

California Public School Parent Survey Summary Report of Key Findings

December 5, 2013

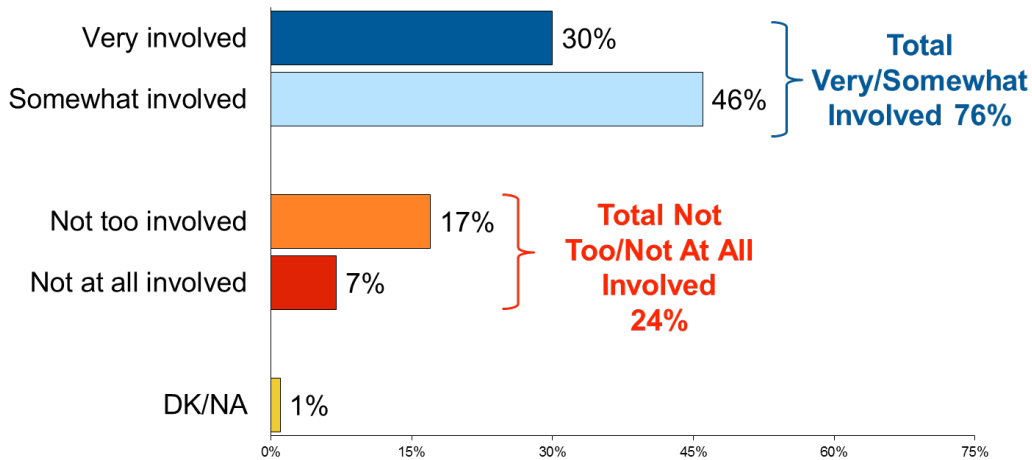
On behalf of EdSource, Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (FM3) completed a survey of 1,003 California parents with children in public schools between November 5th and 12th, 2013.ⁱ Overall, the survey found that California parents are very involved in school activities and issues, have a high opinion of their local public schools, and feel welcome there. However, parents with different levels of household income show significant differences in parent involvement. The data also show that parents rely heavily on their children as conduits of information from the schools.

Although school governance is an area where parents are currently relatively less engaged, **California parents support the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), the state's new system for funding K-12 public schools, and express interest in becoming involved in budget decisions at their child's school.** Parents are more likely to cite a lack of time, rather than a lack of interest or a system that is unreceptive to their input, as an obstacle to greater participation in advising and decision-making. The data suggest that schools and school boards have significant potential to increase parent involvement around the implementation of the LCFF by assuring parents that they have a meaningful voice in the decision-making process, communicating more and in different languages about the new funding formula, providing advance notice of meetings and scheduling them on weekends.

Among the key specific findings of the survey were the following:

- **More than three in four parents say they are involved in their children's schools; however, parents with lower incomes report less involvement.** Seventy-six percent of parents report that they are "very" or "somewhat" involved, with close to one-third (30%) saying they are "very" involved (**Figure 1** on the following page). There is significant variation by income level in parent engagement; fully 39 percent of those in households with incomes of \$100,000 or more describe themselves as "very involved," whereas at the other end of the spectrum only 24 percent of those in households with incomes of \$30,000 or less report the same level of involvement.

FIGURE 1
Parent Involvement in Children’s Public Schools¹



- **A lack of time and intense work schedule are the most commonly cited reasons for parents to be less involved than they would like in their children’s schools.** Parents cite a lack of time (rated as at least a “minor obstacle” by 69% of those polled) and conflicts with work schedules (66%) as the most problematic (see **Figure 2**). Significant minorities of those polled also cited childcare obligations, a lack of transportation, or a lack of openness to parent involvement on the part of schools as reasons.

FIGURE 2
Obstacles to Parent Participation

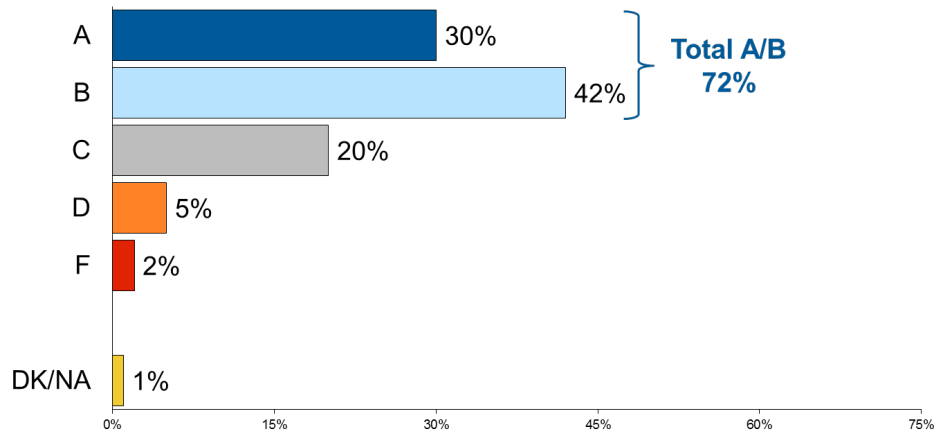
Factor	% Rating Each a Major/Minor Obstacle
Not having enough time	69%
Work hours make it difficult to attend	66%
Not having child care for your children	28%
The school is not interested in what you have to offer	20%
A lack transportation or other difficulties getting to the school	18%
You don’t feel welcome at the school	16%
Not having translation services at events	12%

