



Hearing from Parents:

Recognizing Families as Crucial Partners in Reading Instruction

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Advocates for Children
of New York
Protecting every child's right to learn

Since assuming office in January 2022, Mayor Eric Adams' major priority for public education in New York City has been improving literacy instruction, particularly for students with dyslexia, and his Schools Chancellor, David Banks, has publicly staked his reputation on increasing reading proficiency rates. To that end, New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) recently launched NYC Reads, an initiative that aims to ensure all students become strong readers and all schools are using programs and teaching strategies aligned with the science of reading. As part of this effort, all elementary schools will be required to adopt one of three pre-approved curricula for teaching foundational literacy skills. There are also new efforts underway to screen students for reading difficulties and improve schools' ability to deliver intensive reading intervention to those who need more support, as well as a handful of new structured literacy pilot programs for students with dyslexia.

Against this backdrop, Advocates for Children of New York (AFC) held a series of virtual listening sessions in summer 2023 on the topic of reading instruction and intervention in New York City schools. We wanted to learn more about parents' experiences with their children's schools and hear *their* ideas for how NYCPS could better communicate with families and engage them in the important work ahead. Research has found that partnerships with families are a critical factor for school improvement—while the absence of strong ties between schools and the communities they serve can undermine attempts to improve student learning. In one study, for example, Chicago elementary schools with strong parental involvement were four times more likely to see substantial gains in reading achievement than schools weak in this area.¹ The extent to which NYCPS builds authentic, trusting relationships with families and brings them to the table as partners will help determine the ultimate success of NYC Reads.

The nineteen mothers with whom we spoke came from different neighborhoods and diverse backgrounds, and their children ranged in age from toddlers to young adults. While they do not represent a random cross-section of New York City parents—as evidenced by the fact that they were willing and able to give up part of their day to reflect on their children's experiences learning how to read—their insights are nevertheless informative. Two consistent themes emerged from our conversations:

1. First and foremost, parents consider teaching students how to read to be a key obligation of the schools. They want to be able to send their children to school and trust they will receive the instruction and support needed to develop into able and enthusiastic readers.
2. Parents are eager to be involved in their children's education and want teachers and staff at the school, district, and Citywide levels to truly prioritize and value two-way communication and partnership with families.

These themes are discussed in more detail below, accompanied by recommendations for NYCPS that are drawn from what we heard.

Every child's family has strengths that can be brought to bear to support learning to read, and as NYC Reads moves forward, the message needs to come from the top that family engagement requires more than just passing along information. It means valuing parents' expertise about their children, providing regular updates about individual students' progress, embracing multi-faceted approaches to communication, and ensuring families know how to get help if they need it. It means

¹ For more on parent-community ties as a key ingredient for successful school reform, see University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, [Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago](#) (2010).

building a system where more families have an experience like that of Nickesha,² a mother of two who told us her daughter’s school “did value my opinion and what I said ... they made me feel like I was a part of the team. I wasn’t just her mom; we were all team members working together for one common goal.”

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ABOUT OUR METHODS

Parents and caregivers were recruited to participate in listening sessions through AFC’s direct service work and via outreach to community-based organizations and service providers with whom AFC partners. We met with a total of nineteen parents via Zoom, either individually (five participants) or in groups of two to four parents each (14 participants), in sessions that typically lasted about 60–90 minutes. All participants received a \$50 gift card as a thank you for their time.

- While our listening sessions were open to caregivers regardless of gender or type of caregiving relationship, all 19 parents who participated were mothers. Of the 16 who provided demographic information, all identified as women of color (14% Asian, 14% non-Hispanic Black, 29% Black Hispanic/Latina, and 43% Hispanic/Latina).
- Together, these parents have 37 children. Not including those children who were too young for 3-K or who had already reached adulthood, 15% were preschoolers, 30% were in grades K–2, 26% were in grades 3–5, 15% were in middle school (grades 6–8), and 15% were in high school during the 2022–23 school year.
- Six of the participants (32%) identified Spanish as the language primarily spoken in their home; of those six, three attended listening sessions that were held entirely in Spanish.
- Participants came from four of the five boroughs—all but Staten Island—with the greatest number (eight parents, or 42%) living in the Bronx.
- Eighteen of the parents with whom we spoke (95%) have at least one child with a disability; of those 18, five have a child who attends a District 75 school.
- At least ten of the 19 participants (53%) had previously called AFC’s Helpline with questions about their child’s education or had received individualized assistance from an AFC staff member at some point in the past.
- Several spoke of serving on school leadership teams, participating in parent-teacher associations, or sitting on district-wide councils. As a group, these are highly engaged parents who proactively seek out information, ask for help when they need it, and speak up as they feel appropriate.

