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The Unheard Voices Project

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Unheard Voices Community Conversations project was launched in response to urgent and persistent concerns about the quality of public education in the United States. Despite high levels of education spending, American students continue to lag behind their international peers in academic performance. Traditional top-down interventions often impose recommendations for improvement through policy mandates or regulatory requirements without community input. Community members rarely have a voice in decisions about their local schools, yet they are the ones who must live with the consequences of poor results.

In the Unheard Voices Community Conversations project, we aimed to give a voice to community members in areas with low-performing public schools. Our goal was to create space for these stakeholders to share their lived experiences with local education systems, identify the challenges that prevent school improvement, and explore practical, community-driven strategies to better support student outcomes. We were particularly interested in learning the degree to which community members have the interest and bandwidth to actively pursue educational change in local schools, with a special focus on understanding what conditions or supports might strengthen engagement.

To understand community perspectives, we organized small discussions with community members in collaboration with local organizations. Participants included parents, educators, community leaders and activists, and business representatives, among others. We traveled across the United States to communities of all sizes—cities, towns, and rural areas—and spoke with people from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, educational levels, and experiences, including minorities and those historically underserved, to ensure a diversity of perspectives. The unifying characteristic was that the communities we visited had low-performing schools.

An Initiative from Hoover Education

March 2026

This report draws on nine focus groups and a companion survey conducted between June and November 2025. The results point to policy considerations for strengthening community-school partnerships. The key findings are these:

- Communities have limited information about school performance. Over half of survey respondents were unaware of state performance ratings for their local schools and could not identify their district's rating. Further discussion revealed that performance information is not easily accessible or proactively communicated, limiting families' ability to engage with accountability systems they may not know exist.
- Those who are familiar with performance ratings consistently rate schools as low-performing. Over half of survey respondents rated their schools as needing improvement or not meeting expectations, with district schools rated lowest of all school types. Challenges include teacher turnover, resource shortages, inadequate special education services, low expectations, and unmet needs such as vocational education, financial literacy, mental health support, culturally responsive teaching, and language services.
- Even when improvement efforts demonstrate success, initiatives are often discontinued following funding cuts, leadership changes, or shifting priorities.
- While community members understand the consequences of poor schools, they believe that the value of education has declined for families and students, seeing structural barriers as factors eroding confidence in schooling as a pathway to opportunity.
- Participants believe that crucial decisions regarding educational services and programs are made without community input or representation, leading to solutions that do not address the community's actual needs. Community members feel unheard, excluded, and ignored by school administrators, principals, teachers, and the school system as a whole.
- Communities want to be partners in addressing these problems, yet they feel shut out of decision making. Among survey respondents, 52.1 percent want equal partnership with schools, yet only 24.3 percent believe districts want the same, and school boards are rated the least receptive to community involvement among all stakeholders (mean 2.97 out of 5).
- Despite this exclusion and other systemic barriers, extraordinary untapped civic capacity exists, with nearly 90 percent of participants willing to join community efforts to improve local schools and 54.1 percent wanting active participation, to the point of committing to twenty-plus hours over a six-month period.
- Community members value collective potential over individual influence. While participants are not particularly confident in their personal ability to drive meaningful change, they express much greater confidence in collective action. They see coordinated community efforts as a real source of power that schools and districts should recognize and support.

- Communities know what would enable their participation. They cite flexible meeting times accommodating work schedules, culturally responsive staff reflecting communities served, practical supports such as childcare and stipends recognizing parents' time, antiretaliation protections, transparent decision making, stable leadership, and, most fundamentally, being at design tables from the beginning rather than being handed predetermined solutions.

An overarching insight across the findings concerns community capacity for engagement. The study shows that community members are interested in getting involved in efforts to improve local schools. Yet many barriers limit participation, including limited knowledge and skills to navigate the system and advocate effectively. While respondents recognize that education is important, the link between school performance measures and life outcomes often remains unclear. The findings indicate that if community members are expected to help drive change, intentional capacity building is needed, focused on how schools operate and what is at stake when schools perform poorly.

The rest of the report presents the approach used in the study and summarizes the information we gleaned from individual surveys and focus group discussions.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

IDENTIFICATION OF COMMUNITIES WITH LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

We used district school performance data to identify communities with low-performing schools. Districts were flagged as low-performing if their academic proficiency scores were in the lowest quintile of their state distribution. From the resulting list, we selected school districts to create a pool of communities that had regional, racial, and socioeconomic diversity.

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

This study would not have been possible without the partnership of local organizations focused on education with deep community expertise and connections. These organizations served as liaisons to the communities and as local experts, facilitating participant recruitment. Their support was essential to fielding the participants of each focus group.

Partner organizations were asked to recruit a diverse group of community stakeholders—those whose voices are often overlooked, including parents, local business owners, community leaders, and volunteers who are respected and trusted in their communities. Organizations were especially helpful in recruiting participants who would represent their specific communities well.

Recruitment approaches varied across sites. Some organizations utilized social media while others leveraged their professional networks and recruited from community members already invested in education issues. Consequently, participant engagement and knowledge levels varied across focus groups: Some participants were less active and less informed

about education initiatives, while others were more involved and presented more informed perspectives.

Both local organizations and participants received compensation for their participation.

INTERACTIONS WITH COMMUNITY MEMBERS

All sessions were conducted in person at venues provided by partner organizations, including organization offices, public libraries, churches, and local schools. Each session lasted approximately seventy-five minutes.

Recognizing that surveys and focus group discussions each have their strengths and limitations, we chose to combine their use in our conversations. We provided physical copies of the surveys to participants at the start of the meeting. After introductions and a review of the goals for the session, we interleaved time for community members to answer specific sections of the survey with group discussion of the topics those sections addressed. In this way, we were able to collect individual views and opinions as well as get a broader and more nuanced group read by using probing questions and consensus tests.

The focus group guide and the survey instrument are included in the appendices.

All conversations were audio-recorded with participant consent. The study followed human subject research regulations and received approval from the Stanford Institutional Review Board (IRB). At the conclusion of the analysis, all audio files were destroyed.

DATA ANALYSIS

Audio files from focus groups were transcribed. Transcripts were then organized into a matrix, systematically sorted, and analyzed to identify key themes and domains of interest and to compare findings across sites for similarities and contradictions. The results were then discussed with and vetted by the broader research team. Survey data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics to examine variation between sites and across various demographic and geographic stratifications.

While participants were asked to reflect on specific school districts, their experiences and perspectives often extended beyond the territorial boundaries of individual districts. This was particularly evident in urban and suburban areas where multiple districts operate in close proximity or within the territorial boundary of a single city. As a result, some participants found it difficult to relate experiences to specific schools or districts in their responses.

PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

A total of eighty-two community members participated in nine focus groups across geographically and demographically diverse communities (five urban, two suburban, and two rural). Each focus group included between seven and eleven participants. The distribution

TABLE 1 FOCUS GROUP DISTRIBUTION

Focus group	State	Number of participants	Percentage
RC	CO	10	12.2%
RC	WV	9	11.0%
SC	MN	7	8.5%
SC	PA	8	9.8%
UC	IN	8	9.8%
UC	IN	10	12.2%
UC	NM	10	12.2%
UC	NY	9	11.0%
UC	NY	11	13.4%
Total		82	100%

Note: SC = suburban community; UC = urban community, RC = rural community

of participants across sites is presented in table 1. More detailed site characteristics, including racial composition and the size of the communities and school districts that serve them, are presented in Appendix I: Site Characteristics. Notably, we conducted two focus groups in different locations within New York state and two in a single location in Indiana.

