

Navigating Out-of-School Learning and the Power of Relationships: Lessons from Year 2 at RESCHOOL Colorado

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For working parents, summer brings hard questions. What will my children do while I'm at work? What combination of childcare, learning, and fun can I cobble together? How will I get my children back and forth from activities? Can I find a program that will accommodate my different-aged children? Will we get a spot? Will my children be happy?

For parents in low-income communities or newly arrived to the United States, these questions can be even more pressing. Their neighborhood may not offer many programs. They may have limited access to insider knowledge about program quality or availability. And above all, they may not have the money for camps or other experiences, which in some places can cost hundreds of dollars per week.

Overcoming barriers to accessing summer experiences is not just about childcare. Barriers to summer enrichment and learning experiences reinforce gaps in resources and opportunities in public education that face students from lower-income households. As education researchers David Quinn and Morgan Polikoff explain, during summer “the flow of resources slows for students from disadvantaged backgrounds but not for students from advantaged backgrounds,” potentially exacerbating income-based learning gaps.¹

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In a growing number of cities, new support structures are emerging to help parents overcome barriers to summer enrichment and learning for their children. These supports provide parents with coaches, often called navigators or advocates, who consult with parents on out-of-school learning for their children and other educational issues.

In 2017, RESCHOOL Colorado introduced an employer-based navigator program to address barriers to out-of-school learning. Known as the Learner Advocate Network (LAN), the program provides one-on-one support for parents on all aspects of their children's learning (See inset, “What Is the LAN?”).

1. See David M. Quinn and Morgan Polikoff, Summer learning loss: What is it, and what can we do about it? (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2017); also Doris R. Entwisle, Karl L. Alexander, and Linda S. Olson, “Summer Learning and Home Environment,” in *A Notion at Risk: Preserving Public Education as an Engine for Social Mobility*, ed. R. D. Kahlenberg (New York, NY: Century Foundation Press, 2000), 9-30.

What Is the LAN?

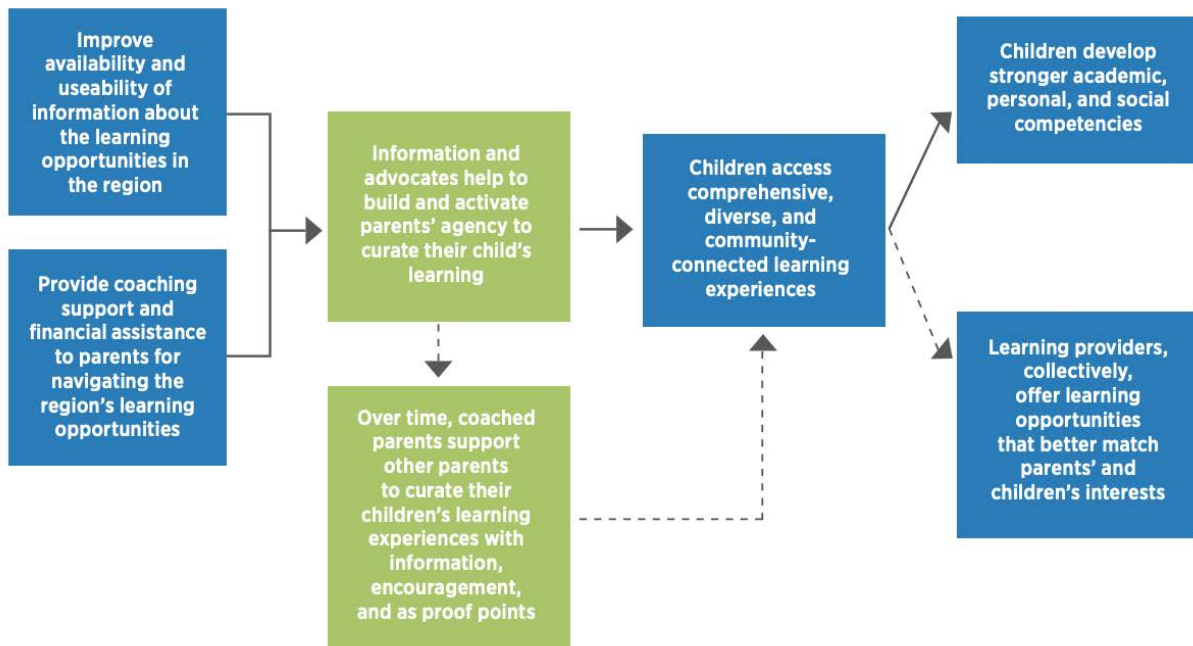
RESCHOOL's LAN is a “navigator” support that helps parents make choices about their children's education. It has two main elements. First, the LAN's Learner Advocates provide one-on-one coaching on educational issues, principally to help parents find out-of-school learning opportunities for their children. Second, RESCHOOL offers parents scholarships to access those opportunities.

The LAN is an employer-based program. It partners with Denver's St. Joseph's Hospital and Lutheran Medical Center to offer LAN services to hospital employees. With many low-wage employees, these hospitals help connect the LANs with its target population: parents facing opportunity gaps. Prior to the employer-based LAN, RESCHOOL had launched an earlier version of the program with the housing authority in Boulder, Colorado, in 2015 (the program in Boulder still operates under the housing authority's leadership).