² All names used throughout this paper are pseudonyms. Some quotes have been edited for clarity or to preserve the anonymity of parents and their children.

Key takeaway:

Schools must value the knowledge that parents have about their children and ask them to share their observations, concerns, and ideas.

We heard repeatedly from the parents who joined our listening sessions that parent engagement must be actively cultivated and intentionally built into a school's culture—not treated as an afterthought.

***MAYA:** We're actually parents who want to be involved; we're actually parents who go out of our way to build a bridge between home and school, and we're so burnt out and exhausted. Like it shouldn't—if you're a parent who wants to be involved, we should not have to work this hard to be a part of our children's schooling. And that for me is like the heart of the issue ... We all love our children. We want to do right by them. But families are multi-stressed ... We should not have to fight for there to be a clear and consistent bridge between home and school ... I feel like it needs to be built into part of the school culture. Like people are always complaining about the lack of parent engagement, but that's on the school. You guys are supposed to build a community for your parents to be a part of.*

Schools and teachers should approach families with humility and recognize that parents are experts when it comes to their children; they possess a wealth of knowledge that can help educators be more effective in the classroom. Families aren't looking to replace their children's teachers, but they are looking to work as partners.

***MONIQUE:** I want them to be proactive, not reactive. That's my issue. Don't sit here and tell me you're for education when education starts as a simple conversation with a parent. If I see you at drop-off, pickup, we should have a conversation ... Some of the teachers, they were upset with me, because they're like, 'Oh, well, you acting like you can do my job.' It's not that. I'm trying to assist you doing your job. It takes communication. It takes a village. And I want them to have that mentality.*

As one example, families can provide valuable insights into students' interests, preferences, and cultural backgrounds. Multiple parents discussed times when they had raised concerns with educators that their child was not developing a love of reading or getting sufficient practice to build their skills because they were not interested in the books the school made available. While access to diverse books is only one piece of the puzzle when it comes to literacy instruction, teachers trying to engage reluctant readers or encourage independent reading can only benefit from knowing what topics and genres are most likely to appeal to and motivate a particular student.

***AMBER:** [My son] doesn't like the books they give him [at school], so I asked, 'Well, are there other options?' Are they giving him books that he's going to like and [that will] get his attention? Are they books pertaining to him? Did you ask him what kind of books he maybe likes to read? Maybe he doesn't want to read about someone going fishing or something. Maybe he plays basketball; maybe you get a book about someone playing basketball, which he likes ... Maybe if you get a book that will engage him, then maybe he will read the book.*

MELISSA: *I just feel like they have not made enough effort to cultivate love for books during the times that he's been in school, to be honest with you. And I mean, that's not to say some kids just don't enjoy reading. But [my son] reads all the books that he's interested in, like Five Nights at Freddy's. Right now, we're reading Voltaire [at home]. Just a variety of different things that he does not have a problem reading. It's just the books that they pick out in school for him are not really of his interest, and I feel like [my son] is just one of those students, that he needs to be intrigued; you need to pique his curiosity.*

We heard repeatedly that parents want honest, two-way conversations with their children's schools and opportunities to share what they have experienced at home. They want to be treated with respect and empathy; as Carmen put it in one of our Spanish sessions, school staff should "prioritize the parent's concerns, put yourself in their place, how you would feel, then above all try to see their point of view." Unfortunately, this was not the norm for the mothers with whom we spoke. Many described feeling dismissed or disrespected by school staff when they raised concerns about their children's progress in reading, and even those parents whose experiences with NYCPS had been largely positive felt it was a struggle to be taken seriously.

