive.

## Theme 1: Helpful but Asymmetric Information

Teachers believe that the information families share can be helpful, but there is an asymmetry in teacher knowledge that advantages already privileged children and families.

*“The more parental support I have, the more success the student has in the classroom.”*

*“When I am made aware of students’ needs, I am better able to work to meet their needs. Students whose grown-ups advocate for their children typically end up with more resources/services.”*

*“I tend to take more time observing students [whose] parents are asking or looking for something more or different.”*

*“These contacts impact how much I am thinking about the child - inevitably, because I have a new point of information or task related to the conversation with the caregiver.”*

*“Parents’ contacts steer my attention towards their children.”*

## Theme 2: White, High-SES Family Communication

Teachers identified white middle- and upper-class professional families as advocating more frequently and in a more demanding way for their children.

*“Every year I tend to have at least one parent--always middle/upper class and white--who contacts the classroom in an attempt to get their child a disproportionately large amount of time and attention.”*

*“This year, there is one white, privileged, English speaking, powerful parent who feels entitled to boss teachers around. In the ten years I’ve been in the district, there are 1-2 similar parents each cohort who suck up 90% of our emotional energy.”*

*“...middle/upper class white families...are very confident about challenging the school/classroom and tend to press on (and even contact people ‘higher up’) until they get their way.”*

*“White, high SES families may sometimes request inappropriate/excessive demands.”*

*“...the ratio of incoming contact is highly skewed to high SES and white families.”*

*“The squeaky wheel gets the grease...at the school committee level, the school level, and the classroom level, [families] from more privileged backgrounds...are more likely to advocate for their perceived needs for their children. These voices are disproportionately heard, and extra support or enrichment is more likely to be given to those students. It’s not right!”*

### **Theme 3: Immigrant Family and Family of Color Communication**

Teachers identified immigrant families and families of color as showing more respect and trust toward their children’s teachers.

*“Caregivers not born here are more respectful of teachers than ones born in USA.”*

*“...families who have recently immigrated of Latino and Black backgrounds [with lower SES] tend to be more trusting of teachers and question less about what is happening in the class and with their children.”*

*“...families at my school--most of whom are people of color and also low-income--are quite likely to check in to see how their children are doing. However, they very rarely make specific suggestions about how I should teach or should meet their children’s needs.”*

### **Theme 4: Language**

Language is a significant barrier to school-family communication.

*“I find it very challenging to communicate with families whose first language is not English. Those families often do not initiate contact with me and frequently do not respond to my attempts to contact them, in their native language or otherwise. Thus, I do end up spending more time working with students whose families are fluent in English.”*

*“My non-native English speaking families...rarely reach out/contact me unless I contact them.”*

*"Parents who do not feel comfortable communicating in English need to be physically and orally invited into the classroom and be shown that we value and respect them or they may not ever make contact."*

### **Theme 5: Presence in the Building**

Families who are able to be present in the school building more often initiate more contact.

*"I have had more frequent contact with higher SES families...because more of those families walk to school or drive so I see them during drop off and pick up."*

*"...families from a higher socioeconomic status often reach out more and also attend more face-to-face events in the classroom and at school."*

*"The more affluent the more present. Our school is basically represented by higher-income families - decisions are made by those families. Other families tend not to feel included."*

### **Theme 6: Collective vs. Individual**

Many teachers perceive lower-income, immigrant, and families of color to be more community-minded and trusting of teachers, while white, upper-SES, English-speaking, highly educated families are more focused on advocating for their child alone.

*"...white, upper class parents feel they can direct us in how to do our jobs. Lower class parents/parents of color often ask for help."*

*"It's the parents whose own social status is higher than that of teachers (well-paid professionals and academics) who have a much greater tendency to boss around teachers and take a lot of time 'correcting' their decisions. Immigrant families, on the other hand, are overwhelmingly incredibly supportive, respectful, and appreciative."*

*"Parents/caregivers with privilege are far more likely to initiate contact...and they are more likely to take up more than their fair share of teacher time/energy."*

*"...white families in the middle class seem...more comfortable taking their time in parent teacher conferences...more comfortable telling me if their child is bored...immigrant families and [low-income] families and families of color tend to express more appreciation for 'taking up your time' or express gratitude for the special things you might offer their child...they just don't seem to feel as entitled to these things, whereas white middle class families feel like those things are just to be expected."*

*“...families [of color] tend to be more respectful and responsive in a way that helps maximize benefits for their child--but never at the expense of another child...families of color tend to operate from an empowerment model, and the white families tend to operate from an entitlement model.”*

### **Theme 7: Limited Time**

Attending to parent requests/communicating with parents is a significant use of many teachers' limited time, a valuable resource.

