

INTRODUCTION

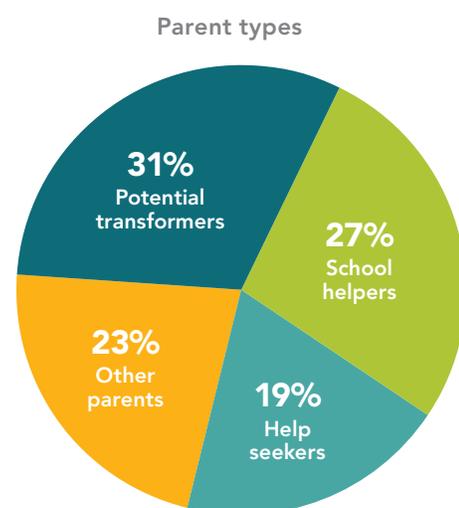
Are parents an untapped resource in improving and reimagining K–12 education in Kansas City? What do they think would enhance student learning and what are they willing to do to help their children get the education they deserve? These are among the questions explored in an in-depth survey of 1,566 parents with children now in public school in the Kansas City metropolitan area. This study finds the majority of parents in the Kansas City area ready, willing and able to be more engaged in their children’s education at some level. For communities to reap the most benefit from additional parental involvement, it is important to understand that different parents can be involved and seek to be involved in different ways.

The results of this research, detailed in the following pages, show that nearly a third of the region’s parents may be ready to take on a greater role in shaping how local schools operate and advocating for reform in K–12 education. These parents say they would be very comfortable serving on committees focused on teacher selection and the use of school resources. Their sense of “parental engagement” extends beyond such traditional activities as attending PTA meetings, coaching sports, volunteering for bake sales, chaperoning school trips and seeing that their children are prepared for school each day. Yet, despite their broad interest in a deeper, more substantive involvement in shaping the region’s school systems, relatively few of these “potential transformers” have actually participated in policy-oriented activities in the past year.

Moreover, this survey finds that even though the majority of parents seem less inclined to jump into school policy debates, many say they could do more to support local schools in the more traditional school parent roles.

This report portrays three distinct groups of parents:

- **“Potential transformers”**—parents who seem ready to play a bigger role in deciding how schools operate;
- **“School helpers”**— parents who say they could do more to help out at the schools their children attend; and
- **“Help seekers”**— parents who are concerned about their own children’s learning and seem to look for more guidance from their schools on how to help their children succeed.



Parents in the Kansas City area share many of the same goals, concerns and ideas about education and the schools, and many (about 23 percent, this study suggests) do not fall explicitly into any one of these three categories. Yet our hope is that understanding more about the characteristic thinking of these three specific groups can help school and district leaders, educators, funders and reformers reach out to them more effectively and plan programs that help them participate in the ways that best fit their needs.

This research also finds that, to some extent, parents' views and experience differ across school districts. Since

Kansas City Public Schools (KCPS), formerly the Kansas City Missouri School District, lost its accreditation in 2012, and since it is the only district in the region that allows charter schools, we take a special look (summarized in section five of this report) at the distinctive set of experiences and concerns among KCPS parents. For example, the survey shows—not surprisingly, perhaps—that KCPS parents are particularly frustrated with the public schools and worried about their children's education. At the same time, they remain optimistic that the right initiatives can mobilize parents to get more involved in their children's education and help change the public schools.

ABOUT THE STUDY

"Ready, Willing and Able?" is based on 1,566 telephone surveys with a representative sample of parents whose children attend public schools in one of five Kansas City counties: Jackson, Cass, Clay and Platte counties in Missouri and Wyandotte County in Kansas. These counties were chosen to represent the geographic and socioeconomic diversity of the Kansas City metropolitan area. Interviews were conducted from May 31 to July 3, 2012, by Clark Research, Inc., using both landline and cellular telephones, and respondents had the choice of completing the interviews in English or Spanish.

Statistical results reported here are weighted to balance the sample to known demographic characteristics of families with children under 18 in the region. The margin of sampling error for the complete set of weighted data is plus or minus 3.6 percentage points. It is higher, however, when comparing subgroups, or in questions that were asked of only some respondents. In addition to the survey, Public Agenda conducted eight focus groups with parents in the region. The methodology section at the end of this report provides detailed information on the study's methodology and data analysis.