Both hospitals offer the LAN to their employees as an opt-in workplace benefit. Learner Advocates work on site at the hospitals and meet program participants during the workday. Learner Advocates typically meet participants two or three times per month during the year.

A key assumption in the LAN's original design was that the program would work by helping parents increase their sense of agency (See our Year 1 report for more on the program's initial theory, shown below). The program assumed that by increasing adult agency it would help parents become more effective advocates for their children, thus better able to navigate the out-of-school educational and enrichment programming.

Building Parent Agency and Resources to Improve Student Learning and the Learning System



This report describes the implementation of the LAN between 2018 and 2019 and what it implies for expanding similar efforts elsewhere. Based on interviews with RESCHOOL leaders, advocates, and 33 participating parents, surveys of 49 participating parents (22 of whom answered the survey in 2018 and 2019), and observations of coaching meetings in 2018, we found:

Parents needed resources. A key assumption in the LAN’s original design was that the program would help parents increase their sense of agency by helping them take action and be effective. But interviews and survey data suggest that participating parents needed extra resources and help solving problems more than an increased sense of agency.

Parents wanted help with a range of education issues. Participating parents wanted resources and help on a wide range of educational issues that affected their children—not just out-of-school learning and summer enrichment but also issues that came up during the school year.

LAN advocates tailored support to meet families’ needs. The LAN provided and leveraged financial resources that increased families’ access to learning opportunities for their children. Because the LAN advocates had built long-term, trusting relationships with parents, advocates were able to offer tailored support and expertise, rather than one-size-fits-all advice, on how to leverage these financial resources.

The implementation of the LAN underscores the importance of providing financial support to parents to address barriers to learning and enrichment for their children. The program also highlights the benefits of pairing financial support with customized advice and expertise and trusting relationships. Advocates for the LAN and similar programs must keep this human element in mind as they look to extend and deepen the impact of navigator supports for parents.

How We Studied the LAN

Interviews

To learn about the LAN, CRPE interviewed the program’s two Learner Advocates, RESCHOOL’s leadership, and participating parents between 2018 and 2019. The Learner Advocates provided additional data through written accounts of conversations they had with parents to debrief their summer camp experiences, as well as end-of-year conversations with participants. Between CPRE’s interviews and data collected by Learner Advocates, we analyzed 33 parent interviews. Parent interviews focused on two main areas: the learning experiences or problems the parents were thinking about for their child and how the parents worked with the LAN advocate (e.g., frequency and type of interaction).

Interviews were conducted in public spaces (e.g., hospital cafeteria) at the parents’ workplace. Because most parents preferred not to be audio recorded, two researchers were present for all interviews, one leading the interview and the other taking detailed notes. Immediately after the interviews, we cleaned our notes and wrote interview scripts that summarized the interview content. To analyze the interview data, we arrayed the issues in the notes in a series of matrices that compared issues case by case, as well as by work site and LAN advocate. These matrices formed the basis for memos and other exchanges among the research team that helped us identify common themes and patterns across the interviews. We also observed three coaching meetings and two information sessions in 2018.

Surveys

To supplement the interviews and track intermediate outcomes related to adult agency, the LAN administered the Me as a Parent survey (Hamilton et al, 2015) to participating parents. The LAN administered the survey twice, first in the winter of the 2018-2019 school year and again in the winter of the 2019-2020 school year. The survey was available in Spanish and English. Parents completed paper surveys during regular, in-person meetings with their Learner Advocate. The survey included 16 items from a pre-existing instrument designed to measure parents' sense of competence and confidence in their parenting, captured in four scales: self-efficacy, personal agency, self-management, and self-sufficiency.

- Self-efficacy refers to parents' "beliefs about their effectiveness in overcoming or solving parenting problems."
- Personal agency refers to parents' "locus of control in attributing their child's behavior and outcomes to their own efforts rather than to chance or maturation."
- Self-management refers to parents' "goal-setting, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation against performance criteria, in order to become self-sufficient."
- Self-sufficiency refers to parents' "independent problem-solving and self-reliance through the use of the parents' own resources, or identification of appropriate external resources."*

The survey included four additional items developed by CRPE and RESCHOOL. These items included the following statements:

- When it comes to my child's education, I have someone I can ask for help when I need it.
- I am good at turning everyday situations into learning opportunities for my child.
- I am good at identifying educational environments that support my child for who he or she is.
- When a challenge arises for my child at school, I feel comfortable getting involved to address it.

During the first administration (2018-2019 school year), 40 parents completed the survey (74 percent of participants). During the second administration (2019-2020 school year), 31 parents completed the survey (58 percent of participants). Of the 40 responses from the first administration, 22 also responded to the survey in the second administration. Unless otherwise noted, the figures in this report use the reduced, matched sample of 22 participants.