*“HELP!!! We need some protocols around how to put a limit to this...we need some kind of across-the-board policy so that we don’t lose precious hours to high-need PARENTS instead of high-need STUDENTS.”*

*“We need to talk about where the boundaries are for parents who feel entitled to hours of communication each week. We need to have a real, honest conversation about the ways this directly and negatively impacts students of color whose families are not forcefully demanding special opportunities to communicate. While I try incredibly hard to ignore my anxiety about parental response when determining my teacher response to issues that arise in school, there’s no question that at some level I operate out of fear rather than sound judgment.”*

*“If you’re not outraged, you’re not paying attention!!!! Parents should be given three tokens. They can use them throughout the year. If by the end of the year they have not used their tokens, something is wrong. If by September 30 they have used up all of their tokens, something is wrong. Wake up people!”*

# BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

In reflecting on communication with families, teachers identify a number of common barriers that prevent strong, manageable communication with ALL families. The most frequently cited barrier was a language mismatch. In addition, the following barriers were named:

- *Discomfort with school environment*: Some teachers speculated that families whose schooling was completed in another country, or who had negative experiences in their own schooling, might be less familiar with the mechanisms of power within the system, or even just less comfortable in the building. Furthermore, teachers wondered whether families might be unsure of what they could ask or advocate for. On the flip side, other families seem highly expert at navigating and “working” the system to gain advantages for their children.
- *Work schedules*: Teachers noted that families working late were less available for school events and conferences, or work schedules prevented families from having adequate childcare to attend events at school. Meanwhile, families with a stay-at-home parent or flexible, salaried (rather than hourly) jobs were better able to be present in the building, which then led to increased contact.
- *Transportation*: Getting to the school building for events and conferences proved challenging for families without access to a car, or with limited or shared access. Teachers wondered if the controlled choice system sometimes exacerbated this issue, given that schools are not within walking distance for all families.
- *Drop off - Pick up inequities*: Many teachers highlighted drop-off and pick-up as the times of day when the majority of parent contact was initiated. Teachers described seeing certain parents every single day, while seeing other parents only once or twice a year, simply based on whether the child took the bus or not. Given the preponderance of teacher-parent communication during this time, this factor alone may differentially impact students.
- *Technological access/comfort*: Teachers describe receiving a lot of email communication from families who have access to a computer (or other device) during the school day. Parents who work from home or who work in offices remain more in contact with teachers than parents who might not have access to email during the day, or might not be as comfortable using that method of communication.
- *Teacher time*: As outlined in the themes above, teacher time was cited frequently as a central barrier to communication. Communicating with non-native English speaking families requires taking the time to get documents or meetings translated.

Communicating with working families may require significant time outside of school hours in order to make contact. And, in general, teachers described responding to the emails, phone calls and meeting requests of more demanding families as taking up all the free time they had outside of their other responsibilities, leaving no extra time to do outreach to families who were not advocating as aggressively.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these initial findings, we have a number of recommendations for systemic changes to promote equity. These generally fall into two categories: some strategies are needed to *set better boundaries* and limits on families that are disproportionately taking up resources, while others are necessary to *invite in* families who might be in less frequent communication with the school.

## **Equity Through Setting Transparent Boundaries**

*Pick-Up/Drop-Off Schoolwide Norms:* We recommend that buildings set norms on pick-up and drop-off, for example by requiring all students to be dropped off and picked up in the lobby, cafeteria, playground, or other public space, rather than walked to and from their individual classrooms. We know that such a change might be painful for families who have relied on this daily interaction with their child's classroom, and who may feel that their child's learning is improved via daily home/school communication. It also may be a challenging adjustment for some teachers, particularly those who teach our youngest students, since teachers acknowledge that information from parents/caregivers can be helpful. However, we see this shift as a necessary step to promote independence among all our students, to respect teacher time and autonomy, and to eliminate one source of inequity between bussed and non-bussed students.