Participants represented diverse roles within their communities, bringing multiple perspectives to discussions about education quality. Of the eighty-one respondents who indicated at least one community role, the most common positions were parents and local advocates or volunteers, each representing 45.7 percent of the sample. Nearly one in five participants were teachers or school employees (19.8 percent) or business owners and executives (19.8 percent), while 18.5 percent served as community-based organization leaders. Smaller proportions identified as neighborhood leaders (13.6 percent), elected officials (3.7 percent), civic leaders (3.7 percent), and faith leaders (3.7 percent). One participant worked as a media professional or journalist. Nearly a quarter of respondents (24.7 percent) identified other roles not captured in the predefined categories, including charter school board members, current students, grant funders, and taxpayers. Many participants held multiple roles simultaneously, reflecting the interconnected nature of community involvement. Table 2 provides a complete summary of community roles.

The sample reflected considerable geographic diversity, with participants residing in urban (44.4 percent), suburban (27.2 percent), rural (22.2 percent), and small town (6.2 percent)

TABLE 2 COMMUNITY ROLES SUMMARY

Community role	Frequency	Percentage
Parent	37	45.7%
Teacher / School employee	16	19.8%
Business owner / Executive	16	19.8%
Elected official	3	3.7%
Nonprofit agency leader	15	18.5%
Civic leader	3	3.7%
Faith leader	3	3.7%
Neighborhood leader	11	13.6%
Media / Journalist	1	1.2%
Local advocate / Volunteer	37	45.7%
Other role	20	24.7%

Q: Which of the following roles in your community apply to you? (Select all that apply; *N* = 81.)

Note: Respondents could select multiple roles.

settings. This distribution ensured that perspectives from varied community contexts were included in the analysis.

The majority of participants (78.0 percent) had children in their family or close circle currently attending local schools, providing them with direct, personal stakes in education quality. Among these sixty-four respondents with school-age children, most had children in high school (62.5 percent), elementary school (57.8 percent), or middle school (51.6 percent), while nearly a quarter (23.4 percent) had children in pre-K or kindergarten. These families primarily utilized district public schools (71.9 percent), although substantial proportions also accessed charter schools (29.7 percent), private schools (10.9 percent), and homeschooling (10.9 percent). The overlap in school types indicates that many families navigated multiple educational settings that enabled perspectives on choice and comparative school quality.

This diverse participant composition ensured that the focus group discussions captured a wide range of experiences, concerns, and insights regarding public education quality across different community contexts, demographic profiles, and stakeholder positions.

COMMUNITY INSIGHTS

LIMITED COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE ABOUT SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Survey data revealed gaps in community awareness of formal school accountability systems. Only 45.7 percent of respondents reported awareness that states rated school performance (table 3), while 44.7 percent could identify *their* district's ratings. This lack of awareness varied across sites, but the overall pattern suggests a fundamental barrier to community engagement: Residents cannot meaningfully engage with accountability systems they do not know exist.

> *"Parents can't be involved if they aren't informed. They can't be informed if they aren't invited."*
>
> *— [Urban Community-1, NY]*

Focus group discussions illuminated the structural barriers underlying this knowledge gap. Participants consistently reported that information about school performance is not readily accessible or proactively shared by educational institutions. Notably, a few expressed that even when information is provided, sometimes it is inaccurate or highly curated to paint a misleading picture. For example, one participant explained how districts use metrics where schools with low proficiency rates receive high letter grades, celebrate growth percentages that obscure persistently low achievement, and report statistics in ways that hide the scale of failure. While less common, participants noted that when parent education

TABLE 3 AWARENESS OF PERFORMANCE RATINGS

Focus group	State	Yes	No
RC	CO	6 (60.0%)	4 (40.0%)
RC	WV	3 (33.3%)	6 (66.7%)
SC	MN	2 (28.6%)	5 (71.4%)
SC	PA	6 (75.0%)	2 (25.0%)
UC	IN	4 (50.0%)	4 (50.0%)
UC	IN	2 (22.2%)	7 (77.8%)
UC	NM	5 (50.0%)	5 (50.0%)
UC	NY	5 (55.6%)	4 (44.4%)
UC	NY	4 (36.4%)	7 (63.6%)
Total		37 (45.7%)	44 (54.3%)

Q: Are you aware of the current performance ratings that your state education department has issued for your local public schools?

"We failed our children. The system failed them."

— [Suburban Community, PA]

programs help families understand these metrics and ask informed questions, districts shut down those programs. Beyond performance data, transparency problems extend to other processes. One participant described a budget process that begins quietly without public visibility, characterizing it as starting "like a mouse in a corner," before "a billion-dollar budget" is suddenly passed without meaningful community input, exemplifying the exclusionary practices discussed later in the report.

Despite limited awareness of formal performance data, many participants understood the consequences of poor school quality for students and communities. Several participants across sites articulated concerns spanning multiple domains: academically unprepared students unable to meet college admission criteria, workforce implications when students cannot pass employer-required assessments, and the school-to-prison pipeline affecting Black and Brown communities. One participant explicitly connected inadequate education to poverty and social control, stating, "Keep them poor and uneducated, you can control them," while successful education programs demonstrate the potential to change life trajectories.

Although they understood the high stakes, participants in almost all focus groups reported observing a decline in the value many families and students place on education. This devaluation reflected multiple intersecting factors across all focus groups: parents without educational backgrounds themselves lacking the capacity to support students; accumulated impacts from waves of crime and drug epidemics; functional illiteracy limiting student support at home; parents working multiple jobs; and diminished parental involvement and expectations over time. Participants described structural barriers and their effects as factors that have reduced confidence in education as a pathway to opportunity.

POOR QUALITY OF LOCAL EDUCATION AND OBSTACLES TO STUDENT SUCCESS

Community members generally understood that local schools are underperforming. Among those aware of current performance ratings, 55.9 percent (nineteen of thirty-four) believed their public schools need improvement or do not meet expectations; 17.6 percent (six of thirty-four) rated their schools as approaching expectations; and 26.5 percent (nine of thirty-four) rated their schools as meeting or exceeding expectations. Across all school types, public district schools received the lowest ratings, with a mean score of 2.91 out of 5.0 (table 4).

Focus group discussions reinforced these views. Community members frequently described schools as poor, referring to low academic achievement, low proficiency rates, and students being unprepared for college or the workforce. They also noted real-world consequences, such as straight-A students who still cannot meet college admission requirements and students who view a high school diploma as their ultimate goal, with little direction beyond graduation.

TABLE 4 SCHOOL TYPE QUALITY RATINGS

School type	Number of ratings	Average	Standard deviation
Public district	79	2.91	0.99
Private nonreligious	36	3.58	0.87
Private religious	36	3.92	0.91
Charter schools	52	3.29	0.96
Technical / Vocational	51	3.45	0.88

Q: For each type of school that operates in your community, how would you rate its overall quality? (Rate on a scale of 1 = Very Poor to 5 = Excellent.)