While informative, the potential for non-response bias and self-selection bias in the survey and interview data warrant some caution when interpreting the results. The parents we interviewed and who answered the survey may have views or experiences that differ—in positive or negative directions—from parents in the program who did not respond.

*See Hamilton, V. E., Matthews, J. M., & Crawford, S. B. (2015). Development and Preliminary Validation of a Parenting Self-Regulation Scale: "Me as a Parent." *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 24(10), 2853-2864. p. 2854. As Hamilton et al (2015) note, the concepts captured by the four scales reflect parenting intervention models, such as the Triple P model: Sanders, M. R. (2008). Triple P—Positive Parenting Program as a public health approach to strengthening parenting. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 22, 506-517.

Lessons From Two Years of the LAN

Between 2018 and 2019, RESCHOOL's Learner Advocates provided both high- and low-touch support to parents. High-touch support involved two to three one-on-one coaching meetings with participants every month. In 2018-2019, the LAN provided high-touch support to 54 parents. In 2019-2020, it provided high-touch support to around 53 parents. In addition to high-touch coaching, the Learner Advocates provided low-touch support to a range of people in the hospitals (workers, but also volunteers, visitors, and patients); this low-touch support included one-time interactions that typically involved answering a single question or sharing a resource. According to RESCHOOL, Learner Advocates had one-time interactions with approximately 1,700 people between 2018 and 2019.

This report focuses on the implementation of the LAN's high-touch coaching. We focus on high-touch coaching because these cases exemplify the program's original design and key characteristics: intensive coaching and financial support.

Parents needed resources more than agency.

The LAN's original theory assumed that the program would benefit parents and children by building parents' sense of personal agency. By increasing personal agency, participating parents would become stronger advocates for their children's learning. But interviews and survey data suggest that participating parents needed extra resources and help solving problems more than an increased sense of agency.

To get a baseline measure of participants' sense of personal agency, the Learner Advocates administered the "Me as a Parent Survey" in the 2018-2019 school year (See inset, "How We Studied the LAN"). The survey measured participants' sense of confidence and competence as parents across 16 items that captured four scales (self-efficacy, personal agency, self-sufficiency, and self-management).

Counter to expectations, the results suggested that the majority of participants who answered the baseline survey already had a strong sense of themselves as parents.

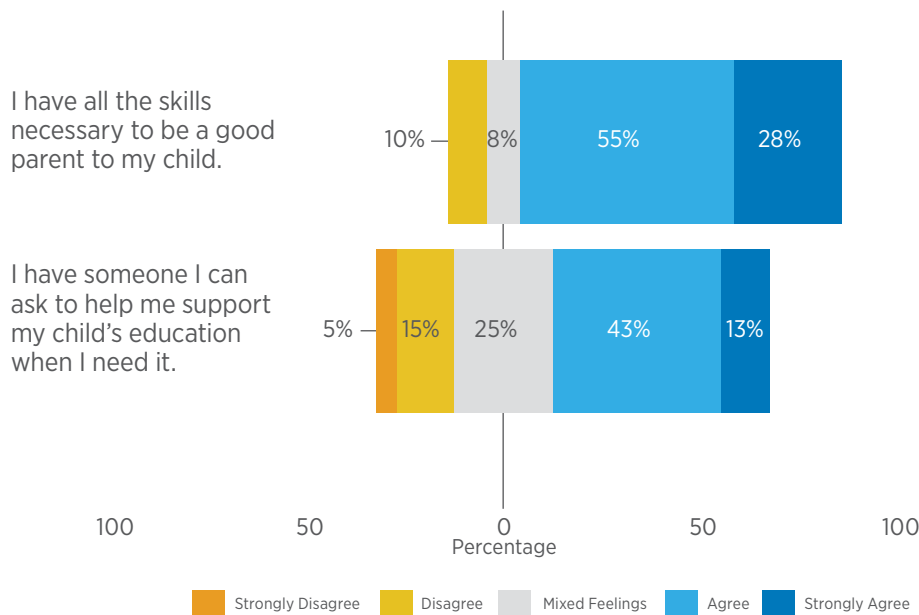
For example, when asked how much they agreed with the statement, "I have confidence in myself as a parent," 78 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Seventy percent also agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "My parenting skills are effective." Sixty-seven percent felt that they could identify the right educational environment for their children.

One parent we interviewed exemplified these attitudes, even in the face of challenging circumstances. An immigrant, English learner, and single mother with five children, she explained that she constantly pushed and supported her children to succeed in school, ensuring that they applied to college and, in one case, made plans to join the military. This parent supported her entire household with an hourly position at the hospital.

Interviews and survey data suggest that participating parents needed extra resources and help solving problems more than an increased sense of agency.

Rather than increasing empowerment and agency, the baseline survey from the 2018-2019 results suggested that parents needed resources and help. Figure 1 highlights the contrast. The bar on the top shows that 83 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had all the skills they needed to be a good parent (8 percent had mixed feelings and 10 percent disagreed). By contrast, the bar at the bottom shows that 56 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had someone they could turn to for help around their children's education (45 percent either disagreed/strongly disagreed or had mixed feelings).