MAYA: *This is like a fight that we have as parents, right? We see things at home that maybe are not always seen at school, and then people think we're crazy, cause they're like, 'well, we've never seen that.' So, you have to get it on camera, or get a professional to see it and vouch for you.*

AMBER: *My son goes to a school, I would say, that's 95% not Black, and the principal and everybody who speaks to me on the daily don't look like me. I have to fight these people, and I'm told 'calm down' when I'm speaking passionately about what's going on ... I cannot talk to the school without anyone [with me], just to feel supported, because I'm constantly just ignored and gaslit and talked over and just, you know, [made to feel like] my voice doesn't matter in this room.*

A handful of parents specifically called out the importance of school leadership in building a culture that values and prioritizes family engagement. For example, Karen, the mother of a kindergartener, stated that communication with families at her child's school was strong "because our principal is on top of everything." She credited the "principal's hours," held on Zoom once a week, for keeping parents abreast of what was happening at the school and providing a space for them to share their concerns, noting that "the floor is yours—whatever you need, you ask."

RECOMMENDATION 1

In both word and action, send the message from leadership at the central, district, and school levels that families are crucial partners in this work. This means recognizing that educators are not the only experts in the room; to do their jobs well, they need information that only parents possess about their children.

- **Set clear expectations for principals in this area.** Superintendents should ensure principals are frequently setting aside time for parents to get information, ask questions, and voice concerns. In conversations with families, school leaders should demonstrate that schools have

high expectations for all children and will work with families to help each child reach their potential. As instructional leaders, principals can make clear family engagement is a priority and a core component of the school's work by ensuring their staff have dedicated time in the workday for communicating with parents; modeling asset-based views of families in everyday conversations with colleagues; and encouraging teachers to share effective strategies for cultivating home-school partnerships with one another.

- **Provide guidance and coaching to teachers on partnering with families and effectively communicating across lines of racial, cultural, and linguistic difference.** Educators should take every opportunity to proactively ask parents questions about their children's interests, strengths, backgrounds, and reading habits at home and should encourage families to share their concerns and ideas. To that end, NYCPS should, for example, provide teachers with guidance on questions to ask families, tools to examine their own biases, and tips for having strengths-based conversations that build reciprocal trust.

Key takeaway:

As schools engage with families around literacy, it is critical that they take parental concerns seriously and approach conversations with the mindset that every child can become a strong reader.

A substantial body of research makes clear that nearly all children, with and without disabilities, are capable of learning to read, provided they receive high-quality, evidence-based instruction.³ Schools should therefore expect students to make progress in reading, provide additional support and intervention promptly when needed, and never assume that a child's disability makes learning to read a less desirable or obtainable goal.

Many of the mothers who participated in our listening sessions were frustrated by what they saw as a lack of concern or urgency on the part of their children's schools. For example, more than one parent whose child was on the autism spectrum felt that, because the student was already receiving special education services, the school was unwilling to pay attention to their difficulties with reading or consider that they might have a concurrent diagnosis of dyslexia because—as Paola, a mother of a third grader with autism, put it—“they're just focused on the autism part.” Other parents of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) similarly described feeling like their concerns about their children's literacy skills were being ignored or put on the back burner.

ADRIANA: *I always say I want my daughter to learn to read, and I try to learn as much as I can about her disability. I get the books, and I try to help as much as I can. And I was always in every IEP meeting, 'I want my daughter to read, what do we have to do?' And they're always, 'reading is a process, they have to learn to know the sounds for each letter and put it together.' Okay, yeah, it's a process, but what are we doing with that process? Because at home I have a lot of books ... I read to her since she's in the belly; I'm reading to her every night ... It's very frustrating for me to see that this child is eleven years old, she's in sixth grade going to seventh grade, and performing at a kindergarten or a first-grade level, and I don't know what to do.*

³ For a more in-depth discussion, see prior AFC reports [Reaching Every Reader: The Path Forward](#) (May 2022) and [Turning the Page on Literacy Instruction in NYC Schools](#) (May 2021).