Despite those generally negative ratings, some participants rated their schools comparatively higher when judging them against what they perceived as even more dysfunctional alternatives rather than on absolute quality. This may help explain why some still rated their local schools as meeting or exceeding expectations.

> *"If you have money, you have a good education. If you don't have money, you don't have access to a good quality education."*
>
> *— [Urban Community-1, NY]*

Challenges Undermining Educational Quality

Participants identified several intersecting challenges that they believed undermine learning quality in the local schools:

- **Teacher challenges are both broad and deep.** Participants in all focus groups reported that teachers are inadequately prepared to work with diverse learners, students with disabilities, or behavioral issues. Retention was also perceived as a major problem, with some noting difficulties filling positions, particularly in math, and describing turnover as "horrendous" because higher salaries in neighboring districts had pulled away experienced teachers. Participants in several focus groups questioned teachers' commitment in their schools and suggested that the job has become more transactional.
- **Resource shortages and misallocation impact performance.** Participants in six focus groups discussed funding challenges. A majority believed that chronic underfunding contributes directly to poor performance. Against that view, another participant pointed out that the issue lies in misallocation of funding, which needs not necessarily to be increased but to be redirected from administration to classrooms. Individual participants specifically mentioned disparities among schools across districts, with some schools lacking lunches or basic medical supplies while others have far better services.

- **Student supports are inadequate.** Over a dozen community members across five focus groups described gaps in identifying and supporting students with learning disabilities, while some reported misuse of IEPs (individualized education programs) as a way to avoid accountability. They reported increases in emotional disabilities after the COVID-19 pandemic without sufficient support systems. At the same time, advanced students were seen as insufficiently challenged because schools focus on bringing struggling students to a minimum proficiency.
- **Communities suffer from low expectations and limited parental capacity.** Participants in six focus groups asserted that expectations for student achievement were counterproductively low in both schools and families. They believed some parents lack the educational background or information needed to support their children. This concern appeared in accounts of schools taking on wide responsibilities traditionally filled by families, such as providing meals, clothing, mental health services, and childcare. In a few communities, respondents in unison indicated that these expanded services are needed because many families are coping with opioid addiction, working several jobs with little time for anything beyond handling emergencies, or facing their own literacy challenges. These conditions leave educators feeling stretched as they try to manage everything, prompting some districts to hire social workers so teachers can focus more on instruction instead of addressing families' basic needs.
- **Disruptive behavior of some students impacts learning for all.** A majority of community members across almost all focus groups reported that students were facing adverse family circumstances, including family violence, homelessness, and parents working long hours, which result in behavioral problems that dominate classrooms and interfere with learning. Participants noted that schools respond with early suspensions and discipline rather than by addressing the underlying causes of student behavior.
- **Technology displaces engagement in many classrooms.** Several participants thought that technology was replacing instruction rather than supporting it. They described students spending long periods on tablets with little oversight or meaningful learning.

Unmet Education Needs

Focus group participants noted that critical decisions about educational services and programs are often made without community input or representation, resulting in gaps they believed need to be addressed:

- **Instructional practices do not meet the needs of the students they are intended to serve.** Community members in five focus groups called for better special education services, including more consistent identification of learning disabilities, differentiated instruction for diverse learners, and clearer pathways for students to progress beyond initial special education placements. Multiple participants emphasized the need for culturally responsive teacher training to help educators work more effectively with diverse

student populations. They also noted that schools fall short in teaching practical "life skills," including financial literacy and money management, and do not offer enough challenges for advanced or gifted students.

> *"Teach them a blue-collar job. We need more people like that, so they can somehow help the community and impact us instead of just being a burden in school all the time."*
>
> *— [Urban Community, IN-1]*

- **Students and communities need vocational career preparation.** Participants across almost all focus groups highlighted the need for strong vocational and technical programs that open real pathways beyond students' current circumstances and contribute to the community. They stressed that students must see how education connects to economic opportunity and upward mobility. This solution had the strongest consensus and the most passionate support across communities, and it was the one participants believed would be transformative.
- **To support student success, expanded support services are needed.** Participants in several focus groups identified critical gaps in mental health and behavioral support, calling for behavioral coaches and interventions that address underlying causes rather than relying on punitive suspensions. Some communities noted that mental health services were recently added and described them as "much needed," suggesting that participants viewed schools as filling gaps left by inadequate mental health and social service systems.
- **Better parent support programs would improve school-parent partnership.** Parent support programs emerged as a priority need across multiple communities. Families reported needing clearer guidance on navigating school systems, understanding special education rights, and supporting learning at home. Participants also pointed out that grandparents raising children and immigrant families require targeted support, including ESL programs and trustworthy translation services.
- **Communication and access need improvement.** The majority of focus group participants discussed communication and access needs. They indicated that information about school performance, improvement efforts, and available resources should be shared proactively rather than left for families to search out. Over a dozen focus group members noted the importance of accommodating working parents, such as arranging evening or weekend meetings and virtual formats. Rural participants also stressed transportation issues, especially the need for improved bus service to enable after-school participation and to shorten long commutes.

DENIED PARTNERSHIP IN EDUCATIONAL DECISION MAKING

Survey results suggest that most respondents recognized where decision-making power sits in their local school systems. A large majority believed that school boards are responsible for school quality (seventy-one of eighty-two, 86.6 percent), about two-thirds believed that

TABLE 5 STAKEHOLDERS RESPONSIBLE FOR SCHOOL QUALITY

Stakeholder group	Frequency	Percentage
Local school board	71	86.6%
Parents and families	52	63.4%
Teachers	55	67.1%
Local government	31	37.8%
State government	40	48.8%
Broader community	29	35.4%
Students	27	32.9%
Other	6	7.3%

Q: In your community, who is responsible for ensuring schools provide high-quality education? (Select all that apply.) (Yes responses only; *N* = 82)

Note: Respondents could select multiple stakeholders.

parents and teachers are responsible (63.4 percent and 67.1 percent, respectively), while fewer assigned responsibility for ensuring that schools provide high-quality education to other community members (table 5).

Community members expressed a strong preference for shared responsibility with schools, but they did not believe districts shared this view. More than half (thirty-eight of seventy-three, 52.1 percent) wanted community and schools to act as equal partners. In contrast, only 24.3 percent (eighteen of seventy-four) believed districts want the same. Very few respondents felt responsibility should rest primarily with the school system or government (2.7 percent), although more believed districts prefer this arrangement (14.9 percent). A smaller group (9.6 percent) wanted community leadership in decision making, but only 2.7 percent believed districts support such an approach (table 6).

"Our voices were never heard. . . . Community members at these meetings faithfully telling them what they need and what these kids need, and it's not being met."

