

Adding Rungs to the Ladder of Opportunity: Actions for Teachers and Schools

This toolkit is a companion to the report “Rebuilding the Ladder of Educational Opportunity”. Here, we present specific, concrete actions and steps that can be taken by teachers, schools, and districts to rebuild the ladder of opportunity, addressing and reducing the gaps that affect students. The actions are grouped under the same major categories of findings as the report: Identify the Gaps; Address the Gaps; and Parent and Community Engagement. Within each category, there are suggestions and steps that the high-performing teachers from the report described as occurring in their own schools and communities. Each individual step may be small, and not all actions may work in every context. The measures described here have proved to be powerful remedies in the hands of educators willing to take a risk and implement them.

Actions: Identify the Gaps

Data Sources

Nearly every school and school district in the U.S. has a **website**, and most teachers are aware that these sites contain a variety of information. The data are frequently targeted to students or parents and families, with courses and instructional resources and contact information and schedules and events. Accountability data, at the state and federal level, may also be available there. Additional resources to supplement include federal data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Their web site where users can [Search for Public School Districts](#) uses the Common Core of Data to provide profiles of schools and districts. Each school and district’s characteristics, locale, student/teacher ratio; staff; funding; and census demographic data are provided. In many cases, context data such as national or state averages are presented for comparison as well. The site consolidates data and makes comparisons straightforward and has a flexible search feature. There is a comparable site to [Search for Private Schools](#). Both sites support download of data sets in Excel format.

In addition, teachers and school administrators are surveyed in the [National Teacher and Principal Survey](#) and its precursor, the [Schools and Staffing Survey](#). The NTPS is of public schools only, while the SASS included non-public schools. These surveys, conducted with a nationally representative sample of teachers and principals, covers a set of core topics as well as a rolling set of topics that changes from cycle to cycle. General information about the community, including housing, poverty, health insurance, education, industries, and much more can also be found in the [American Community Survey](#), part of the U.S. Census.

Speaking of Surveys

People are bombarded with requests for information and time these days; students and families are no exception. And when a week rarely passes by without news of a data breach of some sort, data security has become an additional barrier to gaining participation in surveys. Nonetheless, well-done **surveys** remain a useful tool in gaining insight into otherwise difficult areas.

Students

Surveys used in schools fall into a number of categories. When given to students, there are two main kinds: **student perception surveys**, focusing on the student's views on the instruction they receive, and **interest inventories**, gathering information on what students care about and want to do with their lives. Commercially available student perception surveys such as [Tripod](#) and [My Student Survey](#) are based on research, validating what kinds of questions provide the greatest insight while avoiding issues such as surveys becoming equivalent to teacher popularity contests. Reports providing feedback and context on instructional practices are offered at the teacher, school, and district level.

A large number of sample student interest inventories are available on the web, as well as free tools to create your own like [Kahoot](#), [Survey Monkey](#), and [Google Forms](#), among many others. These tools allow teachers and schools to tailor surveys to fit their population and topics of interest. Answers to items can be free-response, multiple choice, or use a [Likert scale](#). Multiple-choice and Likert items are relatively easily summarized numerically, and free-response items are best for questions with a wide range of possible responses. Technology has made it much easier to administer surveys and get valid results from even very young students, especially now that emojis and images can be used as response options. Most surveys can be completed on any platform, allowing students to respond from a computer, tablet, or phone in a few minutes.

Parents and Families

Families have a great deal of information about their students. They are generally willing to share, as long as they believe their views will be respected, welcomed, and acted upon. **Family and parent surveys** should be thought of as a two-way street: information about the student comes from the parents; and information about resources and support going to the parents. Information requested from families can be many things. Some example questions include:

- What are three words that best describe your student?
- What kinds of things does your student like to do outside of the classroom?
- What academic areas do you think your student needs to improve this year?
- What social skills do you think your student needs to improve this year?
- What upsets your student?
- What make your student happy?
- What books does your student like?
- What does your student want to be when s/he finishes school?
- What resources can the school provide to help you support your student?

