

Today’s children face unprecedented challenges to their physical and mental health and well-being, especially in underserved communities. It’s a child health crisis.

Understanding that we need to prioritize and address systemic health and educational inequities, Action for Healthy Kids (AFHK) launched two surveys to explore parents’ and caregivers’ perceptions and realities on issues facing their kids’ health and well-being and what drives, or creates barriers to, their involvement in these issues at their child(ren)’s schools.

The findings of the full report* help us address the root causes of this crisis and offer guidance to help schools and families partner more effectively to develop the three foundations for lifelong health for children: **optimal nutrition and physical activity; safe and supportive environments; and stable and nurturing relationships with adults.**

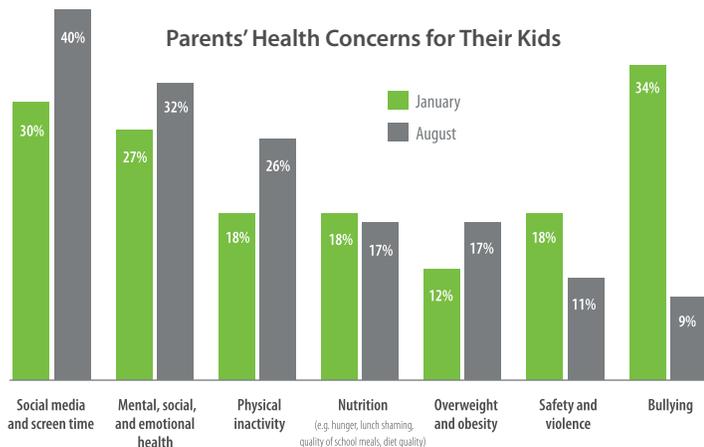
Studies show when parents are engaged in their children’s school activities, kids*:**

- get better grades
- choose healthier behaviors
- have better social skills

Health Concerns Beyond COVID-19

Ninety-two percent (92%) of caregivers say children face more challenges to their health and well-being today than they did 10 years ago.

The biggest challenges were further amplified as COVID-19 swept the nation. Parents became more concerned about social media/screen time and mental, social and emotional health, and physical inactivity. Not surprisingly, concerns about bullying dropped dramatically in the absence of social interactions.



What if Schools Close due to COVID-19?

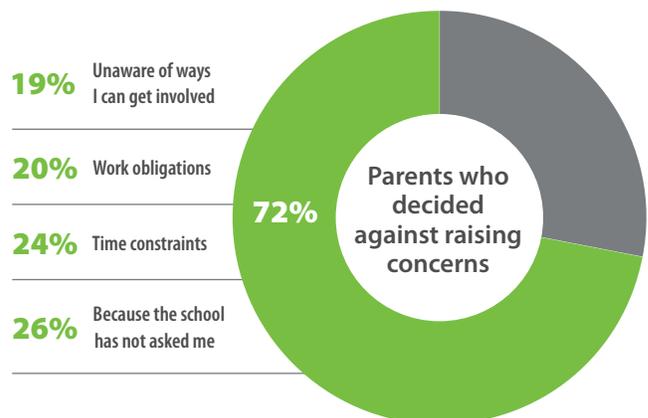
We asked parents what would concern them most if their child did not return to school in person full-time. Most (86%) worried that this would negatively impact their child(ren) physically, emotionally and academically. Specifically, they expressed concerns about:

| | |
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| Lost social element with other students | 50% |
| Lost academic progress | 44% |
| Fewer opportunities for extra-curricular activities | 39% |
| Lost connectedness with teachers | 36% |
| Fewer opportunities to move around or exercise | 34% |
| Fewer opportunities to engage in nutrition education (e.g. cooking classes) | 22% |
| Missed meals from school nutrition programs | 15% |

Parents Are Looking for Support, But Often Find Themselves on the Sidelines

The rise in concerns among parents explains why in August an overwhelming 84% expressed interest in receiving support from schools in the form of virtual classes for physical education and at-home physical activities (40%), physical activity equipment for use at home (29%), and resources related to mental, social and emotional health (28%).

Parents would like to participate, as well. More than 80% are interested in giving input on mental, social and emotional health, physical activity and school meal programs. Yet 51% reported that they do not feel included in decisions about children’s health and well-being at their schools. Seventy-two percent (72%) decided against raising concerns and only 27% said they had ever personally raised concerns about student health and well-being.



Barriers to Engagement

There are a variety of barriers to engagement. Nineteen percent (19%) of parents surveyed say they are unaware of ways to get involved, 20% cite work obligations, 24% cite time constraints and 26% say it's simply because they aren't asked.

While most (89%) say they are being invited to participate in at least one non-health-related activity such as a parent-teacher conference or a fundraiser, far fewer had been asked to participate in school health-related activities.

| Activities Schools Asked Parents to Participate in | |
|---|-----|
| Non-Health Related | |
| A parent-teacher conference | 59% |
| A fundraiser | 44% |
| PTA, PTO or other committee | 41% |
| Volunteering in the classroom | 40% |
| Volunteering before or after school | 29% |
| Other food (snacks, fundraisers, parties) | 23% |
| Health Related | |
| Physical activity (physical education, recess, physical activity in school outside team sports) | 15% |
| School meal programs | 12% |
| Recess | 8% |

11%

report that they have never been invited to participate in anything at their child(ren)'s school

Demographic Differences Revealed



Parents that graduated with a college degree were more likely to be asked to participate in school activities.



