Parents in the Kansas City area are at different “starting points” in their readiness, willingness and ability to engage as advocates for better schools or to advance policies that could promote better learning. “Potential transformers” are poised for action, “school helpers” are willing to be involved in traditional ways and “help seekers” are concerned about their own children’s education but more disconnected from the school system. To be effective, strategies to build momentum for change and improvement in education must meet parents at their starting points and be tailored to the different types of parents. The recommendations in this section are intended to honor the diversity of experiences and attitudes among parents in Kansas City while providing advice to educators, funders and reformers on how to engage and communicate in ways that will move the needle on change. In presenting the promising strategies that follow, we do not aim to minimize the work needed to meet the challenge of engaging parents as partners in reform. Instead, we emphasize that effective engagement of parents is indeed possible when done purposefully.

Quotes throughout this section are drawn from focus group conversations with Kansas City parents that were especially designed to explore parents’ views on different engagement approaches.
OVERARCHING PRINCIPLES

Based on this research and decades of experience supporting sound public engagement, we first want to urge change leaders to keep at the center of their engagement planning and execution four overarching principles.2

1. Communication goes two ways.
Leaders, policymakers and reformers sometimes assume “communication” means simply sending out information or articulating their messages. Surely, this is part of the picture; good, clear communication by teachers and school leaders about academic expectations, homework, absence and school safety policies, extra-help resources and so on are a prerequisite for more active and constructive parent involvement. But sound parent engagement entails more. It is an exchange, in which both parents and educators bring their concerns and ideas to the table to address problems and strengthen schools in ways that can help students succeed. School leaders can, in turn, bring broader concerns to local policymakers. A parent in Kansas City described one experience with ineffective communication:

I think parents need to be more involved, but the schools need to be informative without putting us to sleep. We’ve been to PTA meetings where the topics were, “Who wants to be on the board of this,” or “Who wants to be the chairman of this?” But we don’t even know what these things do.3

2 Throughout this section, we refer to “change leaders” as those individuals, groups or organizations that represent school or district administrators and educators, local policymakers or reformers, concerned citizens and active parents or foundations and philanthropists who are both deeply concerned about educational opportunity in the Kansas City area and spearheading improvement efforts.
3 Quotes have been edited from their original phrasings for clarity.
2. **Begin by listening and addressing key concerns.**

As we have learned, parents experience the Kansas City public education system in different ways, and one-size-fits-all communications or focusing on small subsets of issues will likely not work equally well for all of them. In large part, this means change leaders should begin by listening. It is critical to identify the burning “first-things-first” issues on parents’ minds and to know how they think and talk about them. Parents will be most open to constructive involvement if they know their chief concerns are understood and being attended to. For instance, focus groups, community dialogues, events where parents already meet or lower-intensity mechanisms like surveys with open-ended questions and feedback forms can help change leaders listen intentionally to the concerns and ideas that are foremost in parents’ minds.

3. **Approach parents with a clear request.**

This strategy is deceptively simple: it is to approach parents by asking for their help. As noted earlier, nearly a quarter of parents surveyed say that, in the past year, they’ve never been asked to help out or volunteer at their children’s schools. The importance of this principle is reflected in the comments of one parent in Kansas City,

> Parents don’t understand that their presence makes a difference. Schools aren’t getting that message out. Even when the school was going through its worst times, they didn’t get the message out that they needed help from the community. It was just, “We’re going through this, and we’re trying to work it out.” They didn’t ever say to parents, “This is what’s going on. If we don’t get anything back from you, this is what will happen to your kids.”

4. **Provide many and varied opportunities to engage.**

When asked to describe effective ways in which parents can get involved in their children’s education, parents in focus groups listed many, varied activities, including monitoring their children’s homework, communicating with teachers via email, regularly visiting their children’s classrooms and attending community meetings. When it comes to engaging parents in school improvement, the more diverse the opportunities to get involved, the greater chance of attracting parents of varying degrees of readiness, willingness or ability. Moreover, it is important to engage parents not only on problems, such as school safety, but also on successes, such as celebrating improvements in student achievement.

Finally, as this study shows, providing many and varied opportunities also means attending to the different types of parents who seek to participate in different ways—the potential transformers, school helpers and help seekers.

For each of the categories of parents described in the research findings, we suggest several communication and engagement practices to help put these guiding principles into action.
Engaging POTENTIAL TRANSFORMERS

Making the most of potential transformers’ readiness to engage in school change will mean approaching them as partners. Such partnerships can be cultivated in several ways.