Effectively surveying families requires thoughtful consideration of the questions asked, media used, and what will be done with the results. The list of questions should be as short as is compatible with gathering the essential information, since you do not want to impose a major burden on the respondent. It is probably best to make the survey available in **multiple formats**. Online surveys are great, but not everyone has access to the internet or a computer at home. Sending out a link to a survey via email is effective only if all recipients have and read the email account where the link is delivered. Surveys in English may not be comprehensible to all parents, so translation may be needed. An automated phone survey may work for some families; postal mail may work for others. And for some families, only a personal phone call or home visit will reach them.

Possibly the most important factor in gaining cooperation on surveys and other activities is **follow through**. If families are to believe that their information is valued, something must be done with it. If

student interests are surveyed, then those interests should be reflected in **activities and instruction** at the school. If parents spend their time prioritizing their greatest concerns from a list, then **classes or seminars** addressing the highest-ranked topics should be offered. If a parent indicates that a student needs extra support in reading comprehension or problem-solving persistence, then that should be reflected in **services** the student receives. And the process by which these responses are made should be **transparent**.

Anchor in Reality

Students have asked from time immemorial, “What am I ever going to do with this?” Teachers have answers of all sorts, but sometimes the best way is to have students figure out for themselves where the skills being taught fit into the world of careers. One novel approach has been made easier through the proliferation of online job boards, like [Monster](#), [Indeed](#), [LinkedIn](#), [CareerBuilder](#), and many others. The job listings cover every profession imaginable. Students can do a **search** with the skills they are being taught and see what jobs require them. This step can easily be made part of assignments, and it helps broaden the perspective of students, connecting schoolwork with work in a very direct way.

WATCH: [Lewis Chappellear: Being Prepared](#)

Expectations and Bias

Despite their best efforts, teachers and school leaders have biases. This is hard to acknowledge, but until we understand our baseline, we cannot improve. One way to examine preconceptions is to complete an **assessment of implicit attitudes** and associations such as the one offered by researchers at [Harvard](#). These online assessments are free of charge and cover a range of possible sources of prejudice. These assessments may help teachers recognize their own biases, a necessary step in the process of overcoming them.

Actions: Address the Gaps

Relationships and Partnerships

Trust and relationships was a clear and major theme in the findings of this study, and that comes as no surprise. Teachers know that, if students are to take risks and fail as part of learning, there must be trust that the process comes with encouragement and not embarrassment. They must believe that other students as well as their teacher are there to help, not hinder; to support, not undermine. Teachers **model** those attitudes every day in their classrooms, making and discussing their own errors, building relationships with their students and facilitating those between students. And for some students, that modeling shapes a vision of their own future—they want to be teachers, too. Groups like [Educators Rising](#) support the development of the next generation of teachers.

WATCH: [Leah Luke: Building the Future of Teaching](#)

Another way to reinforce student’s sense that teachers are invested in them for the long run is through **partnering with their previous teachers**. In our study, lower-grade teachers, who previously taught students now in upper grades, help **tutor** those who need extra academic support or who are preparing for state testing. These small-group and individual sessions are with a familiar face, and those teachers are still visibly championing student success—even when those students are no longer in that teacher’s

class. It makes clear to everyone that the students are “ours, not mine.” The school and system maintain responsibility for all students throughout their time in the building and beyond.

An additional place where elementary and middle-grades teachers can partner is in dealing with **behavioral issues**. In our high-performing schools, elementary teachers are effectively communicating clear expectations, building consistent routines, and instilling standards of appropriate conduct and respectful interactions. Explicit teaching of these social norms may be more common in elementary classrooms, so these teachers have experience and lesson plans at the ready. When a middle-grades teacher encounters disruptive or insensitive behavior in students, she may be less prepared to address it. An elementary school partner teacher, however, can offer insight in the past of their students as well as strategies and activities that address the challenges. Knowing how the elementary partner teacher would address the concern offers a fresh viewpoint on how to respond in a way that is both familiar and effective.