— [Urban Community, IN-1]

The survey's ratings of how receptive various local stakeholders are to increased community involvement reinforced these perceptions. Local community leaders received the highest rating (mean score of 4.03 out of 5), while school boards and elected officials received the lowest (2.97). School superintendents were rated slightly higher (3.28), suggesting they may be perceived as more accessible intermediaries. These findings

TABLE 6 PERSPECTIVES ON RESPONSIBILITY FOR SCHOOL QUALITY

	Participants' perspective on responsibility		School district's perceived perspective on responsibility	
Response	**Frequency**	**%**	**Frequency**	**%**
Community should lead	7	9.6%	2	2.7%
Community and schools are equal partners	38	52.1%	18	24.3%
Schools/policymakers lead, community supports	25	34.2%	34	45.9%
Responsibility belongs to school system/government	2	2.7%	11	14.9%
Unsure / No opinion	1	1.4%	9	12.2%
Total	73	100%	74	100%

suggest that those with the most formal authority are perceived as the least responsive to community input.

Community Exclusion

Community members across all sites described exclusion from educational decision making as a persistent struggle, despite many wanting meaningful partnership. Barriers to engagement were discussed with exceptionally high intensity across communities, with 90–100 percent of participants in multiple focus groups raising these concerns at the highest intensity level. They perceived a fundamental hypocrisy in which schools and districts make decisions without community input while publicly emphasizing the importance of engagement.

Participants described several mechanisms of exclusion. Superintendent selection is conducted without transparency, and budget processes remain invisible to communities until final decisions are announced. In some districts, community forums that once supported dialogue had been eliminated, with no alternative offered. Even when formal involvement opportunities exist, such as school improvement committees or parent representative roles, community members reported that these structures exert no meaningful influence. Some parents explained that they had attended meetings, served on committees, or held representative positions for years without seeing follow-through or being consulted on major decisions.

Community members also perceived exclusion based on racial, economic, and knowledge-based differences:

- **Representation by race matters to community members.** Across several sites, participants pointed out that leadership structures are populated by White individuals, creating barriers for families of color who lack representation in decision making.
- **Language and cultural differences act as barriers, not bridges.** Communities with large immigrant and refugee populations described families struggling to navigate English-only communications, school policies, and unfamiliar educational norms. Some parents reported feeling "on an island," unable to advocate effectively for their children. In some cases, school-provided translators aligned with school officials rather than accurately representing parents, and families were not informed that they could bring their own translators.
- **Economic disparities exist across zip codes.** Community members in five focus groups described geographic inequalities, contrasting underresourced schools in their communities with better-funded schools in wealthier areas. One participant noted that schools "ten minutes away" had significantly better resources and amenities, illustrating how district boundaries and community wealth shape educational access.
- **Knowledge deficits act as barriers, not opportunities to educate.** Parents in most focus groups reported limited understanding of how the school system works, how to raise or escalate concerns, the roles of different administrators, or how to interpret lengthy district documents. Some explained that many parents "don't know they are entitled to a voice."

Participants also noted that exclusion extends beyond those lacking resources and knowledge. They described instances where schools had declined contributions from local businesses, nonprofits, or skilled community members, such as engineers or musicians, who offered free programming or workshops for students.

UNSUSTAINED IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS AND FAILED INITIATIVES

Despite these low ratings, participants reported in the survey that some efforts have been made to improve the quality of local schools, mainly through adding student supports (57.3 percent), changing superintendents (46.3 percent), and adopting a new curriculum (26.8 percent) (table 7). The low ratings, despite reform efforts, may be due to implementation gaps or insufficient interventions.

Focus group participants across sites described histories of improvement efforts that were not sustained, with promising initiatives eliminated, successful programs systematically dismantled, and continuous cycles of change preventing program continuity:

- **School districts dismantled successful programs.** Participants in a few focus groups shared examples of initiatives that had been altered or discontinued due to district mandates or policy changes. In one community, a school achieving high performance experienced the removal of supports, and vocational partnerships connecting students

TABLE 7 ACTIONS TAKEN TO IMPROVE SCHOOLS IN THE PAST TWENTY-FOUR MONTHS

Action type	Frequency	Percentage
Electing pro-improvement school board	16	19.5%
Changing the superintendent	38	46.3%
Adopting new curriculum	22	26.8%
Strengthening teacher evaluations	17	20.7%
Adding student supports	47	57.3%
Other actions	6	7.3%

Q: In the past 24 months, have any of the following actions been taken to improve the quality of your local public schools? (Please exclude private schools, charter schools, and technical & vocational schools from your answer.) (Yes responses only; *N* = 82)

Note: Respondents could select multiple actions.

to high-salary careers were discontinued when leadership changed. Community members with professional expertise faced barriers to contributing due to certification requirements. In another community, a community engagement infrastructure, including forums, parent education programs, and parent liaison positions that once provided dialogue and education opportunities, had been eliminated.

"Every child that went through that school from grade seven to graduation had not one, not two, but sometimes five college offers. The school district shut it down because it was not meeting its criteria for education."

— [Suburban Community, PA]

- **Instability undermined program continuity.** Despite lower frequency, participants reported that some school districts had experienced extreme leadership turnover, and each transition disrupted initiatives, with committees and improvement plans losing momentum or being abandoned. Political transitions at the state level meant that new administrations altered or discontinued initiatives, even if they were successful.
- **Efforts to improve effectiveness and sustainability were absent.** Over a dozen participants from multiple focus groups described programs that had started with enthusiasm but struggled to reach scale or consistency; library and community resources that remained underused due to poor communication; and curriculum reforms that varied by school with uncertain implementation. In several communities, participants reported limited awareness of improvement initiatives or difficulty identifying measurable results. In one urban community, recent initiatives, such as a cell phone ban and expanded mental health services, were perceived as showing immediate improvements but faced uncertainty about sustainability given historical patterns. Several communities noted

that only legal action had compelled districts to provide necessary resources after standard channels were exhausted.

UNTAPPED CIVIC CAPACITY

Willingness for Structured Participation

Survey findings showed strong interest in organized forms of participation. Nearly 90 percent of respondents expressed willingness to join a community task force to improve local schools, with over half wanting to participate actively (such as serving as an active member and helping lead efforts) and a quarter preferring passive participation (such as attending community meetings) (table 8).

Survey responses revealed that willingness to participate in a theoretical community task force declined as time commitments increased. Participants averaged 4.36 out of 5 for a five-hour commitment over six months, dropping to 3.40 for twenty or more hours (table 9). Responses also became more varied at higher time commitments, with some participants remaining willing while others found larger demands increasingly unfeasible. These findings suggest that designing participation opportunities with modest time requirements (five to ten hours over six months) may maximize engagement and broad participation.