Figure 1. LAN Parents Are Confident, But Need Help



Source: Baseline LAN Parent Survey January 2019, n=40. Figure shows positive responses (agree, strongly agree) to the right of the vertical baseline and negative response (disagree, strongly disagree) to the left.

Parents wanted help with a range of education issues, not just out-of-school activities.

Parents wanted resources and help with a wide range of educational issues that affected their children—not only out-of-school learning and summer enrichment but also issues that came up during the school year.

Consistent with findings from Year 1, interviews with participants in Year 2 suggested they wanted help that addressed the “whole child” rather than academic achievement alone. Parents said they wanted enriching experiences to support their child’s longer-term development and success. These experiences included outdoor activities, art classes, cooking classes, trips to the zoo, sports camps, bicycling, dancing, and more. When LAN participants talked about the goals they had for their children, some used words such as “self-knowledge” and a “love of learning.” They said they wanted their children to “branch out” and “pursue their passions” and “advocate for themselves.”

Although summer learning opportunities were still at the center of much of the LAN’s work (e.g., finding summer camps, art classes, etc.), eight of the eleven participants we interviewed in Year 2 reported that their Learner Advocate helped with school-related issues, too.

Participants reported that Learner Advocates helped them deal with school choice (selecting a school, understanding school ratings), academic interventions (finding tutors), and accessing special services (Individualized Education Programs [IEPs] for students with disabilities and, in one case, gifted and talented services). In fact, more than a third of the LAN parents had a child with special needs. One parent of a child with special needs explained that the Learner Advocate helped her manage her son’s IEP by pushing her to call a meeting in the wake of staff turnover at her son’s school. The Learner Advocate “helped give me direction in who I should call and who I should get a hold of—that’s been helpful,” she said. A different parent explained how the Learner Advocate helped her navigate choosing a school:

This year compared to last year, I would say that I feel more confident in my child’s school choice. [The Learner Advocate] assisted me in digging deeper into our school’s ratings. That was one of my biggest concerns as my kids started school. I feel much more confident as a parent now, navigating the school, day in and day out, also with extra activities.

Although the Learner Advocates worked on a wider range of issues than originally planned, their help was not unbounded. The LAN support focused on educational issues. When parents raised issues out of the LAN's scope (e.g., housing stability, childcare, workplace concerns) Learner Advocates recommended other support providers. Identifying the program's boundaries was a hard-won lesson. During the first year of the program, one of the Learner Advocates tried to support parents on noneducational issues. As her role expanded, it became overwhelming. So the next year, she and the other Learner Advocate committed, as one said, to "staying in our [education] lane."

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LAN advocates tailored their support to meet family needs.

Because the LAN advocates had built long-term, trusting relationships with parents, advocates could offer tailored support and expertise on how to leverage the program's financial resources and other opportunities. As one participant said,

I think the most beneficial part of working with [the LAN] ... was having the opportunity to sit down with someone that could talk to me about anything kid related. Whatever issues or questions I had, especially about education, [the Learner Advocate was] ... there to help me navigate through them.

Another participant said the LAN's one-on-one attention gave her "someone I could go to with issues and ... [the Learner Advocate] gave me a sense of security." Without exception, each interviewed participants' account of the LAN—from the support they received, to the activities they chose, to their use of scholarship money—reflected Learning Advocates' efforts to match a support to the participants' holistic needs and goals for their children.

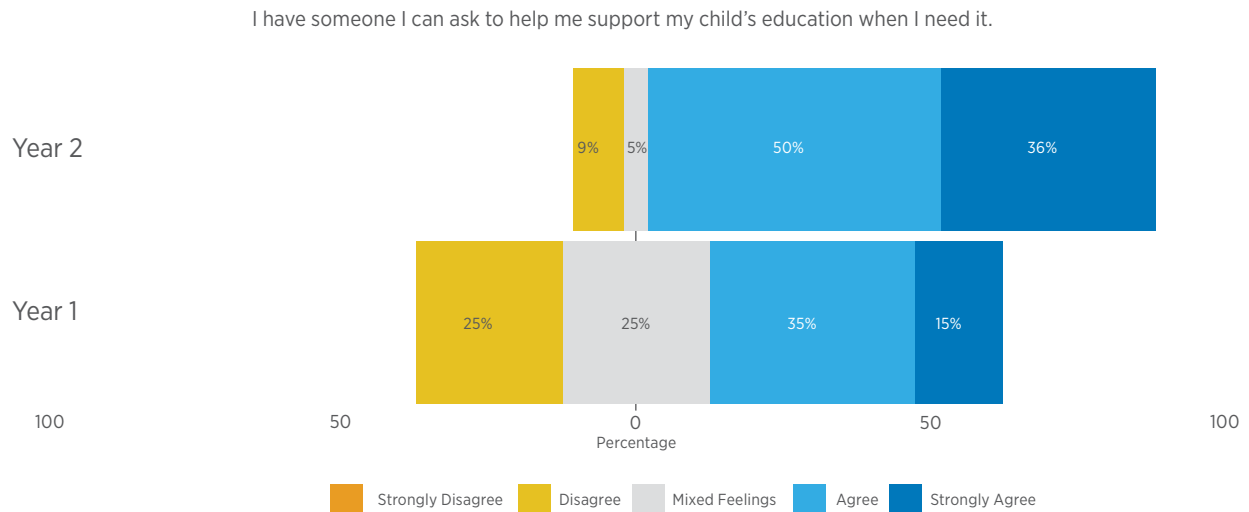
Every participant we interviewed said the information they received through the LAN was valuable. They said that the LAN advocates revealed programs that they "never knew existed." Others explained that the LAN helped them understand the schooling system (including school choosing and special education) better than before.