Empathy and Experiences

The writer Douglas Adams once said: “Human beings, who are almost unique in having the ability to learn from the experience of others, are also remarkable for their apparent disinclination to do so.” We learn best from things we experience ourselves. So too with empathy. Although we can imagine the feelings, thoughts, and attitudes of others, the accuracy of that projection is improved with personal encounters.

Many of our participant schools have populations of students who are learning English and so are at various levels of proficiency. It seems obvious to **group native speakers** of the same language together, and for some activities that is good practice. However, one teacher noted that it can be beneficial to **group students by proficiency** in English as well. At his school, students speak several different native languages, and for part of their daily instruction, the classes within the grade are mixed up so that students of comparable English levels are grouped together to learn. The groups are matched with teachers whose skills align with the students’ needs. These students gain empathy for each other through their shared struggle learning a new language.

Students in the U.S. are tested frequently, often at high stakes and high stress. Although teachers and administrators find testing stressful as well, they experience it differently than their students. One way to demystify the process is to participate in it. Many schools are invited to participate in **research studies, item tryouts,**

LANGUAGE LEARNING

Many programs for students learning English push them towards English only. In the process, many students lose their first language facility. At East Point Elementary in Texas, the program instead has as its goal truly **bilingual and biliterate** students.

The dual language immersion program is open to students Pre-K through 6th grade. Every student in the program is learning a second language—for some, that’s English and for others, it’s Spanish—while building skills in their first.

The results go beyond students receiving foreign-language credits in high school. East Point’s dual-language students consistently outperform their other students in all academic areas.

And perhaps most importantly, the students all depend on each other for support as they learn. Each group has skills the other group is seeking. The English-only speakers are not the “goal.” In the dual-language program, everyone is a model!

and norming samples. In many of these settings, teachers have an opportunity to be the voice for the students they teach, giving feedback to those in charge of creating, administering, and revising the assessments.

Voluntary survey assessments like [NAEP](#), [PIRLS](#), [TIMSS](#), and [PISA](#) are designed to provide insight into the relative performance of groups of students over time, across cities, states, and countries across the globe. Participating in these assessments may require some sacrifice of instructional time, and so these requests should be carefully considered and selected. Teachers and school leaders can influence decisions about which optional tests are given through roles on school and district committees, as well as members of the community, parents of students, and voters. These tests do offer a chance to take a large-scale standardized assessment in a **no-stakes** atmosphere; while the scores are important for policymakers, no individual scores will be returned to the students.

Teachers and leaders may have the opportunity to serve on **curriculum committees** at the district or state level, influencing numerous choices that directly affects their classrooms. They may also gain insight into the testing process through opportunities to become **test item writers** (for example, for [ACT](#), [Pearson](#), or [Measured Progress](#)) or **test scorers** (for example, online for [ETS](#) or on-site at several locations for [Pearson](#)). While the work is confidential, lessons about language, structure, and timing learned can be applied to classroom instruction as appropriate.

Exposure

Many of the schools in this study have large populations of students who do not speak English as their first language and who may not speak it at home. There are numerous instructional techniques to support **language acquisition**, including:

- explicit vocabulary instruction and grammar rules
- physical response and acting out words and phrases
- deliberate teaching of both **“brick” (concrete nouns, adjectives) and “mortar” (verb tense, prepositions, articles, abstract language) words**
- think-pair-share and other approaches to team and group work, where language can be practiced in a low-stakes environment
- increased emphasis on students talking in class
- instructions given both verbally and in writing
- clear modeling of process and steps
- use of diagrams, pictures, or videos, especially of things that may be uncommon in other cultures (like “football”—which is something quite different in the US than other countries!)
- **gradual release of responsibility**, sometimes referred to as “I do/we do/you do”, and
- displaying sentence stems and question starters, in English and other languages relevant to the students.