*Clearer Schoolwide Communication Boundaries:* It is often challenging for individual teachers, especially those in the early years of their practice, to stand up to families who request an excessive amount of communication or accommodation. Even when teachers explicitly state boundaries in their start-of-year communications, insistent parents may override those limits. We suggest that administrators need to help set the tone in family handbooks, Back-to-School nights, and other communications, and then support teachers in holding the line. Messaging to families might sound like this:

- Teacher time is limited, and ought to be focused on addressing student and classroom needs.
- To help facilitate this child-centered approach, know that emails may not be answered right away, and we encourage teachers to respond as briefly as possible.
- Parent-teacher conferences will be scheduled twice annually. Please refrain from scheduling additional meetings outside of conference time.

While this messaging will not dissuade the most determined families, setting firm boundaries as a schoolwide norm will lift the burden off of individual teachers and leave them with more time to connect with families less likely to initiate contact.

*Workshops for Families:* We recognize that most families have the best of intentions when they advocate for their children with the classroom teacher. They are simply engaging in practices

that are encouraged in the wider American culture, everywhere from parenting books to advice columns. We believe it is incumbent upon us as a school system to help parents see how their advocacy impacts not only their own child, but the community. Perhaps in collaboration with our Family Liaisons, we recommend hosting school-based workshops for parents on “effective communication,” helping parents to see how appropriate boundaries can benefit the collective (a progressive value that many families in Cambridge espouse) while at the same time encouraging independence and resilience in their own child. We propose working with teachers to create lists of ways that families can be actively, helpfully involved in the school community (eg. setting up carpools to evening events to support families without cars, working together to do small jobs like painting and repairs in classrooms, etc.) so that families can direct some of their energy and resources toward the collective good.

*Interview Teachers on Best Practices:* As a next step in this research, we have begun to identify teachers in the district who are particularly skilled at setting and maintaining boundaries with families. We propose interviewing these expert practitioners further to learn about their policies, procedures, and “scripts” for approaching families, and then creating a workshop for elementary teachers on how to replicate these practices in their own classrooms.

## **Equity Through Inclusive Practices**

*Alternative Communication Methods:* Many teachers suggested creative ways to connect with working families and ELL families, especially the use of text messaging (either through personal cell phones or messaging apps). Some teachers also use use apps like Class Dojo to communicate to families via phone rather than email. Teachers reflected that they were better able to reach families at work when communicating by text, and that ELL families appreciated the clarity of a short message that could be easily translated. We suggest that schools empower teachers to explore and differentiate methods of reaching out to families.

*Proactive Communication:* Some schools and teachers in the district already experiment with August or September home visits or listening conferences. We recommend encouraging (and funding) these practices as ways for teachers to make connections with families ahead of the school year, in comfortable and familiar contexts. Teachers also suggested sending home family surveys, with translation, to get more equitable input on classroom decisions.

*Conference Accommodations:* In order to ensure that all families are able to participate in conferences, teachers have employed creative methods of accommodation including:

- Explicitly inviting younger siblings to the conference so that parents don’t need to find childcare
- Holding conferences at different times of day and night to accommodate work schedules
- Holding conferences over the phone or video chat if coming to school is not possible
- Allowing some conferences to be held in students’ homes if convenient
- Holding conferences in parents’ cars while they drive around the block so they don’t have to find parking!

We further recommend that it become district policy to offer translation services for all conferences and other parent meetings (eg. IEP meetings, etc.). Currently, it is left to individual teachers to assess whether a family might be in need of translation services and offer them.

*Systemic Outreach:* We know that inevitably, some families will reach out more than others, and some students may require more frequent communication because of their particular needs. But, because of limited time and the conscientious desire to respond to parent-initiated contact, teachers may find themselves communicating with one family three times a week, and another family only twice in the year. We recommend that schools support teachers in making systematic communication plans. For example, if a teacher has twenty students, and there are twenty school days in the month, she could randomly assign one child to each school day. If the 17th is Mohammed's day for family communication, the teacher might reach out to his family by writing a text message or email, sending home a note, making a phone call, getting a document translated for his family, etc. If, however, the teacher has already touched base with Mohammed's family that month, she can refrain from communication that day. This way, teachers can better ensure that they are regularly reaching out to families who may not initiate contact, while not indulging other families' desires for constant communication.