The Gap Between Personal and Collective Agency

While respondents expressed high willingness to engage, they reported low confidence in their personal capacity to improve local schools (figure 1). Only about one-quarter (27.2 percent, twenty-one participants) felt they could have a strong personal influence, while over one-third (36.4 percent, twenty-eight participants) felt they had little, yielding a mean score of 2.88 on a 5-point scale. Confidence increased when they considered collective

TABLE 8 TASK FORCE INVOLVEMENT INTEREST

Involvement level	Frequency	Percentage
Support idea, but would not participate	7	9.0%
Would attend community meetings	20	25.6%
Would be an active member	34	43.6%
Would help lead or organize efforts	16	20.5%
Do not support this idea	1	1.3%
Total	78	100%

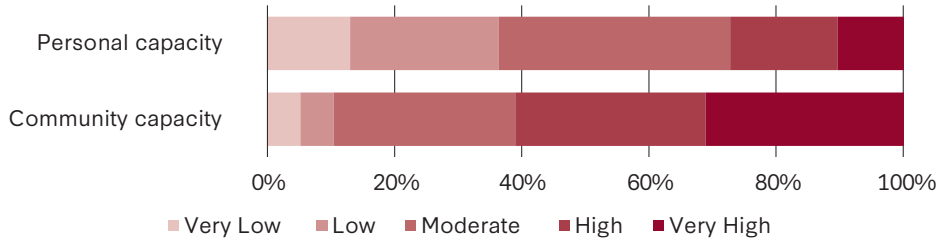
Q: If a community task force is created, what level of involvement would you provide? (Select one.)

TABLE 9 TIME COMMITMENT FOR TASK FORCE PARTICIPATION

Time commitment	Number of ratings	Average rating	Standard deviation
5 hours total	72	4.36	0.84
10 hours total	69	4.12	1.04
15 hours total	68	3.74	1.22
20+ hours total	70	3.40	1.46

Q: How likely are you to join this task force if it required the following time commitments over 6 months? (Rate on a scale of 1–5, where 1 = Absolutely Not, 5 = Absolutely Yes.)

FIGURE 1 Perceived personal vs. community capacity to effect change (*N* = 77)



Q1: Perceived personal capacity: How would you rate the ability of citizens like yourself to bring about change in the performance of local schools in your community? (Rate on a scale of 1–5, where 1 = Very Low, 5 = Very High.)

Q2: Perceived community capacity: How likely is it that community effort would be effective in improving local schools in your community? (Rate on a scale of 1–5, where 1 = Very Unlikely and 5 = Very Likely.)

action; most (61.0 percent, forty-seven participants with a mean score of 3.77 out of 5) believed community-wide efforts could be effective. This gap suggests that people perceive potential in coordinated community work but feel limited as individuals.

Barriers to Community Engagement

Survey responses and focus group discussions point to a mix of personal and systemic barriers to engagement. Notably, the most common survey response was that no barriers affected respondents' ability to participate (26.8 percent). At the same time, several obstacles still emerged. Time constraints affected 25.6 percent of respondents, and some respondents reported issues of inclusion: 20.7 percent did not feel welcome or included, and 18.3 percent reported not being asked or invited. Open-ended comments highlighted additional concerns such as perceived institutional resistance, limited opportunities to contribute, and language barriers (table 10).

TABLE 10 BARRIERS TO SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

Barrier type	Frequency	Percentage
Not interested	2	2.4%
Dislike volunteer work	0	0.0%
Not enough knowledge/expertise	9	11.0%
Not enough time	21	25.6%
Not sure can make difference	5	6.1%
Process too contentious	4	4.9%
Afraid of negative consequences	7	8.5%
No change needed	0	0.0%
Don't feel welcomed/included	17	20.7%
Haven't been asked/invited	15	18.3%
Other barriers	13	15.9%
No barriers affect ability	22	26.8%

Q: Which of the following factors affect your ability to support school improvement efforts in your community? (Select all that apply.) (Yes responses only; *N* = 82)

Note: Respondents could select multiple barriers.

"The reality . . . is that it's a privilege to be civically engaged. . . . We're not going to be thinking: 'Did I vote yet?' . . . We're going to be thinking: 'Did I pay my rent?' 'Do I have food on the table for my kids?'"

— [Suburban Community, MN]

Focus group discussions across sites added nuance to the survey data but should be interpreted in proportion to the quantitative findings. While only a minority of survey respondents identified specific barriers such as lack of time or fear of negative consequences, the qualitative discussions showed how these issues played out for those who experienced them. Community members who elaborated in the focus groups explained how various constraints shape daily interactions with schools, limit families' efforts to engage, and contribute to the gap between their high willingness to participate and limited influence in school decision making. The themes below reflect the perspectives of those who chose to discuss these challenges in detail rather than conditions experienced by all respondents.

- **Economic and practical constraints impact engagement.** Participants across all nine focus groups described limited time for involvement due to economic and practical pressures. In several discussions, participants pointed out that civic engagement is a privilege not accessible to those in economic survival mode. Parents working multiple jobs described having limited time for involvement except during urgent situations. As one participant explained, "It's a privilege to be civically engaged. . . . We're going to be thinking, 'Did I pay my rent?' 'Do I have food on the table?'" Other parents noted working in neighboring counties or towns with "no time to attend anything other than when there's a crisis." Community members explained that financial pressures, caregiving responsibilities, nonstandard work hours, and childcare demands often prevent engagement. In rural communities, transportation barriers, long distances, and inconsistent internet or cell service further restrict participation. Many parents reported that they could not attend meetings without childcare, and such support is rarely offered. They felt expected to participate without the structural conditions that would allow them to do so.

> *"Sometimes you go to school and do nothing because you know that here they retaliate later against the children . . . if you complain."*
> *— [Urban Community, IN]*

- **Fear, retaliation, and prior negative experiences stunt the will to collaborate.** Participants across sites described avoiding engagement due to concerns about retaliation toward their children when they raised issues. Several parents in multiple communities reported past experiences in which advocacy resulted in negative treatment, leading them to disengage to protect their children. Others indicated personal attacks from community members, including elected officials, had discouraged their participation. Long-standing negative experiences in schools had shaped mistrust and discomfort. Parents explained being hesitant to enter school buildings due to earlier interactions that left them feeling unwelcome. In one urban district, conversation particularly emphasized what participants called "generational trauma," explaining that many parents had attended the same schools themselves and "carry trauma from how they were treated," seeing "their children facing the same problems decades later." In another suburban community, parents reported being "ignored or even escorted out of school board meetings." When parents had raised informed questions, they were labeled "insubordinate" or "troublemakers," creating an adversarial culture that positioned parents as problems rather than partners. In one urban community, several participants described fear of retaliation, with immigration-related fears compounding these concerns.

- **Information and knowledge gaps create barriers to engagement.** Community members in over half of the focus groups reported limited understanding of school structures and processes. In one community where this theme particularly dominated the conversation, participants explained that they "don't necessarily know how to advocate for themselves. . . . They haven't been instructed or led" and faced documents of over a thousand pages as barriers. Many did not know how to escalate

"Some administrations are unsure how to utilize parent/community involvement effectively. Some schools are uncertain of what to do, despite considerable community interest. . . . Some administrations are not transparent. Some are completely against involvement."

— [Urban Community, NM]

concerns beyond principals, what various administrative roles entailed, or what rights they had, especially in special education. The majority of participants in several communities emphasized the need for parent education about IEP rights and navigating special education systems. Although resources and programs exist, they are often inconsistent, and families indicated that they are not clearly communicated such that extensive research is needed to locate information. Parents who were immigrants, in particular, face challenges navigating the system, with language barriers further limiting their ability to understand the rules, advocate for their children, and become more involved in their children's education.