Our high-performing teachers discovered that these **same techniques are also very effective with students facing opportunity gaps such as poverty**. Much academic material has a high language load, as well as a set of underlying assumptions about general and cultural knowledge that marginalized students may not share. These techniques are good teaching for any class and students, and they work to bridge the gaps for many learners.

Another dimension of exposure that disadvantaged students may lack is to “background” cultural experiences, terms, and knowledge. Teachers in our study unanimously recommended activities like

field trips—to universities, theaters, sporting events, monuments, farms, museums, cities, or employers—and **guest speakers**. Presenters who have a **connection**, either to the school, such as alumni, or to the content, like architects who use geometry to create buildings or authors of books students are reading, will have the greatest impact.

WATCH: [Topher Kandik: Learning from Experience](#)

Consistency

Everyone in a school system works better when the system has consistent rules, expectations, and policy enforcement. One aspect of consistency is **staff and leader turnover**. Although a few of our participants noted that some turnover can have beneficial effect, as when a new leader brings fresh ideas and a different attitude to a school or district, most praised stability in staffing. Repeatedly remarked was the idea that **strong school leadership** with clearly communicated goals had a dramatic impact in reducing teacher turnover. Multiple administrators in the study stated that they had to replace one or a few or even no teachers in the previous year or years, and what turnover they had was due to maternity leave, military relocation, or other factors outside of their sphere of influence. Making the school a place that teachers want to stay, where they feel supported, where policies are fair and equitably enforced, and where the staff send their own children: all of these are part of what makes a school successful.

Relatively small actions by staff and administrators build that consistent culture of caring. In one school, when something requires a teacher to be out of his classroom, such as joint planning time, peer observations, or an appointment off campus, the **administrators step in to provide coverage**. They may teach the class themselves or split the students up into other classes in the grade as appropriate. This support indicates both that the teacher activity is important to them, as is stability of the adults the students interact with.

For example, after **interviews** with her team uncovered a sense that the teachers did not have enough time with their families, one principal in our study instituted a policy that on Fridays, when the students leave, so does everyone else. Student **tutoring** was often held after school and was thus a reason that teachers frequently were at the school late. This activity was moved into the regular school day. Students, previously sent to tutoring at the beginning of the year and left there, were assigned to tutoring for short, 3-week cycles and then **re-evaluated**. This allows students to

Virtual Reality

If you are willing to try combining technology with experiences, you may find yourself exploring **virtual reality (VR)**. Not all experiences are safe or possible for everyone to have firsthand. With VR, students and teachers can virtually travel the world, explore the universe, climb into a volcano, and do things that might otherwise not be physically or financially possible.

VR requires **hardware**, and it can be expensive. There are **relatively inexpensive options** available as well. And since it is often relatively simple to get external funding for hardware, especially technology hardware, VR headsets might be something funders will support.

Once you have a VR system, there are numerous **free** VR trips and experiences available on the internet, such as those at [Google Expeditions](#), [Discovery VR](#), or [Titans of Space](#). More VR adventures are being added every day. While VR is not the same as being there, it does expand educational opportunities for students.

move in and out of academic support as needed and allows all students to participate in club meetings held at the same time.

In another school, instead of a typical **homeroom**, students are assessed on academic and social skills regularly. The results are used to form **small groups of students with similar needs**, and the group meets with the teacher who can best support growth and development in that specific area. The group assignments swap depending on new assessment results, as students improve and change. In another school, teachers are assigned a small group of students with whom they meet for the duration of the students' time at the school. These students may or may not be in the teacher's class, but they are on their personal team, usually for **several years in a row**. In all these structures, an overt display of shared responsibility and the belief that everyone in the school is invested in each other's success is key.