- **California public school parents are generally pleased with the performance of local public schools, though few give them the highest possible rating.** As detailed in **Figure 3**, more than seven in ten (72%) offered a positive grade of either “A” or “B,” though fewer than one-third offered the top grade of “A” (30%). Fewer than one in ten offered a negative

¹ “DK/NA” stands for “Don’t Know/No Answer.”

grade of “D” (5%) or “F” (2%). The highest-income parents (those making more than \$100,000 per year) offered the most positive evaluations of their local schools (with 43% assigning them a grade of “A”). Numbers were notably lower among those making \$50,001 to \$100,000 per year (34%), those making \$30,001 to \$50,000 (17%), and those making \$30,000 per year or less (25%).

FIGURE 3
Parents’ Ratings of the Quality of Local Public Schools



- **Parents are most likely to learn about what goes on in their children’s schools through their children.** While the majority of parents used a wide range of information sources on at least an occasional basis, by far the most prevalent source of information (as shown in **Figure 4**) was conversation with the students themselves: nearly all parents (97%) report learning about issues at their children’s schools through conversations with their children, and nearly nine in ten from information sent home with students (87%).

FIGURE 4
Sources Parents Use Most Frequently to Learn About Children’s Schools

Source of Information	Use Frequently/ Occasionally
Conversations with your child	97%
Information sent home with students	87%
Conversations with your child’s teacher	85%
School newsletters	76%
Recorded telephone calls from the school	66%
Conversations with other parents	63%
Information from a parent-teacher association	57%
Emails from the school	55%
On-line networks or e-mail newsgroups of parents	50%
Information from a community group	34%
Text messages from the school	19%

Use of these different sources of information varies somewhat among subgroups of the population. For example, upper-income parents are much more likely to turn to other parents and to online sources as ways of finding out what is going on at their children’s schools.

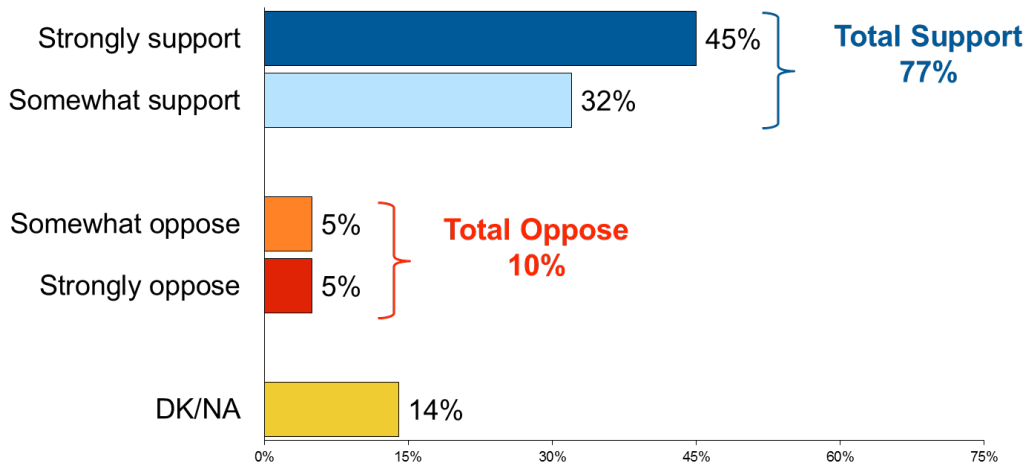
- **While parents are very involved in many aspects of their kids’ schools, they are least likely to attend school site council or committee meetings.** As shown in **Figure 5**, just one-quarter of parents (24%) say they have participated in school site councils or other school-related committees.