- **Community members see institutional exclusion and resistance on the part of school administrators.** Participants across all sites pointed out situations in which schools or districts actively limit community participation. For example, they reported that administrators discourage questions, do not return calls or emails, decline offers from community organizations, or restrict access to meetings and buildings. Participants across communities described power structures that do not reflect the demographics of their communities. They believed this creates a disconnect between leadership and families. Parents described feeling unwelcome in schools. Some reported being escorted out of meetings or told they could not enter school spaces beyond the front office. Meetings are often scheduled at times when parents could not attend.

- **Personnel turnover and organizational challenges create crippling instability.** Community members described districts with high administrative turnover, including rapid changes in superintendents and principals. They viewed these changes as disrupting continuity and erasing prior work. New administrations often replace existing initiatives, making long-term progress difficult. In several communities, participants discussed how programs disappeared due to grant dependency, while others noted that frequent staff turnover means "if even a relationship is built, it turns over." Some communities perceived the system as shifting from student-centered to adult-centered priorities, with increases in administrative positions while student needs remained unmet.

- **Lack of follow-through and accountability are strong signals of disregard.** Families in half of the discussions reported long-standing experiences of providing input without seeing outcomes. For example, in one community, participants mentioned that they had served on committees for years without seeing effective results, with one waiting four years for a budget session follow-up. Other communities also discussed the lack of follow-through. This pattern discourages engagement and reinforces perceptions that participation will not lead to change.

Supports Communities Identified as Necessary

Despite those barriers, community members suggested specific supports and structures that could make engagement more feasible and effective. These supports were typically discussed with high intensity and by substantial majorities of participants.

> *"One of the most important ways to support is literacy. Parent literacy. If we really knew what we had available and how, if we all understood that, we would better know how to approach the situation. Once you understand what you have available and what you lack, then that's when you start building blocks."*
>
> *— [Urban Community, IN]*

- **Community members want flexible and accessible ways to participate.** Most community discussions revealed a need for a flexible, accessible participation option. Participants highlighted that meeting times should be scheduled with community needs rather than institutional convenience in mind, that engagement should not depend entirely on physical presence, and that even small contributions, such as ensuring regular attendance, were valuable. They recommended evening or weekend meetings, virtual participation, home-based engagement opportunities, and clear, limited commitments.
- **Parents believe clear, consistent communication and parent education is essential.** Parents in almost all focus groups reported needing information through multiple channels (such as text, mail, newsletters, phone calls, and communication apps) to understand opportunities, resources, and expectations. In one urban district, all participants emphasized the need for workshops on policy reading and school processes as well as education on parents' rights. The majority of participants in several other communities also emphasized the need for parent education, including about IEP rights and parents' rights as taxpayers. They recommended more proactive outreach rather than requiring parents to search for information, noting that even when comprehensive programs exist, families may be completely unaware of them.
- **Constructive engagement must consider supports to families.** Participants in five focus groups identified practical supports, such as childcare, food, transportation assistance, and after-school meeting times, as essential for engagement. Some recommended modest stipends or gift cards to recognize parents' time and reduce barriers. They described roles such as family engagement coordinators, parent liaisons, and community-based family centers as valuable bridges between families and schools.
- **Inadequate cultural representation and responsiveness remain drivers of divide.** Community members in areas with high immigrant populations emphasized the need for good-quality, trusted translation services across the many languages spoken in local schools and the value of school staff who reflect local communities and are trained in cultural competency. They recommended increasing the presence of teachers and administrators who come from the communities they serve and adopting the principle of "nothing about us without us" in designing engagement opportunities. They stressed the

importance of beginning with community listening rather than offering predetermined solutions.

- **Transparency and accountability for inclusive practices by district officials are essential for trust.** During four discussions, participants noted that communities need processes and laws protecting those who want to raise concerns, such as antiretaliation measures and accessible complaint pathways. In one community, all participants called for a truly parent-led office of parent engagement and better superintendent selection processes. Several other communities also emphasized the need for accountability and transparency. They recommended more-transparent budgets, clearer communication about major decisions, and stronger follow-up mechanisms to demonstrate that community input leads to action.
- **Stable leadership and commitments to long-term investment are essential to improve community confidence.** Community members in several discussions also emphasized that schools need steady leadership and consistent staffing to make real progress. They felt that frequent turnover disrupts programs and prevents long-term improvement. In several focus groups, participants called for better teacher compensation to reduce turnover. Participants also said that funding should be reliable rather than tied to short-term grants and that more resources should reach classrooms instead of expanding administrative layers.

SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE EDUCATIONAL QUALITY

When asked what actions would help improve underperforming schools, respondents preferred evidence-based, comprehensive approaches (table 11). The most commonly selected actions were conducting a comprehensive assessment of schools' current models

TABLE 11 ACTIONS TO IMPROVE UNDERPERFORMING SCHOOLS

Improvement action	Frequency	Percentage
Comprehensive assessment of school's current model	65	79.3%
Examples of successful turnaround efforts in similar communities	61	74.4%
Assigning new management team to school	47	57.3%
Offering alternative school choices for students	49	59.8%
Other actions	12	14.6%

Q: Which of the following do you think would help improve underperforming schools in your community? (Select all that apply.)

Note: Respondents could select multiple actions.

(79.3 percent) and examining examples of successful turnaround efforts in similar communities (74.4 percent), indicating that communities want data-driven solutions grounded in proven models rather than untested interventions. Over half also supported assigning new management teams (57.3 percent) and offering alternative school choices (59.8 percent). Respondents who specified other actions identified needs spanning staff development, accountability mechanisms, communication improvements, programming enhancements, and systemic reimagining. The range of responses and the fact that respondents selected multiple actions suggest that communities recognize that improvement requires coordinated interventions across multiple domains rather than single solutions.

Focus groups expanded on these survey findings. Communities identified effective approaches to improving schools based on both proven results from implementation and successful models observed elsewhere. These solutions are presented in condensed form in table 12.

TABLE 12 PROPOSED SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LOCAL SCHOOLS

Solution category	Specific approaches	Evidence of effectiveness
Instructional innovation	Supportive practices addressing the effects of poverty and adverse childhood experiences; differentiated instruction based on student interests; skill-based progression where students advance when competencies are mastered; hands-on experiential learning through field trips and job programs	Understanding how students respond to adverse experiences enabled more effective instruction; teaching to student interests; increased engagement.
Expanded curriculum	Vocational/technical education (HVAC, welding, plumbing, auto repair) leading to career pathways; financial literacy and money management; cultural identity education; workforce readiness skills	Participants characterized vocational pathways as needed alternatives; cultural identity education reduced bullying and increased empathy.
Alternative assessment	Recognition through project-based work, presentations, capstone projects, attendance rates, dropout rates; asset-based approaches viewing bilingualism as a strength	Moved beyond standardized testing as sole measure; "success in world shouldn't be based on eighth-grade math test."
Student support services	Mental health services and school-based health clinics; behavior coaches during suspension with virtual learning and cognitive behavioral methods; better screening for ADHD, ADD, learning disabilities; social workers	Drug incidents cut in half with resource officers present; mental health services addressed critical needs; parents initially came for incentives but "stayed for the material" in parenting classes.