RESCHOOL supplemented the information the LAN provided with a scholarship program that offered \$250 per child for learning activities. Of the 60 LAN participants, 29 children received \$250 scholarships provided by RESCHOOL. RESCHOOL also built relationships with several providers in the city to ensure that participants had information and access to existing funding opportunities. The advocates also worked with other organizations (e.g., a children's museum and an outdoor camp) to provide matching grants and scholarships to LAN participants. Altogether, RESCHOOL's scholarships, combined with discounts and other scholarships, distributed a total of \$19,000 to 48 percent of its parents. As one participant noted, these extra resources allowed her child to attend activities she otherwise could not afford.

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Results from participants who answered the survey in both years provide some suggestive evidence that reinforces the sense that the program expanded parents' sense of support. Similar to figure 1, figure 2 shows that 50 percent of respondents in the matched sample agreed or strongly agreed that they had someone to help support their children's education when they needed it in the baseline year (this result is different than in figure 1 because the sample is reduced to only those who answered the survey in both years). By the next year, 86 percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. While the number of responses (n=22) mean these results should be interpreted with caution, they nevertheless reinforce the idea that parents felt supported after being in the program for two years.

Figure 2. LAN Parents Reported Having More Help in Year 2*



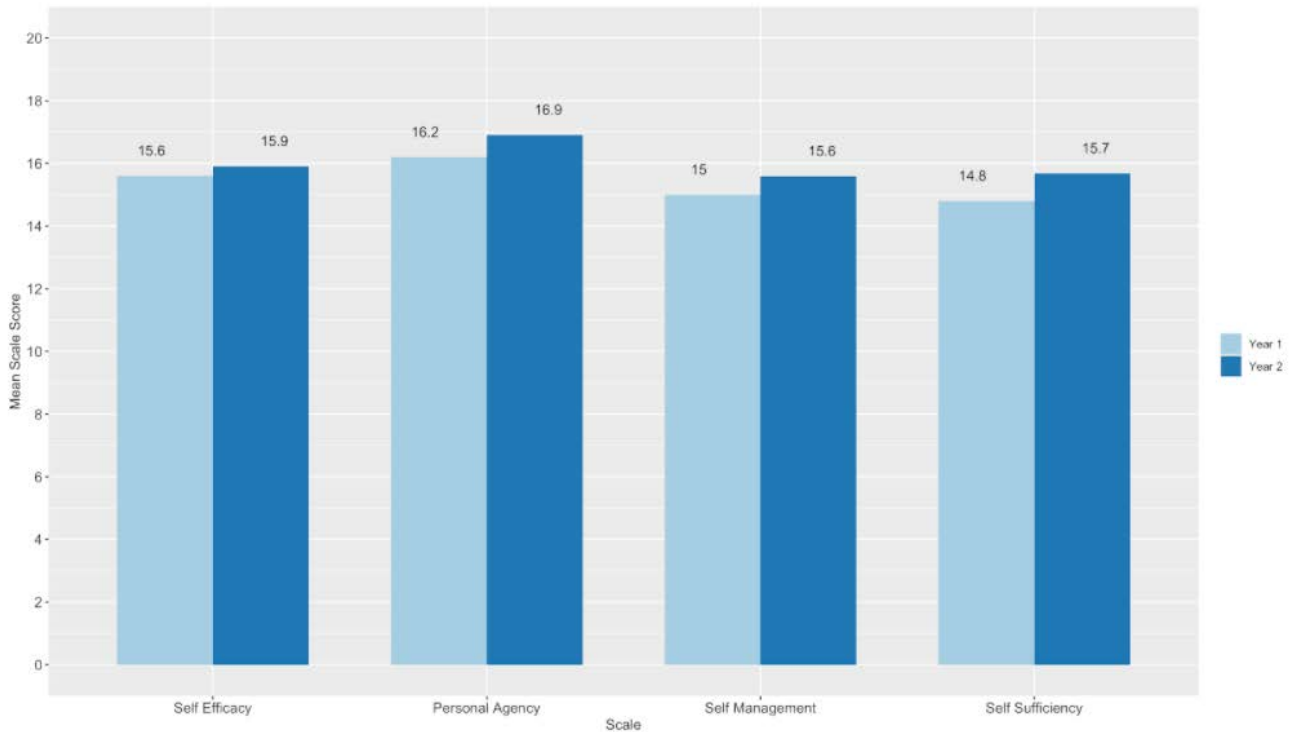
**Note that the percentages from Year 1 are different from the Year 1 results in figure 1 because of differences in the sample. Figure 1 includes all participants who answered the survey in Year 1 (n=40). Figure 2 includes a reduced sample of participants who answered the survey in Year 1 and Year 2 (n=22).*