*School or District Allocated Time for Family Communication:* Proposals like the one above will be impossible to enact without designated professional time dedicated to family outreach. We recommend that schools use part of their 35 hours to allow teachers blocks of time specifically to reach out to families who are not initiating contact. For example, a staff meeting could include 15 minutes of general updates, and then an hour during which teachers are free to contact the three families they have had the least contact with lately. Teachers could then use that hour to make phone calls, write emails or texts, get documents translated, book translation services for an upcoming meeting, hold a meeting with a family, connect with the family liaison, make a home visit, and so on. Most teachers expressed a strong desire to do this kind of outreach, but simply felt there was not enough time in the day to be proactive in their approach.

# CONCLUSIONS

We have a persistent, insidious, and urgent problem in our school system: we are failing our students of color, our low-income students, and our ELL students, at the same time as we are systematically advantaging their privileged peers. To make lasting change, we must do more than simply remove barriers placed in front of historically underserved populations. We must also rein in the entitlement and opportunity hoarding among families whose children arrive in our kindergartens having already benefitted from the racial, socio-economic, and language privileges society awards them.

It has been said that when you are accustomed to privilege, equity feels like oppression. Should the district and its schools decide to implement our recommendations, we would anticipate a fair degree of backlash from families who feel they are only doing their best to meet their children's needs, families who have interpreted our controlled choice system to mean that they are consumers and the customer is always right. In fact, it is fear of this very backlash--the irate letters to the Superintendent, the threat to withhold votes from School Committee members, the specter of litigation, and the ever-present possibility that families will remove their children from CPSD and send them to private schools--that has allowed a culture of entitlement to flourish here in a city of supposedly progressive values.

This culture serves no one. It exacerbates the under-serving of high-needs students, exhausts teachers and administrators, perpetuates anxiety and competition among high-powered parents, and enables another generation of privileged children to grow up without the independence and resilience to advocate for themselves and handle conflict and disappointment. The consequences for privileged children are troubling. The attendant consequences for disadvantaged children continue to be devastating, immoral, and unacceptable.

A reframing of these cultural norms is within reach. There are many families, with and without privilege, who have made the choice to engage with our schools respectfully and who advocate for school and district policies that benefit all children, not specifically their own. Those families can act as allies and models as our district shapes a new cultural norm. We encourage the district and building leaders to act now and develop systems to support teachers in establishing more equitable practices. As the CRLS Black Student Union reminded us recently, it is far past time for our district to "do better."

# APPENDIX 1

## **Survey Text**

Hello Teachers!

We are a small group of teacher-researchers who are a part of the study investigating the root causes of inequality in CPS. Our group is interested in understanding the effects of caregiver-initiated contacts with classroom teachers. In this study, you will be presented with a set of questions about the types of caregiver-initiated contacts that you receive, how you deal with these messages, and whether the types of messages that you receive differ across student groups. At no point in this survey will you be asked to share any of your personal information. Please be assured that your responses will be kept completely confidential.

We'd be very grateful if you could take a few moments to answer our survey about your experiences. It should take no more than 15 minutes, and (if you leave your name at the end) you will be entered in a raffle for one of several \$50 cash prizes (to be added to your paycheck). Your responses are anonymous and will not be associated with your name and or email.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer, and you may stop taking this survey at any point, for any reason. If you would like to contact the Principal Investigator in the study to discuss this research, please email Gretchen Brion-Meisels at [gretchen\\_brion-meisels@gse.harvard.edu](mailto:gretchen_brion-meisels@gse.harvard.edu).

By clicking the button below, you acknowledge that your participation in the study is voluntary, you are 18 years of age, and that you are aware that you may choose to terminate your participation in the study at any time and for any reason.

Please note that this survey will be best displayed on a laptop or desktop computer. Some features may be less compatible for use on a mobile device.

- I consent, begin the study
- I do not consent, I do not wish to participate

Q2.2 In the past month, how often have parents/caregivers initiated contact with you regarding their child? (Please estimate the total number of contacts you've received in the last month.)