***HUA:** I told the psychologist [that I wanted my child to be tested for a reading disability]. And then he told me that ‘Oh, he might grow out of it,’ or something like that. ‘We should test him when he turns 8 years old,’ blah, blah, blah—that’s what he was telling me ... Progress is very, very slow. I don’t see much improvement. I mean, still, his reading [and] writing is very low. He won’t be able to reach the third-grade level; it’s impossible. But the school informs me, ‘oh, don’t worry about it.’ They are all like, ‘His class now, it’s all [students with] special needs’ ... They assure me that he’s not like the ‘not-normal’ one; he’s kind of the okay one in the classroom, because his whole class has—everybody has—IEPs.*

***XIOMARA:** I want to make it clear, the teachers have been very supportive ... I think they have been doing their part to help him, as much as they can do, with the resources [that they have]. But I notice that—I think this is a problem with the system, in the sense that when you tell them that this is dyslexia, they just say, ‘Oh, okay.’ But it’s not a concern; they are not as concerned as me. It’s not a concern [for the school], as I see it ... They have a budget, so they can’t go over that. And I was checking around, investigating on my own, and they said that when it comes to dyslexia, [an evaluation is] expensive. So I know they’re not gonna do it.*

Frustration was by no means limited to parents whose children were struggling with reading. Those who had a child reading at or above grade level explained that they wanted their children to be challenged and for educators to raise the bar higher, while the school simply accepted basic proficiency as “good enough.”

***WENDY:** I think she can go deeper ... Yes, she knows how to read, but let’s really challenge her with stuff that she’s reading; let’s go a little bit further than where she is. And [the school’s response] is sort of like, ‘No, if she meets the mark, that’s good enough’ ... I find that with the public school, if the kid’s average, that’s enough for them to be like, ‘There’s no problem; we’re good.’ There’s no challenge. The expectation level will come down, versus, you know, ‘Let’s get you out of your comfort zone, let’s go a little bit higher, because there’s potential there.’*

Parents need to feel confident that—no matter where their children fall on the spectrum of student need—the schools will help them reach their full potential.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Ensure schools are responsive to families’ concerns and provide teachers and administrators with the tools, training, and resources to be able to differentiate instruction, determine the origin of students’ reading difficulties, and develop plans for providing the support necessary to address them. In conversations with families, educators should make room for discussion and pursuit of literacy goals, no matter what disability classification a child has or how complex their needs.

Key takeaway:

Schools and classroom teachers must regularly share information with families about how individual students are progressing with reading and should provide tools for supporting literacy learning at home.

The mothers who joined our listening sessions were hungry for substantive information about what their children were learning and how they were progressing in reading. Most had heard little to nothing about NYC Reads or about the literacy curriculum being used at their children's schools, and more than one wished there were more opportunities to discuss their child's performance and individual needs in depth. Many were eager to know what they could do at home to support what was happening in the classroom, and they wanted specifics, not generic advice to read with their child every evening.

MICHELLE: *When it comes to my son's school, I don't feel like I receive that much information. Basically, they tell the parent that their student should be reading every night ... I really would like to learn more about the literacy curriculum that the school has, because interestingly, I'm on the SLT [school leadership team] committee at the school, and I don't really get much ... I feel like I would like more information. Maybe that's because that's the type of parent that I am—the more the better. I mean, influx me with as much information; more is a lot better. They'll just tell me what level he's on. And that will be it. They'll just tell me, 'oh, he's doing good, he's doing okay.' Not really like, what can I work on with him? What are his struggles? What are his challenges? What can I—what should I—be doing at home? The only thing that they recommend that I should be doing at home is the reading at night for 15 and 20 minutes.*

MELISSA: *More individualized information would probably be better and more beneficial. Because if I get generalized information, yeah it's helpful, you know, to keep the parents engaged and aware. But how does that relate to my child?*

WENDY: *Even in the parent-teacher conferences, which are like a blink of an eye—I mean really, I sneeze, and they're over, you know—and so I feel like I just get the 'Yeah, everything is going great, you know she could be doing better at this and this.' But there's never really any specifics ... I don't feel there's ever an opportunity to discuss, or even explain their process. I've never heard of the public school's process. I don't know what the curriculum is based on, I don't know the teacher's approach, none of that.*

Several parents in our listening sessions expressed concerns that they and other families weren't getting the information they needed because they weren't asking the right questions. While schools should be conscious of not overwhelming families, only providing resources and information to those who proactively request it perpetuates inequities by privileging parents who know they can ask and feel comfortable doing so.

