

Education Leaders Must Not Be Data Gatekeepers

Parent Portals Are a Key COVID-19 Recovery Strategy



For the first time in history, public schools have closed across the country, and students have been receiving instruction from their homes. But in their new role as educators, parents have been largely flying blind in their efforts to ensure that students are on track for success. This problem is not new: parents have always needed to be informed partners in their children’s education—and have stated their desire for data in poll after poll.

Too often, leaders assume parents do not have the time, energy, or knowledge to use data, but this assumption is more of an excuse than a reason not to act. Parents deserve the same information that teachers have about their children, especially in a time when they are functioning as de facto educators. Regardless of the pandemic response a district chooses to implement next year, parent portals will be key to ensuring good communications and parent supports.

States and districts already have the tools they need to provide parents with data. Every student information system (SIS) is capable of providing parent access—but many districts choose not to “turn it on,” placing district leaders as the gatekeepers to the most important asset a parent can have: information. It’s far past time to debate parent access to data; parents are ready for student data—and they are asking for it.



Parent Portals Deliver Communications and Data

As districts plan for next year, they must ensure that parents have access to a portal with the following [characteristics](#):

- **User-friendly interface and language:** Parents must be able to easily navigate the portal, and text must be easy to understand. Jargon should be defined, and information should be translated (or translatable) into the common native languages spoken within the district.
- **Timely alerts:** Parents should receive notifications through this tool that alert them to important information, like when their child misses an assignment or becomes at risk of not passing a course.
- **Seamless communications:** Portals should enable seamless and timely two-way communication between families, teachers, and administrators.
- **Clear context:** Student data must be presented alongside school data. Parents should be able to easily see how their child is doing in the context of overall school and district performance.
- **Multiple data sources:** Parents should be able to log on to one platform and have access to data from multiple sources.
- **Up-to-date data:** Parents must have timely information if they are going to support and advocate for their child.
- **Actionable information:** Data must be presented alongside resources and actions parents can take in support of their child.

School Information Matters to Parents Too

Alongside student information, parents need access to school performance information. The Data Quality Campaign’s (DQC) [2020 parent poll](#) found that 77 percent of parents agree that states should resume administration of statewide annual assessments in math and reading in 2021 to better understand how well schools and students are meeting academic standards.

The primary value of these assessments is understanding student academic growth, which offers parents a more complete picture of school quality. In Los Angeles, parents [demanded](#) growth data to better understand the performance of their child’s school—and they got it.

For further guidance on what information parents want and how to present it, see DQC’s [Show Me the Data](#).

Source: Online survey conducted within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of the Data Quality Campaign: April 28–May 1, 2020, among 1,725 parents of children ages 5–17 (1,565 whose children attend school).



States and Districts Can Learn from Leaders Already Doing the Work

Some education leaders have already taken action to get information into the hands of parents. States and districts can learn from the steps these leaders have taken and follow suit.



Houston's YES Prep Public Schools

YES Prep Public Schools, a charter network whose student population is 97 percent African American and Hispanic and 89 percent economically disadvantaged, is committed to sharing actionable data with parents and students. YES Prep parents are exactly the kind of parents that leaders typically think cannot or do not want to “do data,” but the network has found ways to meet them where they are by saving them time, speaking their language, and providing real value. Through its [Family Portal](#), YES Prep has been successful in taking the following actions:

- **Providing connections to staff during school closure:** When schools closed, YES Prep needed an easy way for teachers and administrators to communicate with parents and vice versa. Parents were already using this tool, so YES Prep enhanced it to facilitate communications during remote learning.
- **Taking parent feedback seriously and continuously improving:** Leaders have defined terms and acronyms that parents felt were confusing (e.g., GPA) and simplified the login process, creating a mobile app that is easier to access.

“All of us want our kids to succeed, and tools like this make it so much easier.”

—YES Prep Parent

- **Enabling two-way, translated communications:** The portal not only allows parents to communicate directly with their child's teachers but also seamlessly translates the messages into a parent's native language. YES Prep has guidelines for teacher responses to ensure that parents receive responses in a timely manner.
- **Integrating data:** After realizing that some families had students at different campuses within the network, YES Prep made sure that parents could use one login to access all of that information. Because the network used the [Ed-Fi data standard](#), it was able to incorporate data from the SIS and the schoolwide behavior system in one place, saving parents valuable time.

- **Sharing up-to-date information:** Parents are able to see student grades, attendance, behavior, and missing assignments in real time. Some functions, like a calendar displaying absences visually, help parents understand how chronic absenteeism affects their child's academic progress.



Providence Public Schools

Leaders in Rhode Island's Providence Public Schools are working to get data into the hands of parents. The district is developing Learner Profiles, a tool that will connect parents, families, and students with data to help students in Providence succeed. This work includes the following steps:

- **Building in time to pressure test the tools to make sure the data makes sense to families:** Leaders are hosting focus groups to gather parent feedback on the profiles to ensure that the profiles are a useful tool that will engage families, students, and educators with the information they need to help students in Rhode Island excel.
- **Connecting out-of-school-time providers and others who can help students succeed:** On the Learner Profile, district officials will provide information about the child's “team,” including counselors and teachers as well as out-of-school-time partners who interact with the students. Providing this information will facilitate seamless communication among all of the adults invested in ensuring that a student gets the right support.



Georgia State Department of Education

Georgia delivers student-level longitudinal data from the state data system directly to each district's SIS, enabling administrators, principals, teachers, and parents to access a richer set of data through their existing local portal. State leaders worked with SIS vendors to develop the coding necessary to deliver student information from the state directly to teachers and parents without creating new dashboards or logins. Every parent has access to current-year information from the district as well as to their child's data from the prior academic year linked over time. With one login, parents can see their child's progress over time and spot trends to inform conversations with teachers about their child's path.



State Leaders Must Prioritize Making Parent Portals Possible

Districts should not have to do this work alone. States can ensure that districts provide parents with the information they need by taking the following steps:

- **Require districts to turn on their parent portals and support district efforts to provide parents data access.** Turning on parent portals is the simplest way that districts can give parents access to the data they need. States should support district efforts to give families access to data through easily accessible online tools that make data easy for parents to find, use, and understand.
- **Ensure that every parent has access to their student's longitudinal record and robust school information side by side with daily information.** It is not enough for parents to have access to data about their child. They must also have access to information that puts their child's data in context with the student's longitudinal record and helps them understand how their child is being served by the school. States and districts can support parents by presenting this robust data in the parent portal.
- **Use federal recovery dollars to ensure that every parent in the state has a parent portal.** The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) Act provides funding to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education. The funding can and should be used to increase the capacity of a state's data infrastructure by providing families with access to useful information through parent portals.

The time to give parents data is now as districts craft COVID-19 response strategies. Parents must have information to help their children succeed as they continue to navigate the uncharted territory of school closures and remote learning. States and districts must meet parents' data needs and support them in accessing and understanding information that will help them best meet the needs of students. Recovery depends on it.



The Data Quality Campaign is a nonprofit policy and advocacy organization leading the effort to bring every part of the education community together to empower educators, families, and policymakers with quality information to make decisions that ensure that students excel. For more information, go to www.dataqualitycampaign.org and follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) (@EdDataCampaign).