- **Speak to parents’ highest priorities to build the momentum for change.** School safety, bullying, basic educational opportunities for all children, supports for children who need extra help and assistance or resources for teachers were among the top concerns for parents who participated in the Kansas City focus groups. Since they may not necessarily agree on which issues are priorities, parents who are ready to roll up their sleeves may need opportunities to establish common ground on where they would like to begin directing their energies. Well-facilitated dialogue can help individuals with diverse priorities find common ground.

- **Build potential transformers’ capacities to lead change efforts.** In a number of large urban school districts across the country, leadership academies offer parents and concerned citizens opportunities to participate in trainings that build skills and knowledge about important education issues. Trainings might cover such topics as the history and laws of the public education system; parent–community–school partnerships; strategies for increasing parent engagement; communication among parents, students and teachers; and understanding education terms and jargon. In both the survey and in the focus groups, we found parents who were encouraged by the idea of a leadership academy and saw its potential to build a cadre of citizens dedicated to improving educational opportunities for all children.

  As stated by one Kansas City parent,

  > [The leadership academy] I think is a good empowerment tool for parents, and it’s also creating a pool for advocates and activists that help change systems that aren’t working, and maybe help get more community-based educational institutions involved.

School administrators, district leaders and educators looking to explore parent leadership development programs may find it useful to connect with local or national organizations to learn more about such opportunities and with local leaders to underwrite them.

- **Build potential transformers’ capacity to be authentic engagement facilitators.** Engagement is too often viewed as a one-off event—a single school board or town hall meeting, for instance. To be truly effective, it should be an ongoing process of communication among leaders and publics that is embedded in the life of community. These habits of communication can become points of departure for new forms of individual and collaborative action, as well as community leadership development. Potential transformers, with their unique talents and local knowledge, can play an important role in creating this culture of shared responsibility and collaborative problem solving. For example, they can be trained in dialogue facilitation by engagement experts and collaborate with local organizations on the design and organization of engagement processes.

- **Recognize successes and achievements in parent engagement.** Creating venues to recognize accomplishments, honor commitments and celebrate victories is an important early step in building a sense of shared ownership of problems and solutions. Such opportunities should be regular in order to maintain high-levels of engagement and energy for change and improvement.
Engaging SCHOOL HELPERS

As we have discussed, school helpers are already involved with their schools in traditional ways that are admirable and important to the schools’ success. Can they be engaged in even more robust ways in addressing the issues that stymie school and student success, such as truancy problems, lack of essential resources or poor teacher preparation?

School helpers tend to believe they could be doing even more, and we believe that at least some of them can be more intensely engaged if they are asked in the right way and provided with “user-friendly” ways to get involved that respect their time and other commitments. Again, it’s important to start with where these parents are by making the most of the support they are already providing to their children and schools.

- **Present options that provide a range of engagement levels and opportunities.** When we advise leaders about how to think about sound public engagement, we like to say (as we did above) that it’s not an event, but rather an ongoing process of enhancing communication and building trust, respect and collaboration. But the flipside is that everyone is busy, and their time should be respected. Although school helpers believe they could be doing more, they are already supporting their schools to some extent. Engagement in deeper ways to help improve school policies and practices or to forge new community partnerships should not be presented as an all-consuming involvement. Relatively quick-hit, high-quality engagement, such as participating in a focus group or a well-designed community forum rather than an ongoing task force, may allow more people to contribute. Some may then develop a taste for the process and want to do more. Also, since these sorts of parents are inclined to help out at school anyway, inviting them to do so at parent engagement events, such as asking them to provide food for a dinner prior to a community forum, can expose them to a broader range of issues needing attention. A Kansas City parent, a head of a PTA, described the activities at one school:

  We try to give busy parents different avenues. We have different things throughout the school year at different times, different days of the week, because we realize everybody has different schedules, so we try to change up the schedules, change up the times, use different ways of communicating with the parents.

- **Raise awareness of important education policy issues.** Raising awareness of pressing policy issues will not necessarily influence behavior change or move people into problem solving, but it is an important prelude. Introducing the issues and providing a clear picture of how these play out in their own schools is a critical step in keeping the door open to parents who are already involved and may be spurred to further action on an issue of particularly deep concern. Since school helpers tend to feel comfortable in their school environments, using this setting as a launching place for civil and open dialogue on pressing public issues will be most effective.
• **Demonstrate the power of parent engagement.** With parents in this group saying parental involvement is not necessarily the highest impact way of changing schools, there is a need to connect the dots between parent involvement and policy or practice changes. Change leaders should help these parents answer the question, “What can I actually do if I don’t like what’s going on?” A parent participant posed the question in the following way:

> As far as you’re talking about the importance of knowing where your school ranks—it would be nice to also know what you can do about it if you don’t like it. If Kansas City is not accredited, what the hell can you do about it?