For some parents, the LAN's benefits reached beyond a growing sense of support and financial resources. One participant said the “[LAN] helped me to be a better parent.” Four of the eleven participants we heard from at the end of their LAN experience reported that the coaching from the LAN improved their ability to find educational solutions for their children. One participant said, “[The LAN advocate] helped me start thinking differently and helped get me unstuck.” Another said, “The [LAN] helped me be a better parent.” Three of the participants we interviewed said the LAN increased their self-confidence. Two parents of children with disabilities said the experience helped them advocate for their children and better understand the complexity of special education processes and services.

Although not necessarily representative of the overall program or evidence of program effects, survey results from the 22 participants who answered the survey in Year 1 and Year 2 allow a comparison of the four scales measured by the survey. As figure 3 shows, the mean scores on each 20-point scales were higher in Year 2 than they were in Year 1. The self-sufficiency scale saw the largest increase (from 14.8 to 15.7). The self-efficacy scale saw the smallest increase from 15.6 to 15.9.²

2. In the appendix, we present item-level results in diverging stacked bar charts similar to figure 1. These charts show the spread of negative and positive values (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree) aligned around a midpoint.

Figure 3. “Me As a Parent” Scales Year 1 and Year 2



Source: Baseline (2018-2019) and follow-up (2019-2019) LAN parent surveys.

The Power of Relationships

One of the most striking themes from the interviews was that the social component of the LAN was an essential part of the program. By establishing trust-generating relationships with parents through frequent contact, the Learner Advocates may have been better able to respond to participants’ diverse concerns, tailor support, provide information, become a trusted problem-solving partner, and build advocacy and confidence. The Learner Advocates focused on parents’ educational concerns and drew boundaries around their work, but they didn’t follow a script. They prioritized listening to parents and understanding their unique needs. They built a relationship with parents and parlayed it into effective support.

It’s worth underscoring the point that the program’s success depended on the combination of relationships and the Learner Advocates’ expertise about education and insider knowledge. The Learner Advocates connected participants to information about in- and out-of-school education that participants did not have before. Participants revealed in interviews that, despite having visited relevant websites and reviewed public information, they sometimes struggled to understand a range of issues that seem essential to navigating these systems, including school choice processes, school performance assessments, special education procedures, and the rights of students. The Learner Advocates were a link to useful information about out-of-school learning: an insider view that was not available in the participants’ existing social networks.

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This combination of relationships and insider knowledge suggests that the power of the LAN's success can be understood, in part, as leveraging social capital. By social capital we mean the “power and information present in parents’ social relationships that can be used to leverage additional resources” to support their child’s success. Specifically, the LAN program appears to leverage what social scientists call “linking” social capital, which involves a relationship that gives individuals access to information and resources that are outside what they might otherwise access from close associates (e.g., family, close friends) and adjacent associates (e.g., coworkers, neighbors). Access to these new resources helped parents identify and enroll their children in new experiences.

The LAN’s success is a reminder that creating meaningful learning experiences requires meeting parents where they are, and that a human touch may still be the most effective way to connect parents and children to learning.

Since we published our first report, interest in the potential role of navigators like the LAN has continued to grow. The role of expertise, relationships, and linking social capital in the LAN highlight three key issues that efforts to replicate and expand navigator programs must keep in mind:

Manage the caseload. By the end of Year 2, the Learner Advocates had concluded that the maximum caseload for a single Advocate was 26 parents. Given what this ratio implies about cost, the LAN and similar programs should look for ways to differentiate support (perhaps similar to the lighter-touch interactions the Learner Advocates provided in Year 2). The need to differentiate supports raises additional questions: How can the LAN assess a participant’s level of need? What would a menu of tiered services look like? What mix of clients is workable for Learner Advocates? Would the LAN benefit by creating differentiated support positions (more one-on-one support by expert Learner Advocates versus more transactional support by support providers with less expertise)? How should the LAN track interactions and degree of contact with parents?

Build trusting relationships. Even if the LAN were to differentiate support, relationships remain the heart of the program. The idea of scaling with an App or “nudge” tool sounds appealing for reducing cost and extending reach (studies of nudge tools show they can improve the likelihood of individuals to meet deadlines). But technology-based tools may be less likely to build trust or to help parents make sense of new information in light of their own situation. Technology alone is unlikely to address many of the concerns facing parents and students. The importance of relationships raises other questions: How can the LAN develop the capacity of Learner Advocates to build trust-generating relationships? How could technology support program logistics so Learner Advocates could focus even more on the human aspects of their job? Although the LAN, by design, does not follow a script, what structures or routines contribute to strong relationships? What support do advocates need to manage deep relationships with parents in a healthy and sustainable way?