- Never
- Fewer than 5 times
- 5-10 times

- 11-20 times
- More than 20 times

Q2.9 Think about the THREE MOST RECENT contacts that parents/caregivers initiated. For each contact, please answer these questions.

Q2.10 Contact 1

The parent/caregiver wanted me to... (check all that apply)

- Be aware of a child's need
- Follow up on something that happened in school
- Provide information about their child
- Schedule a meeting outside of the regular conference time
- Provide an accommodation for their child
- Excuse their child from a classroom expectation
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Q2.11 Please describe the demographics of the parent/caregiver in Contact 1 (e.g., race, gender, SES, language, etc.).

Q20 Contact 2

The parent/caregiver wanted me to... (check all that apply)

- Be aware of a child's need
- Follow up on something that happened in school
- Provide information about their child
- Schedule a meeting outside of the regular conference time
- Provide an accommodation for their child
- Excuse their child from a classroom expectation
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Q21 Please describe the demographics of the parent/caregiver in Contact 2 (e.g., race, gender, SES, language, etc.).

Q22 Contact 3

The parent/caregiver wanted me to... (check all that apply)

- Be aware of a child's need
- Follow up on something that happened in school

- Provide information about their child
- Schedule a meeting outside of the regular conference time
- Provide an accommodation for their child
- Excuse their child from a classroom expectation
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Q23 Please describe the demographics of the parent/caregiver in Contact 3 (e.g., race, gender, SES, language, etc.).

Q2.3 Of the parents/caregivers who contacted you in the last month, about what percentage were from families that you perceive to have socioeconomic privilege?

- None
- Fewer than 25%
- Between 25% and 50%
- Between 50% and 75%
- More than 75%

Q2.4 Of the parents/caregivers who contacted you in the last month, about what percentage do you perceive to be white?

- None
- Fewer than 25%
- Between 25% and 50%
- Between 50% and 75%
- More than 75%

Q2.5 About what percentage of the families in your classroom do you perceive to have socioeconomic privilege?

- None
- Fewer than 25%
- Between 25% and 50%
- Between 50% and 75%
- More than 75%

Q2.6 About what percentage of the families in your classroom do you perceive to be white?

- None
- Fewer than 25%
- Between 25% and 50%
- Between 50% and 75%
- More than 75%

**Q2.7**

Before taking this survey, how often have you thought about the relationship between the identity of students' caregivers and their likelihood to advocate for their children?

- I've never thought about this.
- I think about this occasionally, but don't think there is a relationship.
- I think about this occasionally, and do think that there is a relationship
- I think about this often, but don't think there is a relationship
- I think about this often, and do think that there is a relationship

**Q2.16**

How, if at all, do you think parents/caregivers' contacts -- or attempts to advocate for their children -- influence your decisions in the classroom? (These decisions might be pedagogical, content-related, peer-related, etc.)

**Q2.17** Over the course of your teaching career, what, if any, patterns have you noticed about the relationship between parents/caregivers' contacts and their social identities (e.g., SES or race)?

**Q2.18** Is there anything else about your relationships to parents/caregivers, or parent/caregiver contacts, that you'd like to share with us?

**Q24 OPTIONAL:** Please share your demographic information with us.

**Q25 (Optional)** What grade band do you teach?

- JK-2
- 3-5

**Q26 (Optional)** How would you describe your racial/ethnic identity? (Check all that apply)

- Not Hispanic or Latinx
- Hispanic or Latinx
- White
- Black or African American
- Asian
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_



## APPENDIX 2

### Further Reading

Anonymous (WeAreTeachers staff writer). (2018, August 30). Lawnmower parents are the new helicopter parents and we are not here for it. Retrieved from  
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Hagerman, M. (2018). *White Kids: Growing up with privilege in a racially divided America*. New York, NY: NYU Press.

Lewis, A. E. & Diamond, J. B. (2015). *Despite the Best Intentions: How racial inequality thrives in good schools*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Pinsky, J. (2019, January 16). 'Intensive' parenting is now the norm in America. *The Atlantic*.

Quealy, K. & Miller, C. C. (2019, March 13). Young Adulthood in America: Children are grown, but parenting doesn't stop. *The New York Times*, p. A14.