• **Communicate through trusted sources.** School helpers have positive relationships with and trust in teachers and school principals. This provides a unique opportunity to strengthen and leverage these communication channels as a means to encourage parental engagement beyond traditional in-school and at-home activities. Moreover, building connections with fellow parents, especially those who are potential transformers, might build momentum for change among school helpers.
Engaging HELP SEEKERS

Unlike the potential transformers and school helpers, help seekers don’t seem ready or willing to take on more active roles in their schools or to become education advocates. Instead, this group is somewhat more alienated from their schools and don’t see teachers and administrators making genuine efforts to help their children succeed. To engage these parents effectively, it seems important to gain a deeper understanding of their core needs and experiences. This can be achieved by conducting targeted research into the views, values and concerns of this particular group and by utilizing these research findings to develop engagement approaches that speak to these parents’ needs. Meanwhile, change leaders should focus on opening up new lines of communication to better understand and reach this group of parents.

- **Strengthen relationships and understanding between school personnel and the community.** Help seekers are less likely than other parents to trust principals and teachers to do what’s right when it comes to their children and to say they have a good feel for the community. To overcome this disconnect, schools should make concerted efforts to establish relationships with the school community and build a greater understanding of the social, cultural and environmental factors that affect the education of their students. For instance, parents in focus groups offered ways for schools to provide services that address common community concerns:

  The teachers know who [the students with less engaged parents] are. Get to know that student. Get to know what is going on in their lifestyle and in their family and what is going on, and then maybe they can step out of the school and go to their home and communicate with their family.

- **Create opportunities and policies that welcome parents into schools.** Help seekers are less likely than other parents to believe their schools welcome parental involvement, and several focus group participants shared experiences of being treated as unwelcome outsiders by school staff and administrators. While they recognized the safety concerns with allowing pedestrians to enter and exit school buildings during school hours, several parents said they had become frustrated by the attitudes of staff and administrators at the schools or felt they were treated with suspicion when their intentions were to visit their children, check in with teachers and monitor student progress. School personnel might be able to find ways to reduce teachers’ perceptions of parental visitation as a threat or provide professional development that cultivates the teachers’ skills in conflict resolution and moderation. As one parent stated, a welcoming environment and attitude can go a long way:

  I love it when teachers thank me for coming. I love it when the principal says, “Glad to see you. Hope to see you again.” I think it is just old-fashioned, hey, being polite and thanking each other and making people feel welcome and not making parents feel like, “Hey, you’re infringing on us”—making parents feel like, “Hey, we’re really glad that you were part of this process,” and make a concerted
effort. This is something that we have to do, and so I think a person ought to talk to the staff and say, “Hey, when parents come around, make them feel good. Make them feel comfortable. Make them feel welcome.”

- **Help parents’ efforts go further.** Many help seekers feel as though they are doing as much as they can to be involved. In fact, they are not absentee parents—most report checking homework regularly and meeting several times a year with teachers. Yet many are dissatisfied with the ways teachers and principals communicate with them about their children’s progress. To make parents’ efforts count more, school personnel might strengthen communication between teachers and parents about the issue these parents tend to care about most: helping their students learn. In focus groups, some parents expressed great frustration at not having the support they need as parents to help their kids succeed in school. Parents shared the following comments:

  Teachers don’t send any textbooks home. When kids get homework, they get a packet stapled together, and schools want you to help these kids with homework. [The packet is] not explaining to me how I’m supposed to explain [the homework]. When he is doing homework and he’s looking at me like “help me,” I have to call up the school. They have a hotline or something that you call, but they’re not really explaining, not even trying to explain to you how to explain it to him.

  I had a teacher tell me if my son had paid attention in class that I wouldn’t be calling up there asking for help. “You’re so right, but I am calling, and I’m saying that I don’t understand how to help my son, so don’t expect the homework back tomorrow. You need to send home better instructions so that he can get help.” Her exact words were, “Your son should have paid attention in class and you wouldn’t be calling up here asking for help.”