Link to expertise. Our findings also underscore the importance of linking parents to insider information they did not have access to before. This implies that Learner Advocates and navigators need to be (or have ready support from) education experts. With this, efforts to expand the reach of navigators by tapping navigators from other sectors, community leaders, or parent-to-parent networks may require a mechanism to link these new support providers to an education insider. If the LAN or similar networks leverage coaching from non-insiders, how will it ensure these non-insiders have access to information and networks beyond their existing networks?

“A better life for my child.” “A better parent.” These phrases capture the profound impact the LAN has had over the last two years. Grounded in trust, linked to expertise and financial resources, and—above all—responsive and adaptable, the LAN has helped parents access new learning opportunities for children who otherwise may not have had them. The LAN’s success is a reminder that creating meaningful learning experiences requires meeting parents where they are, and that a human touch may still be the most effective way to connect parents and children to learning.

Since we first drafted this report, the COVID-19 outbreak in the spring of 2020 has only underscored the potential strength of parent navigation networks, such as the LAN.

As daycare centers and schools shut down, parents, especially front-line workers, needed help. RESCHOOL's Learner Advocates started getting calls for help as soon as the first schools began to close. In the weeks following school closures and shelter-in-place orders, the Learner Advocates communicated with nearly all of the participating parents in their network.

At first, parents called the LAN with questions about childcare coverage. As out-of-home childcare options quickly closed (and parents turned to friends and family), parents started asking for help with remote learning. The LAN families live in several area school districts, so Learner Advocates had to help parents understand a range of district plans and guidance for remote learning. As before the COVID-19 crisis, the advocates linked parents to information and resources to help set up learning experiences at home.

Meanwhile, RESCHOOL drew on its wide network of relationships to increase awareness of and access to out-of-school learning for low-wage and underserved families, working with program providers in the region to identify, elevate, and aggregate information on innovative remote learning opportunities.

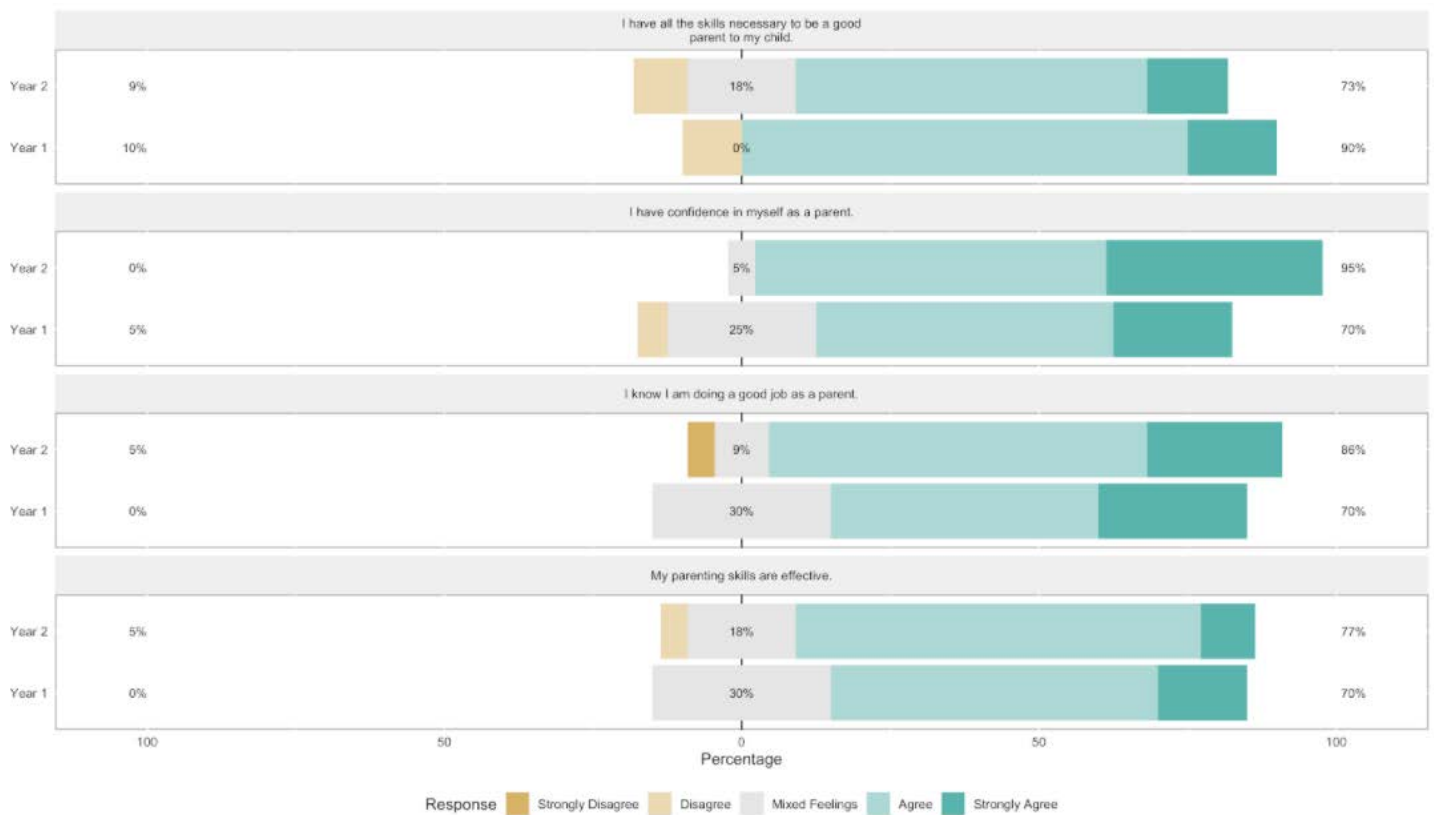
By late spring, the Learner Advocates found that their families were developing digital learning fatigue and parents had difficulty sustaining their children's engagement. In response, the advocates linked parents to art activities and projects, the city's recreational centers, and the region's popular outdoor adventure provider. RESCHOOL elevated local programming that offered remote learning experiences during the spring school break on its Blueprint4SummerCO website.