Those with a HHI < \$35K are more likely to say they've decided not to participate in a school activity because they haven't been asked, compared with those making > \$75K.



Parents in cities are almost 2x as likely to be concerned about missed meals from school nutrition programs and are 30% more likely to be concerned about decreased opportunities to engage in nutrition education curriculum than those who live in suburban or rural communities.



Hispanic parents were more likely to agree with not feeling included in decisions about child health and well-being in school, compared to non-Hispanic parents (60% vs. 49%). They more frequently decided against raising concerns (81% vs. 70%) and against participating in school activities (77% vs. 66%).

How Parents and Schools Can Use This Information

The findings of our surveys conducted in January and August 2020 underscore how COVID-19 has exacerbated an already dire situation for families and children. Now, more than ever, we need to break down the barriers to parent-school partnerships and build the capacity of families, schools and school districts to work together to lead and implement changes that create healthy learning environments where kids are prepared to become healthy in body and mind.

Through our family-school partnerships model, Action for Healthy Kids provides equitable, culturally responsive interventions to help families and schools ensure that children, particularly in underserved communities, are supported with the three foundations of lifelong health: optimal nutrition and physical activity; safe, supportive environments; and stable and nurturing relationships with adults.

Here are tips for bridging the communication gaps between parents and schools.

Tips for Parents

- » **Set aside preconceived notions** about how school and school district staff think and why they work in a certain way. Instead, ask and listen.
- » **Introduce yourself to school leaders** and ask questions. What are your school's and school district's priorities and practices related to student health, and how would they like families to provide support?
- » **Talk to other parents.** Gather perspectives and ideas from other families.
- » **Your voice matters.** You're the expert on your child, so don't be afraid to speak up and offer to help however you can.
- » **Don't make assumptions**—learn how things work. Take advantage of learning opportunities and ask questions, then communicate your concerns with a spirit of collaboration. School staff want to hear from you and need you involved to make decisions together.

Tips for Schools

- » **Set aside preconceived notions** about how parents think, what they know, and how they want to be involved. Instead, ask and listen. Learn about the values and specific challenges parents in your community face.
- » **Create a warm and welcoming environment** that shows parents their voice matters and their input is desired, respected, and valued. Ask parents about their lives and concerns and validate their role as the expert on their child.
- » **Offer options for two-way communication channels** so parents can ask questions and share opinions (e.g., texts, emails, phone calls, video conferences, in-person meetings).
- » **Conduct meetings** primarily in the language of the majority of participants and/or provide quality interpretation for parents or staff who do not speak the same language.
- » **Communicate the school and school district vision and priorities** clearly and transparently and provide parents with clear information about how school and school district departments function, set policy, and make decisions. Also share school and school district policies, goals and plans related to student health.

Tips for Schools and Parents on Working Together

- » **Identify meeting times and locations** (if able to meet in person) that are accessible and agreed upon by staff and parents. Consider providing childcare for the meetings or think about other ways this barrier can be addressed (e.g., children attend meetings with their parents, schedule meetings at different times, hold virtual meetings, provide stipends for babysitters).
- » **Recruit committed parents and school staff to co-lead the partnership.** They should care deeply about the work, have connections and credibility in the community, believe in the partnership's value, and commit to addressing concerns with solutions as a group.
- » **Offer opportunities for parents to get involved at various commitment levels.** While a few parents will take on a leadership role or regularly attend meetings, more will be able to attend and volunteer at events, reinforce messages at home, and answer questions or complete surveys to provide input.
- » **Work with established school parent groups** (e.g., PTO, PTA, Parent Advisory Council) to get their perspective and buy-in for the collaboration and to recruit more families to participate.
- » **Bring a solution-focused mindset to the work.** Every person brings a different set of values and experiences to the table. Identify the core values you share and bring them to the forefront of how you collaborate.

For the full research report, visit: <https://www.actionforhealthykids.org/parent-survey-2020>

*Action for Healthy Kids. (2020). Parenting and Educating in the Era of COVID: The importance of family-school partnerships in supporting children's health and education.

**Ornelas IJ, Perreira KM, Ayala GX. Parental influences on adolescent physical activity: a longitudinal study. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity* 2007;4(3):1–10.

About Action for Healthy Kids®

Action for Healthy Kids is a national nonprofit organization mobilizing family-school partnerships to prepare kids to be healthy in body and mind. We collaborate to support three key areas of child health: food access and nutrition education; physical activity and active play; and social emotional learning and risk behavior prevention. To learn more, donate, and get involved, visit us at actionforhealthykids.org.

Healthy Kids. Better World.

600 W. Van Buren St., Suite 720, Chicago, IL 60607 • 1.800.416.5136
actionforhealthykids.org

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