Some parents say that prioritizing communication about the most critical instances of disciplinary issues or the most important meetings to attend can help them have greater impact despite their limited capacity to get involved. One mother explained,

  You got some teachers in some schools that will call you for everything that your kid did. But in this school, they have a disciplinary person... This person will mediate, she’ll calm him down, and nine times out of ten I probably won’t even know that he got a write-up that day because it wasn’t serious enough to call home. That works out for me because say if I have a call center job, I cannot get off of the floor every time the school calls.
DON’T OVERDO THE TYPOLOGY; SOME FUNDAMENTAL PRACTICES CUT ACROSS PARENT TYPES.

The typology emerging from this research has important implications for effective parent engagement and serves as a useful framework to plan tailored engagement strategies. Overusing it, however, runs the risk of pigeon-holing parents or catering to types that are easier to reach. In addition to tailoring strategies to the needs and inclinations of different types of parents, we also urge change leaders to return to the principles that began this section and use them to guide engagement efforts that cut across parent types or situations, as well. The principles can be translated into broader stakeholder engagement strategies using several concrete practices outlined here.

• **Find the priorities that overlap.** When seeking to engage larger groups of parents and other stakeholders, engagers should still begin with the overall guiding principle: start where people are. While issue priorities will vary among stakeholders, parental concerns, community concerns and experts’ concerns are likely to have some overlap, indicating the areas or issues around which to begin a broader engagement strategy. Opinion research, gap analyses and facilitated dialogues can help illuminate the overlaps among stakeholders’ views.

• **Use the right amount and the right types of information.** Data are just one piece—albeit a very important one—of how people form their views and judgments about a given topic. As we learned in the parent survey, only about one-third of parents overall see publicizing more data about schools’ spending, student achievement and teacher quality as a way to improve parent engagement greatly. Instead, education change leaders must take care to find the very few key data points that can help people work through their knowledge gaps, clarify misperceptions or open up space for new thinking and problem-solving ideas. More detailed and comprehensive data should still be made available to those who seek it, as stakeholders often begin to have more questions and need more information as they become engaged and dig into an issue. Making information available at events or on websites are ways of filling this need once it arises.

• **Cultivate a deeper understanding of how problems can be addressed.** People often need to go through a variety of stages to come to terms with an issue, decide what approaches to problem solving they are willing to support and figure out how they can make their own contributions to change efforts. Schools, funders and community organizations can provide opportunities that help parents work through this process in two important ways:
• **By supporting parents’ “self-organizing” tendencies.** Regardless of typology, parents face similar pressures and want the same things for their children. They therefore see potential in mutual support through parent networks and community-building efforts to help them navigate shared challenges. For instance, one parent shared this statement:

> We need to connect with each other, and that is where the breakdown is coming into play, as well. We can’t rely just on the school. Us parents got to group together and say, “Okay, we all have work schedules. We all have to make meals when we get home and do homework and do all of this. Why don’t this week, Jake makes chili and we all get together and we sit down and let the kids do homework and talk about some issues—network—and find out agencies to help each other.”

Change leaders and engagement experts can also create user-friendly online tools to support parents’ desire to network, share information and develop mutual support systems.

• **By providing opportunities for dialogue and deliberation.** In our view, carefully designed, community-based face-to-face dialogue is the most effective and powerful vehicle to move people from awareness of a problem to developing solutions. Remember that parents and other concerned citizens can come to an engagement process with a sense of “meeting fatigue”—that is, feeling as though they are already doing as much as they can, or having participated in previous engagement efforts that lacked adequate opportunities to contribute or meaningful follow-up. For these reasons, community dialogues must be structured to be as productive as possible.

Several ingredients go into well-designed engagement efforts, including, but not limited to, a diversity of participants; discussion materials that prompt meaningful conversations about areas of common ground, disagreement, questions and ideas for action; high-quality facilitators; careful attention to event logistics and space; and a clear plan for follow-up on the discussions.  

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Broad-based dialogue with a diversity of stakeholder groups creates new lines of communication and forges new ways of working together for people at varying degrees of readiness, willingness or ability. Whether in large public forums or small-group meetings, in face-to-face settings or via the Internet, dialogue among citizens and across different perspectives can be key to building public understanding and to addressing problems facing schools, districts and communities. Planners who attend to important details while keeping these guiding principles at the fore will have the best chance of making the most of potential transformers’ energies, spurring school helpers to contribute in new ways, and bringing the voices of help seekers to the conversation on improving public education for all students in the Kansas City area.

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Public Agenda has produced hands-on materials and tools to help public engagers organize, implement and follow up on community dialogues that follow different formats. For information on these materials and our technical assistance, please visit our website: www.PublicAgenda.org.