AMBER: *I dropped out of school myself in the ninth grade, so I can't say that I was a big advocate for my oldest son in terms of reading and writing ... because I really didn't know. Like my parents or my grandmother, we just thought, you send them to school, and they just do that, right? ... I didn't know the questions to ask, at all, at the time. I didn't know what was going on. I didn't know what to say. I just trusted that they would do what's best, because they're the*

educators. They went to school for this. They have the degrees. They know. So I never knew the questions to ask, I never knew what to ask, how to ask ... I feel like because, maybe they felt like I wasn't knowledgeable, they weren't upfront with information to me.

MICHELLE: Even though the teachers are always saying that you can stop by and communicate with them or drop in anytime, I just wish that—I think for me personally, I need to ask the right questions so that I can get the answers that I need to help my son.

MAYA: [One of the other parents] mentioned a good point, which is that you only get what you ask for. I wanna just validate that and share that that's so true, because I've gotten materials sent home with my son—like so many great resources to further his learning at home—but only because I asked for it.

In contrast, a handful of parents were very happy with how their child's school—or how an individual teacher—approached communication, and their experiences provide a window into what strong partnerships between school and home can look like. These parents made clear how much they appreciate being kept in the loop, emphasizing the importance of open dialogue and getting specific, real-time information about the curriculum and what they can do at home to reinforce learning.

ANGELA: They do send handouts home, which has been so helpful every single week, to kind of make parents aware about what words they're working on, how to sound them out, how to practice with kids at home. And that has been extremely helpful ... [My younger child's] kindergarten teacher, she was very communicative and sent emails multiple times a week ... on phonics, on decoding texts, and what they were working on ... I would devour every single word of that email from my son's teacher. And she would add PDFs and links and worksheets. Every time my son was out—like if he was sick and would stay home—she would send a whole bunch of worksheets and she would say, 'this is optional, but in case he wants to work on this, this is something that you can work on together.' And I felt so empowered by that, because I felt like I had some direction, some guidance. I had some tools for that day, or for that time frame, to ensure that he didn't fall behind his classmates.

YESENIA: Communication, honestly, with my daughter's school is amazing. We use the Remind app and they are very responsive. Every Friday, they briefly give me a summary of everything that [my daughter] may have learned, everything that I can do at home to help her as well. Any questions I have throughout the day ... if I ask them on the Remind app, they'll respond maybe like in 10 minutes ... And we also have a Zoom once a month to talk about my daughter's progress.

As NYC Reads rolls out Citywide, NYCPS must clearly explain *why* the City is changing its approach to reading instruction, what curriculum has been chosen by each district and why, and what families can expect to see throughout the year. NYCPS should also provide families with clear, digestible information about the skills children should be mastering at each grade level and specific strategies and activities for supporting literacy learning at home. While the task of teaching children how to read ultimately lies with the schools—and families cannot be expected to fill in the gaps on their own—parents who have the time and capacity to provide support at home should have the resources they need to do so.

That said, providing families with information about literacy instruction and individual students' progress is only useful to the extent that parents *understand* what they are being told. Information needs to be presented in an accessible, jargon-free manner if it is going to be meaningful to families. For example, when talking to a parent about their child's performance in reading, schools need to explain screening and progress monitoring data in a way the parent can understand; there should be a conversation about what a student's results *mean* and how the school plans to respond, not a simple offloading of statistics.