FIGURE 5
Parent Participation in Various School Activities

Activity	% Participated
Attending parent teacher conferences	87%
Attending school assemblies, or sporting or performing arts events	76%
Volunteering at school events	60%
Attending fundraising events, like walkathons or silent auctions	56%
Accompanying your child’s class on a field trip	56%
Volunteering in your child’s class	53%
Participating in a parent group such as the PTA	51%
Attending school board meetings	30%
Participating in a school site council or other school or district committees	24%

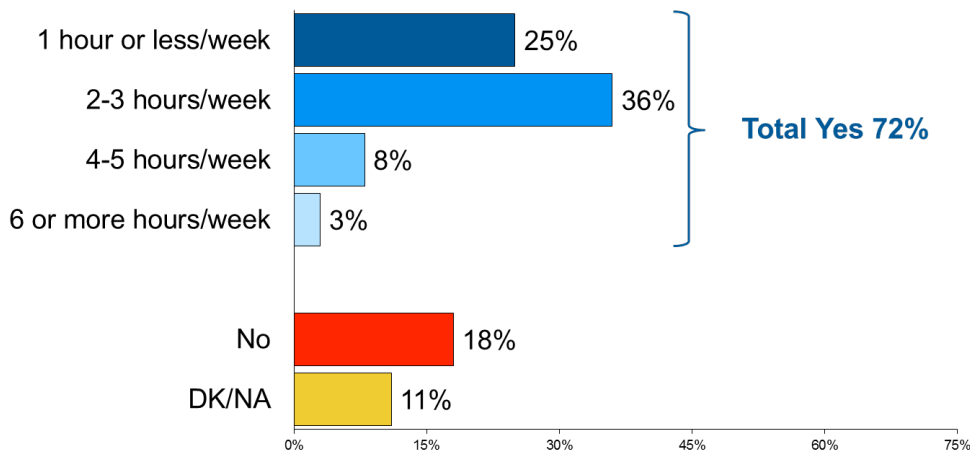
- **A sizable minority of parents believes that only a small group of parents are given the opportunity to participate in decision-making at their school.** Nearly one-third of parents (31%) agree that “only a small group of parents are offered the opportunity to participate in school decision-making, while most are excluded.” Nearly two in five parents with income of \$30,000 or less say that only a small group of parents have the opportunity to engage in decision-making (39%), while among upper-income households (those with a household income of more than \$100,000) the proportion is much lower (19%).
- **Though most are unaware of the policy, after hearing a brief introduction, more than three-quarters of parents support the LCFF.** Initially, fewer than one in ten parents say they have heard “a great deal” about the LCFF. After hearing a summary of the policy, more than three quarters of parents (76%) say that they support the idea – with close to half (45%) saying that they “strongly” support it (as detailed in **Figure 6**). The policy has the support of at least seven in ten parents across lines of gender, ethnicity, language, and income.

FIGURE 6
Support for the LCFF



- **Close to three in four parents say they would be willing to spend more time guiding school decision-making.** Having been made aware of the LCFF, parents were asked whether they would be willing to spend more time helping to guide their children’s schools’ funding decisions, and if so, how much time they could commit. Close to three-quarters of parents (72%) say that they would be willing to get more involved, with a majority (61%) saying they could commit between one and three hours per week (as shown in **Figure 7**).

FIGURE 7
Willingness to Spend Time Helping Guide School Decision-Making



- **There are several steps schools could take to increase parent involvement.** As shown in **Figure 8**, parents say a number of actions by their child’s school would increase their likelihood of getting involved – particularly being given plenty of advance notice and being assured of a meaningful voice in the process. Among the other items parents value to

encourage their participation are logistical support, such as childcare, communications in other languages, and transportation to meetings.

FIGURE 8
Impact of School Actions on Parent Involvement

Step Taken by School	% More Likely to Get Involved
Giving lots of advance notice of when meetings will be held	83%
Making it clear that parents will have a meaningful voice in the decision-making process	80%
More frequently communicating with parents about the new funding formula	76%
Holding meetings in the evenings or on weekends	74%
Providing classes or training for parents on how they can participate	64%
Providing child care at meetings	45%
Offering more communications in languages other than English	33%
Providing transportation to meetings	27%

Taken together, these survey results suggest that **parents are eager to be more involved in guiding funding decisions for their children’s schools and that the LCFF presents an opportunity to tap that enthusiasm.** If they knew that their input would make a difference, most parents would be willing to engage more deeply. Other factors that will support their involvement include meetings scheduled at convenient times and lots of advance notice. The data suggest that by taking these and other steps, California public schools could use the opportunity presented by LCFF to meaningfully increase parent engagement.

ⁱ **Methodology:** From November 5-12, 2013, FM3 completed 1,003 telephone interviews (on landlines and cell phones) with California parents of children under the age of 18 attending public schools. The margin of sampling error is +/-4.4% at the 95% confidence level; margins of error for population subgroups within each sample will be higher. The sample included interviews with a random sample of 601 parents, paired with oversamples of 202 parents with household incomes under \$30,000 and 200 parents of children in ESL (English as a second language) classes. All data have been weighted to reflect the true distribution of California public school parents by household income and ESL status. Due to rounding, not all totals will sum to 100%. The survey was conducted for EdSource with funding from the California Endowment.