(continued)

TABLE 12 PROPOSED SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LOCAL SCHOOLS (*continued*)

Solution category	Specific approaches	Evidence of effectiveness
Teacher quality improvements	Culturally competent teachers drawn from the communities they serve; professional development on working with diverse learners; competitive compensation to prevent turnover; administrative support for struggling teachers; teacher evaluation tied to student performance	Teachers who understood students' contexts improved instruction and built trust.
Proven engagement models	Parent liaison programs with culturally connected staff conducting thousands of home visits; structured parent involvement requirements (homework checks, meetings, educational sessions); hiring administrators who reflected community demographics	Reduced dropout rates from 56 to 8 per 1,000; increased postsecondary enrollment from 20% to 70%; programs requiring structured involvement achieved performance matching that of highest-performing districts.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined community members' perspectives on educational quality and engagement in nine diverse communities with low-performing schools.

Community members expressed interest in contributing to efforts to improve local schools and believed in the value of collective action. They understood the consequences of poor school performance, including students being unable to meet college admission criteria or pass employer assessments and who subsequently experience limited economic mobility. They linked inadequate education to cycles of poverty and reduced opportunities, demonstrating awareness of the high stakes involved. However, the connection between school performance measures and life outcomes often remains unclear to some parents and community members.

Despite this general readiness and awareness, participants reported barriers to effective participation. These included practical constraints (such as time limitations from working multiple jobs and meetings scheduled during work hours), systematic exclusion (not feeling welcomed or invited and lack of access to major decisions about budgets and superintendent selection), structural barriers (language barriers without adequate translation and limited building access), and concerns about consequences and efficacy (fear of negative repercussions for speaking up and doubts about whether their input would matter).

A critical barrier identified across all sites was limited knowledge and capacity for effective engagement. The majority of participants were unaware of state performance ratings for their

local schools and could not identify their district's ratings. Focus group participants reported lacking information on how to navigate school systems, understand performance data, interpret accountability measures, or access decision-making processes beyond school principals. Many demonstrated limited knowledge about special education rights, available support services, and pathways for advocacy.

These findings suggest that if community members are to become effective partners in educational improvement, intentional capacity building will be essential. This might include education on how school accountability systems work and how to interpret performance data; training on navigating school bureaucracies and understanding escalation pathways; information about rights and available services, particularly regarding special education; and skills for effective advocacy and participation in decision-making processes. Communities demonstrated a willingness to engage and an awareness of the importance of education, but they require specific knowledge and skills to participate effectively in improvement and accountability efforts.

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APPENDIX I: SITE CHARACTERISTICS

Community	Context
Urban Community, MN	The racial composition is 31% White, 34% Black, 13% Hispanic, 17% Asian, 1% Native American, and 4% Multiracial. The city has four school districts. The discussion centered on a small district comprising one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school, serving approximately 2,124 students.
Urban Community, NM	The racial composition is 38% White, 3% Black, 48% Hispanic, 3% Asian, 4% Native American, 1% Other, and 3% Multiracial. The city is served by the largest school district in the state, which operates approximately 143 schools including 88 elementary, 5 K–8, 28 middle, 20 high, and 31 charter schools, serving approximately 70,000 students.
Suburban Community, PA	The racial composition is 14% White, 71% Black, 10% Hispanic, 1% Asian, 1% Other, and 3% Multiracial. The city is served by a school district that operates a high school and 5 elementary schools, serving approximately 3,100 students.
Urban Community-1, NY	The racial composition is 37% White, 35% Black, 19% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and 6% Multiracial. The city is served by a school district that operates approximately 46 schools serving around 22,000 students. The district includes elementary schools (grades PK–6), middle schools (grades 7–8), and high schools (grades 9–12).
Urban Community-2, NY	The racial composition is 42% White, 32% Black, 12% Hispanic, 9% Asian, and 4% Multiracial. The city is served by a school district that operates approximately 61 schools serving about 29,000 students across elementary, middle, and high school levels.
Rural Community, CO	The racial composition is 36% White, 2% Black, 56% Hispanic, 2% Native American, 1% Asian, and 3% Multiracial. The city is served by a school district that operates an elementary school, middle school, and high school, serving approximately 2,100 students.
Urban Community, IN	The racial composition is 49% White, 27% Black, 14% Hispanic, 4% Asian, and 5% Multiracial. Multiple K–12 public school districts serve residents of the city. The discussion centered on a district serving approximately 21,000 students.
Rural Community, WV	The community is predominantly White with 98% White residents, 1% Hispanic, and 1% Multiracial. The town is served by a county school district that operates 8 schools, serving approximately 2,900 students across the county.

Note: All demographic data are from the 2020 US Census. School enrollment figures are from the 2023–24 or 2024–25 school year, depending on data availability.

APPENDIX II: SURVEY INSTRUMENT

First, we'd like to learn about you and your role in your community.

Please answer questions 1–5.

Q1 Which of the following roles in your community apply to you? *(Select all that apply.)*

- ☐ I am a parent of a K–12 student.
- ☐ I am a teacher, administrator, or employee of a local school.
- ☐ I am a business owner or executive (CEO, COO, CFO) operating in my community.
- ☐ I am an elected official (mayor, city or county administrator, council member).
- ☐ I lead a local, state, or national community-based or charity organization.
- ☐ I lead a civic organization (e.g., Rotary, Kiwanis, Knights of Columbus, Boy Scouts).
- ☐ I lead a faith community.
- ☐ I am an official or unofficial neighborhood leader.
- ☐ I am a journalist or media leader.
- ☐ I am a local advocate or volunteer.
- ☐ Other—please specify: _____

Q2 How would you describe the area where you currently live? *(Select one.)*

- ☐ Urban (city)
- ☐ Suburban (near a city)
- ☐ Town
- ☐ Rural (countryside or sparsely populated area)

Q3 Do you currently have children in your family or close circle who attend local schools? *(Select one.)*

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No (skip questions Q4 & Q5)

Q4 What grade levels are they in? *(Select all that apply.)*

- ☐ Pre-K / Kindergarten
- ☐ Elementary school (grades 1–5)
- ☐ Middle school (grades 6–8)
- ☐ High school (grades 9–12)

Q5 What type of school do they attend? *(Select all that apply.)*

- ☐ District public school
- ☐ Charter school
- ☐ Private school
- ☐ Home school
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

Now, we'd like to learn about the quality of schools in your community.

Please answer questions 6–9.

Q6 For each type of school that operates in your community, how would you rate its overall quality? *(Rate on a scale of 1–5, where 1 = Very Poor, 5 = Excellent.)*

	1 Very Poor	2 Poor	3 Fair	4 Good	5 Excellent	N/A
Public district schools	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Private nonreligious schools	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Private religious schools	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Charter schools	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Technical & vocational schools	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q7 Are you aware of the current performance ratings that your state education department has issued for your local public schools?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Q8 What performance rating did your state education department issue for your public school district for the 2023–24 school year?