KAREN: *I think this was a little over mid-year, they gave us a rundown on how the kids are faring with the goals for reading ... Sometimes it's hard to understand, because it's the statistics, but they show us, they give us the information for us to know, and then I guess that's it.*

MICHELLE: *What are some of the specifics? Like especially when we have the parent-teacher conference in the fall, once they do the assessment and we get those results back, [I wish they would tell me] like what exactly [my son] needs to work on and how can I help.*

Schools should work collaboratively with families to use screening and assessment data to co-construct shared goals. Parents should never be left in the dark about the fact that their child is struggling or left guessing about what support the school is providing and what they can be doing at home to help their child progress; they should be told about any reading interventions their child is receiving—or is supposed to receive—and given opportunities to communicate with the people providing those interventions.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Inform families about the literacy curriculum being used in their school, regularly update parents on how their individual children are progressing in reading, and provide specific suggestions and tools for supporting literacy instruction at home. NYCPS should:

- **Create resources that schools and teachers can adapt for their communities and provide coaching on how to use those materials.** Individual schools and teachers should not have to recreate the wheel; limiting the number of different curricula in use across the City means that template letters, emails, handouts, videos, and other informational materials can be created centrally. Superintendents and central leadership should make it as easy as possible for principals and classroom teachers to provide families with real-time information on what their children are working on in class and specific examples for how they can practice those skills at home.
- **Provide guidance and support to schools on how to communicate with families about their children's progress under the new ELA curriculum.** Educators are accustomed to discussing students' reading levels using Fountas and Pinnell's straightforward—albeit flawed—A to Z scale. Phasing out this mode of assessment is a positive step, given the lack of evidence to support its use, but it is essential that teachers have the tools to talk to parents about what student growth looks like in the absence of levels. Schools need guidance and resources on what data to share with families; how to present and explain that data so it can be easily understood; and what questions to ask parents about their experiences at home to create a more robust picture of the student's needs.

- **Ensure schools are complying with existing requirements regarding parental notification and involvement when students are eligible for intervention.** New York State regulations already require schools to notify parents in writing when their children are receiving reading intervention through Academic Intervention Services (AIS) or Response to Intervention (RTI).⁴ NYCPS must ensure that schools are complying with this mandate and that families receive meaningful information about how and why their child was identified as needing an intervention; are told about the specific services their child is supposed to be receiving; are given regular updates about their child’s progress; and have opportunities to communicate with their child’s interventionist.

Key takeaway:

Building strong family-school partnerships requires flexibility, multi-faceted approaches to outreach, and adequate time and staffing.

A theme that arose repeatedly in our listening sessions was that what works best for one parent might not be easy for another, and so flexibility is key. Maya summarized her group’s conversation by noting that while many different strategies—emails, texts, a shared notebook, apps like ClassDojo, face-to-face conversations—could work, the point was that schools had to “ask families what they need to communicate regularly with the teacher and the school and [then] implement those things.”

At the most basic level, schools must provide interpretation and translation services for parents whose primary language is not English. Multiple parents raised concerns that this was not happening at their children’s schools.

***ADRIANA:** I know parents that speak Spanish that—they don’t have [any] idea what is going on in the schools because many, many, many of the meetings are just in English. In this school where is my daughter, I never see a Spanish translator ... Sometimes I used to be the translator for some parents that speak [Spanish]. I help out; I just jump in, and say ‘okay, I’ll let you know what they said.’*

***ANGELA:** I think about the parents who don’t speak English as a dominant language and have children at home who do, and what it is for them to receive a bunch of emails like the ones that I received. How that doesn’t necessarily help them because they are not able to use that [information], right?*

The varying—and sometimes directly conflicting—opinions we heard from parents illustrate the importance of tailoring outreach to meet families and communities where they are. For example, some parents thought technology had improved communication and liked being able to contact their child’s teachers via apps or email. In other sessions, parents worried about how the reliance on technology for information-sharing impacted children whose caregivers had low digital literacy

⁴ See NYS Regulations of the Commissioner of Education, [Part 100.2\(ee\)\(6\)](#) and [Part 100.2\(ii\)\(1\)\(vi\)](#). These requirements are also described in the NYCPS [Academic Policy Guides](#).

(Monique noted, “Some of [my daughter’s] classmates are being raised by their grandparents and they’re not, you know, savvy, tech savvy.”) We spoke with parents who liked the flexibility offered by Zoom meetings, as well as with parents who felt that in-person meetings at the school were critical for relationship-building and meaningful conversations.

