

# Learning across boundaries:

how parents and teachers are  
bridging children's interests

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# executive summary

This report presents findings from separate surveys of 1,550 U.S. parents and 600 pre-K–8 teachers on whether, to what extent, and how U.S. children ages 3–12 are linking their learning experiences across home, school, and community settings. The inquiry paid particular attention to the ways in which caregivers and teachers support and, in some cases, impede the development of young children’s interests and the learning associated with pursuing these interests. Focusing on differences across demographics, the developed environment, and socio-economic status while taking an equity perspective, findings highlight areas of weakness and strength in this ecosystem of connected learning, suggesting what we need to pay attention to if we are intent on facilitating seamless learning across boundaries.

## Key findings

**Learning in the community.** From libraries and churches to cafes and laundromats, young children spend time in diverse settings around the community. In general, high-income children spend time in a greater variety of settings than middle- and low-income children, which suggests unequal participation in activities that can promote their cognitive, social, physical, and cultural development. High-income children are more likely to regularly visit sports facilities and low-income children are more likely to visit laundromats than one another. Of the 10 places parents could choose from, malls/stores are the only one that children of all income groups are equally likely to visit.

**Learning in transit.** Children spend significant stretches of their days in transit. Nearly all (97%) ride in cars regularly, with 43% of parents reporting that their child spends more than three hours per week in the car. What do children do during their daily drives? Older kids are more likely to play with mobile devices or read than younger kids, and younger kids are more likely to nap. White children are more likely to talk to their parents than Hispanic children are, and African American children are more likely than their White or Hispanic peers to play with mobile devices. Just over a fifth (22%) of parents reported that their child takes mass transit, with three-fourths of these parents reporting that their child spends less than three hours on trains, busses, or subways in the course of a week. Generally speaking, children talk, consume media, and sleep less on public transit than in cars.

**Learning in digital realms.** Children use media and technology in a variety of ways to extend and deepen their interests—searching the Internet for information, watching online videos to get better at a skill, playing the same video games at home and school, and creating things with digital tools. There are differences between racial/ethnic groups in how children go about each of these activities: with their parents, with peers, or alone. Hispanic parents are more likely than other parents to accompany their child in these endeavors, and African American children are more likely to do them alone.

**Bridging roles.** Adults bridge young children’s interests and learning across time and place in various ways. We queried parents on four categories of bridging roles: connection (e.g., talking or learning about a child’s interests), exploration (e.g., doing activities or reading together), curation (e.g., identifying digital/media resources or books), and extension (e.g., attending or transporting a child to events around the community). Parents play connection, exploration, and curation roles at about equal rates across most demographic markers. However, differences were detected by family income on extension roles. Teachers also bridge students’ learning across time and place. Teachers serving language-diverse communities are more likely to read with, do activities of interest with, and assist students in finding print and digital media sources, compared to teachers serving less diverse communities.

**The enrichment gap.** Our data provide further evidence of what Duncan and Murnane (2011) coined the *enrichment gap*, the discrepancy between lower- and higher-income children’s participation in sports, music, scouting, and other out-of-school activities associated with positive physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional outcomes. More than a quarter (27%) of low-income parents reported that their child hadn’t participated in any of the 11 listed enrichment activities in the past year, compared to just 6% of high-income parents. Similar differences in non-participation also were found between Hispanic (25%) and White (17%) children, and children who live in rural (23%) versus suburban (16%) communities. These findings indicate that beyond the cost of these programs, social, cultural, and institutional factors may also account for lower rates of participation among certain groups.

**Locating opportunities.** Where do parents find out-of-school enrichment programs for their children? They most often count on the people they know in real life, including friends and family as well as more distant acquaintances like other parents. They also consult media-based resources like search engines and social media and, to a lesser extent, websites, newspapers, and e-mail listservs. Physical locations like libraries and community centers are less common sources of advice, simply because it doesn’t occur to parents to consult these resources. High-income parents are more likely to seek advice from parents of their child’s friends—which may provide access to a greater variety of enrichment opportunities to consider—than mid- and low-income parents. Low-income parents are more likely to consult family and friends than other parents, which may limit their purview of available opportunities in the wider community.

**Parent-teacher communication.** Parents and teachers are generally satisfied with their ability to reach one another with questions or concerns about a student. Four out of five parents are able to reach their child’s teachers with questions or concerns with relative ease. Of the fifth of parents who find it difficult, urban, middle-income, and single parents are more likely than their counterparts to have this challenge. Parents who send their child to private school are also more likely to express difficulty contacting teachers than parents of public-school students. Two-thirds of teachers believe that the amount of communication they have with parents is just right; a third want more and 4% want less. The teachers who want more communication primarily attribute the disconnect to parents who fail to show up for in-person meetings and events. These findings align with parents’ sentiments about in-person meetings, which they find less desirable/convenient than virtual modes of communication such as e-mail and messaging.

**Feelings of connectedness.** The extent to which both parents and teachers feel connected to their school communities may shape the nature and flow of learning across home and school. Four out of ten parents feel that their family is different from most of the families whose children attend their child’s school; one in five pre-K–8 teachers find it difficult to relate to many of their students’ families. Urban parents and teachers are more likely to feel different/dissimilar than those in rural and suburban communities. Parents and teachers in lower-income communities are also more likely to feel different/dissimilar than those in higher-income communities. Hispanic and African American parents admitted to feelings of dissimilarity at higher rates than White parents.

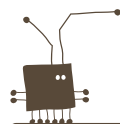
## Implications

**It’s not all about money.** This research highlights how some children have less access to out-of-school opportunities and venues that may benefit their learning, development, and later career prospects. But it also illustrates that the cost of these programs and places may not be the only reason why. While free or low-cost enrichment programs are increasingly available even in impoverished communities, the data suggest that parents may not be aware that these programs exist, or they may have difficulty locating ones that suit their child’s interests and/or their family’s budget, schedule, and transportation resources. Cultural differences may also play a role in terms of how much parents value school- versus out-of-school learning opportunities. We need to raise parental awareness of how these opportunities serve to connect and extend what children learn in school and at home and the availability of affordable and accessible programs.

**Family funds of knowledge.** Most teachers are aware of their students’ out-of-school interests and support them in a variety of ways. Still, there is a disconnect between home and school, especially among teachers who find it difficult to relate to many of their students’ families and among parents who feel alienated from the school community. In-person visits are one way that parents can share their families’ “funds of knowledge”—the expertise based on their culture, experiences, and routines—which can build greater empathy between home and school and lead to better learning outcomes for students. However, our survey indicates that parents have difficulty attending these meetings. How might teachers use technological solutions, such as parent engagement apps, to tap into families’ funds of knowledge?

What kinds of professional development supports are required to help teachers make the most of these tools for cultural knowledge sharing?

*Beyond parents and teachers.* While the surveys queried parents and teachers on the ways in which they support children's interests and learning across settings, findings point to other important actors in the learning ecosystem: the tech developers generating solutions to facilitate parent-teacher communications; the librarians providing information on programs available around town; the museums and parks offering free admission days to local families; and the press and media influencing what parents think about out-of-school learning. Our work suggests the need to engage out-of-school educators, civic institutions, city planners, the media/press, and technology developers in discussions with parents and teachers on bridging children's learning across settings.



advancing  
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