- ☐ A / Exceeds Expectations / 5 stars
- ☐ B / Meets Expectations / 4 stars
- ☐ C / Approaching Expectations / 3 stars
- ☐ D / Needs Improvement / 2 stars
- ☐ F / Does Not Meet Expectations / 1 star
- ☐ I don't know

Q9 In the past 24 months, have any of the following actions been taken to improve the quality of your local public schools? *(Please exclude private schools, charter schools, and technical & vocational schools from your answer.)*

	Yes	No	I don't know
Electing a pro-improvement school board	☐	☐	☐
Changing the superintendent	☐	☐	☐
Adopting a new curriculum (for example, a new reading program, civic courses, etc.)	☐	☐	☐
Strengthening teacher evaluations	☐	☐	☐
Adding student supports (mental health counseling, tutoring, post-secondary planning, etc.)	☐	☐	☐
Other (please specify): _____			

In the next few questions, we will ask you about community involvement and your individual contribution to improving schools in your community.

Please answer questions 10–15.

Q10 In your community, who is responsible for ensuring schools provide high-quality education? *(Select all that apply.)*

- ☐ The local school board
- ☐ Parents and families
- ☐ Teachers

- ☐ Local government
- ☐ State government
- ☐ The broader community
- ☐ Students
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

Q11 Which of the following statements best reflects <u>your perspective</u> on how responsibility for improving local schools should be assigned? *(Select one.)*

- ☐ The community should lead the effort to improve local schools.
- ☐ The community and school system should be equal partners.
- ☐ Schools and policymakers should lead, supported by the community.
- ☐ The responsibility belongs entirely to the school system and government.
- ☐ I'm unsure or have no opinion.

Q12 Which of the following statements best reflects <u>your local school district's perspective</u> on how responsibility for improving local schools should be assigned? *(Select one.)*

- ☐ The community should lead the efforts to improve local schools.
- ☐ The community and school system should be equal partners.
- ☐ Schools and policymakers should lead, supported by the community.
- ☐ The responsibility belongs entirely to the school system and government.
- ☐ I'm unsure or have no opinion.

Q13 How would you rate the ability of citizens like yourself to bring about change in the performance of local schools in your community? *(Rate on a scale of 1–5, where 1 = Very Low, 5 = Very High)***:**

- ☐ 1 – Very Low
- ☐ 2 – Low
- ☐ 3 – Moderate
- ☐ 4 – High

- ☐ 5 – Very High
- ☐ I don't know / don't have an opinion

Q14 In the <u>past year</u>, how many hours have you spent in activities related to local schools or the school district? This may include attending school board meetings, volunteering at a school, supporting school-related initiatives, advocating for school improvements, tutoring students, or other activities. *(Select one.)*

- ☐ 0 hours
- ☐ 1–4 hours
- ☐ 5–9 hours
- ☐ 10–14 hours
- ☐ 15 or more hours

Q15 Which of the following factors affect your ability to support school improvement efforts in your community? *(Select all that apply.)*

- ☐ I'm not interested.
- ☐ I dislike this kind of volunteer work.
- ☐ I don't feel I have enough knowledge or expertise.
- ☐ I don't have enough time.
- ☐ I'm not sure I can make a difference.
- ☐ I expect the process would be too contentious to endure.
- ☐ I'm afraid of negative consequences (e.g., retribution or backlash).
- ☐ I don't think any change is needed.
- ☐ I don't feel welcomed or included in these efforts.
- ☐ I haven't been asked or invited to participate.
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____
- ☐ There is nothing I can think of that affects my ability to support school improvement efforts in my community.

Imagine your local schools have been officially identified as needing improvement due to serious deficiencies in education quality. In response, community members are being invited to help develop solutions to improve these schools.

Please answer questions 16-20.

Q16 How likely is it that community effort would be effective in improving local schools in your community? *(Rate on a scale of 1-5, where 1 = Very Unlikely and 5 = Very Likely.)*

- ☐ 1 - Very Unlikely
- ☐ 2 - Unlikely
- ☐ 3 - Neutral
- ☐ 4 - Likely
- ☐ 5 - Very Likely
- ☐ I don't know / I don't have an opinion

Q17 How receptive do you think the following groups would be to greater involvement from the community? *(Rate on a scale of 1-5, where 1 = Very Unreceptive and 5 = Very Receptive.)*

	1 Very Unreceptive	2 Somewhat Unreceptive	3 Neutral	4 Somewhat Receptive	5 Very Receptive	I don't know
School board	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
School superintendent	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Elected government officials	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Local business leaders	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Local community leaders	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Local media	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q18 If a community task force is created, what level of involvement would you provide? *(Select one.)*

- ☐ I support the idea, but would not participate.
- ☐ I would attend community meetings.
- ☐ I would be an active member.
- ☐ I would help lead or organize efforts.
- ☐ I do not support this idea.

Q19 How likely are you to join this task force if it required the following time commitments over 6 months? *(Rate on a scale of 1–5, where 1 = Absolutely Not, 5 = Absolutely Yes.)*

	1 Absolutely Not	2 Probably Not	3 Neutral	4 Probably Yes	5 Absolutely Yes
5 hours total	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10 hours total	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
15 hours total	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
20+ hours total	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q20 Which of the following do you think would help improve underperforming schools in your community?

	Yes	No	I don't know
A comprehensive assessment of the school's current model	☐	☐	☐
Examples of successful turnaround efforts in similar communities	☐	☐	☐
Assigning a new management team to the school	☐	☐	☐
Offering alternative school choices for students	☐	☐	☐
Other (please specify): _____			

APPENDIX III: FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

1 *Let's start with your role in the community.*

Q1 Raise your hand if any of these apply to you:

- You work in or for a school (like a teacher or school staff member).
- You work with or lead a community, civic, or nonprofit organization.
- You own a local business.
- You're a parent of a school-age child.
- You're an elected official.
- You hold some other role (specify).

2 *Let's talk about the quality of public schools in your community.*

Q2 What is a general impression of the quality of your local public schools?

Q3 What are the biggest challenges schools face?

- PROMPT: You might think about things like safety, attendance, transportation, parent involvement, or relationships between teachers and students.

Q4 Can you think of any specific actions that have been taken? Have those actions been successful?

- PROMPT: If not, what went wrong?
- PROMPT: If yes, can you give examples of what worked well—something that could serve as a model for future school improvements?

Q5 What actions would you like to see taken to improve local public schools?

3 *Let's start with a show of hands.*

Q6 Raise your hand if you would consider yourself an active citizen in your community.

Q7 Do you think community members have a role in improving schools?

- PROMPT: If yes, what does that role look like? Can you share any examples?

4 *Imagine people in your community came together to push for better schools.*

Q8 What would that look like in your community?

Now thinking about the present:

Q9 What gets in the way of people getting involved in school issues? (Alt: What are some barriers that stop you or others from speaking up or taking action?)

Q10 What kinds of support or resources would make it easier for people to get more involved in school issues?

Q11 Is there anything else you'd like to share about any aspect of education in your community that hasn't been mentioned yet?

32 31 30 29 28 27 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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About the Unheard Voices Project

The Unheard Voices Project continues Hoover Education's tradition of providing sound, research-based information focused on improving education for every child in every community in the United States. While there are a number of important surveys relating to K–12 education, only the Unheard Voices Project combines and amplifies the voices of elected leaders, business leaders, organizational leaders, and parents to identify policies and practices in K–12 schooling that will strengthen their communities.

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