Culture

Creating classroom culture requires building relationships. There are numerous ways in which these values are expressed. One part of classroom culture is interpersonal relationships and how **conflicts** get resolved. In recent years, there has been a shift towards explicitly incorporating **social-emotional learning** into schools and lessons. In classrooms where students are encouraged to interact and critique each other's work, conflict will inevitably arise. This is particularly true as norms for this type of interaction are established. Preemptively creating a process by which discord is addressed allows for more effective resolution of problems that do occur. Consistently teaching the method allows students to take ownership as they become more adept at its practice. Schools and classrooms use different approaches and terms to describe the ways they address conflict resolution and offenses against rules and norms, such as a [Peace Path](#) (more common at the elementary level) or [Restorative Justice](#) (more common at the high school level).

Another aspect of culture built at these schools is the **celebration of success**. All kinds of success, in areas both academic and not, for everyone in the school. No good news is too small to share and honor. In one school, a strong culture has been built around **video capture and sharing** among teachers of lessons that worked, so they can be emulated and applauded, and those that didn't, so they can be critiqued and improved. At another, students set **individual goals** collaboratively with their teacher or an administrator. Making growth towards or achieving a goal earns the student a **reward**: a bead or star added to their individual necklace or bracelet, worn at school with great pride.

Every teacher wants to infect their students with genuine enthusiasm for the academic content they are learning; for students to want to solve the problems, tackle the challenges, fail and grow and succeed because it is intrinsically valuable and interesting. One essential skill for success in academics and life is rich **reading** skills coupled with deep comprehension. At one school, reading at home is celebrated with a "**university degree**." For every 50 books read during the school year, students earn another degree, starting at the associate's level and progressing through a doctorate. The diplomas are hung prominently in the main hallway, with prizes awarded at the end of the year to the top readers.

Another teacher has created a **home library** project for his school. Students select their own books to keep with some minimal guidance from parents and teachers. The goal is to create experiences for students so reading becomes something you do on your own and with the people you love. In addition to changing beliefs and culture around reading, there are some remarkable effects on reducing the "[summer slide](#)" as well as **family literacy**—all from providing students with their own books.

WATCH: [Justin Minkel: Changing Reading Culture](#)

Professional Development Of, By, and For Teachers

There is probably someone in your building, in your district, in your professional associations, or elsewhere in your network who is extraordinarily talented in that aspect of the work. **Teachers uniformly state that they prefer to learn from each other**, from someone who shares their experiences and situations. While external consultants can bring specialized knowledge or skills to specific topics that may be well-suited to professional development sessions, most “drive-by” PD has been shown repeatedly to be ineffective. One reason is **ongoing access and support**. Changing classroom behavior is hard, open-ended work that works best when there is consistent collaboration around steps for implementation, as well as evaluation of the technique in the new context. And that is easier when the **expert is up the hall or in the next building**.

This includes PD explicitly focused on opportunity gaps. We heard repeatedly that **PD on the impact of poverty or trauma on students** was valuable. Sessions on the **inputs of bias** have led to improvement in the skill of having difficult conversations with colleagues, a necessary step forward in increasing behavioral awareness and altering attitudes. PD on achievement gaps and differential student outcomes is quite commonly required by states or districts, but opportunity gaps do not receive the same focus. We heard praise for districts that select a **consistent focus** for the required PD across schools over a year. Teachers or leaders may be able to influence the choice of topic and recommend themes on opportunity gaps for PD in their district.

The obvious goal of PD is for teachers to grow, improve their skills, and find new techniques that work in their classrooms. **Development plans** that target focal areas selected by the teacher in **collaboration** with administrators and mentors are preferable to those imposed externally. In one school in this study, teachers are **partnered with someone else in the state** who has similar PD needs. With **technology** to support communication, widening the pool to find a specific PD profile match is quite feasible. This helps teachers not feel censured or isolated, like it’s just them. It isn’t; there are others struggling through the same trials. Partners help teachers see the process as part of growth, broadening their methods and techniques to help students respond better to the instruction.