***NICKESHA:** We got to understand some parents are illiterate, or they didn’t complete school, so they don’t understand certain things, right? So I think if they connect with the parent and say, ‘hey, this is what we’ve been doing,’ and then they’re learning with their child, it would make life a little better ... I believe they need to bring families into the school. Because just putting a piece of paper in these kids’ bookbag—we know the teenagers; mom’s probably never checked the bookbag. I feel they need to bring them in, have a conference with them, and explain, so that they understand.*

And while the above parent didn’t think backpacking notes home was a terribly useful strategy, Carmen, one of the Spanish-speaking parents, told us she liked getting information that way, saying that she always looked through her children’s backpacks when they get home from school. In another session, Adriana expressed frustration that she would see flyers announcing PTA meetings sitting on a desk in a school office instead of being sent home, saying “How many parents would go to the office and take one of those flyers? ... Put them in the backpacks. Send them home. They do nothing here.”

Finally, parents discussed the need for full-time, school-based staff dedicated to building community. The role of the parent coordinator came up in these conversations as someone who, ideally, was already “tapped in with the parent community” and could potentially play a greater role in parent outreach and communication around literacy.

***ADRIANA:** I understand there’s a lot of students. And a lot of families and there’s foster parents, there’s people in the—it’s a lot. I really know it’s a lot, but maybe—the parent coordinators in the schools are there. Maybe they could get more involvement in the communication with the parents. They are inside the schools and they are supposed to communicate with the superintendents and with the counselor. That’s one person.*

NYCPS should provide school staff, including parent coordinators, with training on NYC Reads, the new curriculum being adopted by their school, the screening and assessment tools in use, and the supports available for a student struggling with reading. Family-facing staff need to be able to dialogue with families about this initiative—to explain what is changing at their school and why—and should know what intervention options are available and how to access them so that they can connect parents with those resources. As Amber told us, “As parents, our first go-to is our child’s school. They should be the main information-holder and the main yellow pages for us.”

RECOMMENDATION 4

- **Provide families with information about literacy instruction and their children’s progress (as described in recommendation 2) in their home language and using forms of communication that are accessible and culturally appropriate.** When disseminating

information, NYCPS must take into consideration families' varying levels of literacy, comfort with digital media, and preferred modes of communication. This means proactively using a variety of strategies, including speaking to parents in person or over the phone, sending letters to the home, and using digital media. As with English materials, NYCPS should ensure that translations use clear, accessible language that is easily understandable by parents.

- **Train parent coordinators, school social workers, and other school staff who interact with families on the basics of the school's literacy curriculum and the supports available to students who need additional help.** Ensuring students become strong readers should be considered the responsibility of everyone in the school building, not just the ELA teachers; meaningful change requires school-wide commitment. While non-instructional staff do not need the deep level of curricular expertise that teachers do, they should have a broad overview, such that they are able to answer parents' questions and can recognize when a student may be a good candidate for interventions or supplementary programs available in the building.

Key takeaway:

New York City Public Schools must ensure that families know where to turn when their children are struggling with reading and need extra help.

The mothers who joined our listening sessions were fierce advocates for their children, and they wanted a clear, jargon-free roadmap for getting help and resolving problems—something that explained where to go, who to contact, and what to do next. As Paola put it, “I just feel lost sometimes about how to go about certain things.” The difficulty of navigating the public school system and getting answers to their questions came up in nearly every one of our conversations; Maya, for example, told us that “It surprised me, as a parent, how much I had to dig for information that was gate-kept.” Others similarly described trying to connect the dots on their own when they saw their child struggling with reading, searching for resources and information both inside and outside the public school system in the absence of a clear roadmap.