Different Questions

Beyond deepening the rigor of questions and curricula, there are other ways to extend the **depth of content**. One way is to ask students about their future plans; teachers may use the information to **individualize instruction**. Assignments can be held to the same high standards, even graded using the same rubric, while permitting students latitude in the **specific content or format** for their product.

Teachers may feel some anxiety about deviating from a standard approach. It may seem unfair or inequitable to have students doing different things for the same project. Students understand that they are all different. As long as the grading and feedback is not based in their differences, but instead provides scope in how work is scaffolded, how content is presented, or what kinds of support students need to succeed, students are not upset and do not perceive differentiation as unfair or inequitable.

WATCH: [Mary Eldredge-Sandbo: Project Personalization](#)

Step Back

There is a clichéd pair of phrases used to describe teaching practices: **“sage on the stage” versus “guide on the side”**. The goal is to shift the traditional model of the teacher as a depositor of information and the students as passive recipients, where procedures and facts are poured out of the teacher’s head and into the students’. Instead, students should engage in problems that interest them, that require skills they may not already have to solve. Motivating the skills acquisition reinforces the idea that we use

knowledge as a tool. Solving problems devoid of context can be fun in and of itself, but the reason is to accomplish things.

One of our schools is an [Expeditionary Learning](#) school, whose core philosophy is built around an interdisciplinary approach to real-world, concrete problems in the local community. Student work is central to class, using [document cameras](#) that make it easy to show several student's work and results, sparking discussion of approaches and results. This is an integral part of **critique lessons**, where students give constructive analysis of each other's work as they collectively solve a problem or determine if approaches and solutions are correct and useful. In this lesson, the **students are the experts**, acting as the source of authority. The teacher **manages** the process, moving to more of a facilitator role while assuring accuracy and limiting tangents from the learning objectives.

WATCH: [Bill Day: Facilitating Math Learning](#)

Academic Identity & Future Self

The opportunity gap reflecting a lack of **sense of self as an "academic" person**, one able and expected to contribute to scholastic endeavors, rang clear in this study. Students of every age, race, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic background feel that [they do not belong](#) in an educational setting, especially one beyond the current. These students feel this way through a combination of lack of models in their lives, not seeing anyone who resembles them in those fields, and societal expectations expressed in ways large and small every day. Teacher after teacher talked about ways they address this limitation.

Teachers and administrators hold workshops for students and families to offer **support and guidance in choosing the next educational institution**. For example, in DC there is a [citywide lottery](#) system to place students in charter schools or public schools that are outside their geographic attendance zone. About 3 out of 4 students in the district do not attend their neighborhood school. As part of this process at one middle school, students and families get support to research schools, considering factors such as size, location, learning model, sports, academic focus, transportation, magnet school status, test scores, and any other factors that might indicate **the school is—or isn't—a good fit** for the student.

The high schools in our study follow a similar process for **college applications**. One has a community partner who sends staff to an evening event, and who pays one state college application fee for each student. At another, students receive support with applications to schools and scholarships, as well as **follow-up support and outreach from staff members once they leave the school and attend college**. These calls check in, making sure the alumni are connecting with the right resources to be successful.

Related to the college planning process, at one high school, students entering are required to make a **4-year academic plan** for themselves. The school is relatively small, so offerings are limited. Special courses, such as arts, career and technical courses, or honors or advanced classes may only be offered once during the day—and several may occur at the same time. Students learn to **prioritize**, considering which courses are most important to their personal goals. The long-term plans are revised annually, but the focus forward changes student perspectives and explicitly teaches skills like **goal setting** that may not come naturally to disadvantaged students.