XIOMARA: *I read about [dyslexia], and I see a checklist about a lot of the of the features there. I would say 80% applies to my son. So that's why I say I have a high suspicion that he has dyslexia ... I don't feel like I'm getting enough support from the school ... I feel like they are limited. That's why they don't tell you more. You have to educate yourself, basically ... I feel like I had to look for everything outside of the school.*

AMBER: *I would have just loved transparency. I would have just loved support. I would have loved honesty ... I felt like no one is listening to me. No one is taking this serious. Like I have an African American son who is failing, and who's not reading, who also is struggling with self-esteem issues, who tells me himself that 'I'm stupid, right? I'm dumb.' He's now talking down on himself, you know, and I'm just fighting, and I'm saying, 'Help him, help him. Help me! Help him! Help us!' And it's like, total nothing. Nothing ... Where do I go? I just want to know where to go. Where does he fit in? I'm advocating. I'm doing what a parent is supposed to do. What am I not doing? ... The school points you to the DOE, the DOE points you to the school.*

WENDY: *We don't know the system. The system is set up in a way where you don't know it, and quite honestly, I don't believe that the DOE has a system set up for you to thrive ... Even the people who work in the system sometimes don't even understand the whole system ... The other thing is also putting it in layman's terms, where the average Joe like myself can understand; [where] what you're saying, it doesn't seem like mumbo-jumbo ... [I want] a sort of lay of the land, right? Like, 'This is what we do. This is where this stuff falls under ... You do this if this doesn't happen, then you can do this. If this happens, then the next step is this.' ... I know it's not going to be a step-by-step for every scenario, but at the very least, enough of a skeleton that I'll know where to go if it falls under that range of an issue.*

Multiple parents spoke about trying to supplement on their own to make up for what they felt their children weren't getting in the classroom. For example, Michelle signed her son up for Kumon⁵ because she “unfortunately didn't feel that the school was able to give him those important foundational [literacy] skills” and asked a friend with teaching experience to tutor him for the state tests. Michelle went on to say, “I always find myself looking outside the box” for support. Another mother, who first noticed her older child's difficulties with reading when the schools shifted to remote learning during the pandemic, described turning to the Internet and social media for help.

ANGELA: *I had to try and learn after I noticed that my kid was in third grade [and] not necessarily able to move forward with her reading, and that just sitting down and reading was not enough. The more we read, I didn't see an upward curve in her ability to read more fluently, and it didn't help to read those leveled reading books, because she was bored out of her mind, and it didn't make reading more enjoyable. So, I would go on to Google or on Instagram and follow a whole bunch of pages about how to teach kids how to read and find activities ... I definitely didn't have the tools. I didn't have the knowledge. In a perfect world, I would have [gotten that from] the school.*

No parent should feel like critical information is being gate-kept or like they have no choice but to “look outside the box” to get support. Families should know what supports are available at their child's school for students who are struggling with reading, who at the school to contact if they have concerns, and what to do next if they are not getting the help they need at the school level.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Provide families with a clear roadmap for how to get additional help when their children need it. Families should not have to struggle to obtain support when they see their child is not progressing in reading. NYCPS should provide a system of support and interventions, tell families about the options that exist, and make clear how to access them.

⁵ An out-of-school math and reading program that provides individualized worksheet-based instruction.

* * *

New York City Public Schools needs to welcome families as partners in the critically important work of helping every child learn to read. While Chancellor Banks and other top leadership at NYCPS have publicly acknowledged the importance of family engagement, there is much work to do to translate that to the school level. A key component of NYC Reads must be communicating with families about what exactly NYCPS is doing and how it is affecting the teaching of reading in their schools; equipping teachers with the tools they need to provide parents with clear, digestible information about how their children are progressing and what they can do to support literacy learning at home; and creating a roadmap for families so they know where to turn to get help when a child is struggling. It will also require a mindset shift: moving beyond one-way information sharing to embrace parents as *allies* who possess funds of knowledge about students that schools cannot get anywhere else.

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ABOUT ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN

Since 1971, Advocates for Children of New York (AFC) has worked to ensure a high-quality education for New York students who face barriers to academic success, focusing on students from low-income backgrounds who are at greatest risk for failure or discrimination in school because of their poverty, disability, race, ethnicity, immigrant or English Language Learner status, sexual orientation, gender identity, homelessness, or involvement in the foster care or juvenile justice systems. AFC uses four integrated strategies: free advice and legal representation for families of students; free trainings and workshops for parents, communities, and educators and other professionals to equip them to advocate on behalf of students; policy advocacy to effect change in the education system and improve education outcomes; and impact litigation to protect the right to quality education and compel needed reform.

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