For some, elementary school is not too soon to begin the planning process! At one elementary school, students may be featured on a **College-Bound Wall**. Students create a poster to be displayed on the wall, doing research on the campus location, their major, and how they plan to pay for their education. At kindergarten and again at 6th-grade graduation, the students wear **sashes with their chosen college** over their cap-and-gowns. During College Week, classroom doors are decorated with the colors and

mascots of the chosen schools, and one day that week **students come to school dressed as their future career**. Another high-performing teacher in our study has her 2nd-grade students complete a college plan with their parents. These same students wear **lab coats during their science classes**. Decorated by their families, the lab coat is a small, concrete thing that shifts their image of who a scientist is or might be.

WATCH: [Melissa Collins: Academic Identity](#)

Actions: Families & Community

Homework is a regular source of stress, and one on which families may have strong feelings. One principal heard consistent messages that their elementary students had too much homework, that it took up too much family time in the evenings. She investigated the [research](#) and decided that the benefits were unclear, but the downsides were not. She **responded** to the parent concern directly, barring homework altogether at this elementary school.

At a high school in the study, the math department decided that **homework would be due weekly**, not daily. This allowed students to access the technology needed to complete assignments, since some do not have internet at home and cannot come early or stay late at school every day. Another result of weekly rather than daily tasks was more thoughtful, coherent choices by the teachers in what they gave students to do.

Communication with families is a perennial challenge, cited by most of our participants as an area where they want to grow and do better. One solution several noted as very helpful is the [ClassDojo](#) app. It runs on **mobile phones** that most parents and many students have. The app is free to teachers and supports **immediate feedback** on any topic: academic goals, social behaviors, photos and videos from class or school, and student work. The app has tools for teachers, lets parents join the classroom, and has translation support for numerous languages.

Getting parents and families on site at school is difficult. One approach is to go to them and make

TEACH THE PARENTS, TOO!

At Jones Elementary in Arkansas, there are two key efforts to help parents learn as well as students: Parent University and the Family Literacy Program.

Before Parent University, family needs and concerns are assessed through a **survey**. Respondents rank their highest priority topics from a list. On the evening of Parent U, families can choose 2-3 classes to attend. Topics range from the importance of reading with your children, parenting skills, and technology and email, through financial literacy, crime and policing, college savings and applications, and nutrition. Community partners offer expert instruction in specific classes as well as provide financial support for food and child care.

The Family Literacy Program has parents who are learning English **join their student** for part of the school day, usually just half an hour or 45 minutes, and learn alongside them. They learn English based on what their students are learning in their classroom. For that time, the adult becomes another student in that teacher's classroom. The rest of the time they are meeting with the other parents learning English. The direct connection to what their student is learning motivates the language acquisition as well as giving them first-hand insight into the educational experiences of their students.

home visits. Home visits are valuable when the goal is to understand the context of the student's life, made without judgment. It's best to not go planning to discuss negative news. And **cultural awareness** can be essential. Assuring that the visit does not become a burden on the family is important, so consider bringing food if the visit occurs at a meal time. Keep focus on building relationships and trust and gaining insight into circumstances as the desired outcome.

School events are a time-honored way to encourage families to come in and see the context where students learn. It is key to make the events **valuable** to the participants as well as the school staff. For example, a literacy night might include families selecting books to keep and attending workshops to gain tips on supporting their students academically. Math fairs can illustrate how common materials in homes like dried beans can serve as counters or can be classified by shape or color or pattern. Parenting skills classes can have value and serve to bring families into the school.

WATCH: [*Dana Boyd: Building Relationships with Parents and Community*](#)

Conclusions

The teachers and schools who participated in this study offered a wide variety of ideas and approaches to reduce the impact of the opportunity gaps they see in their students. Not every technique will work in every school or with all students or families. Adaptations to the local context may be needed and may make the idea better! The essential thing to do is try: Pick something. Take a risk. Implement and evaluate. Modify if needed. Stop one thing and try another. But addressing and reducing the opportunity gaps that students face can and will result in happier learners, better outcomes, and changes that resonate throughout the lives of students.