Throughout it all, the Learner Advocates' agility, strong relationships with parents, and familiarity with local providers allowed them to mobilize responsive support quickly. The LAN wasn't designed for a pandemic, but it continued to be an indispensable resource to parents during this most unusual of events.

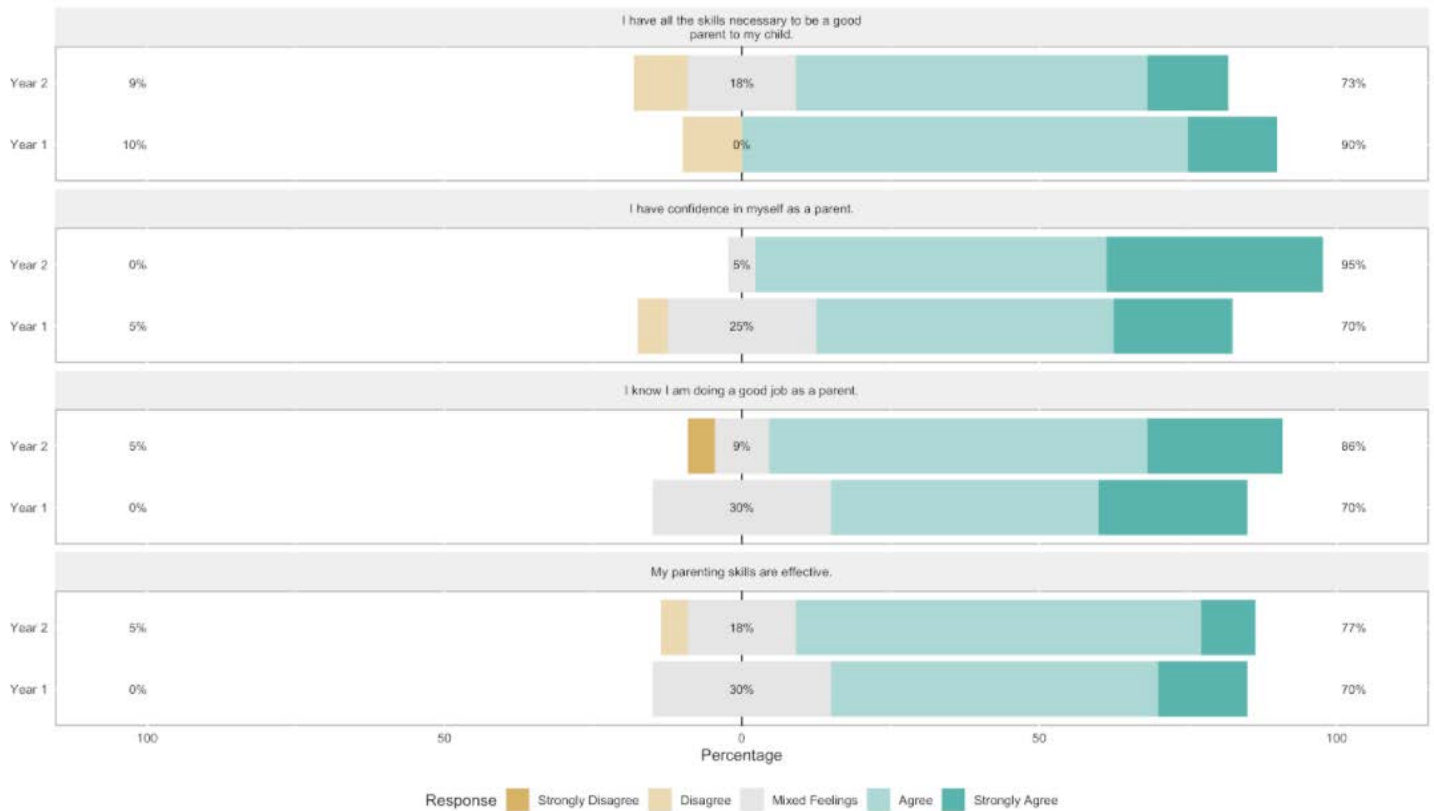
Appendix: Survey Results: Year 1 and Year 2

The following charts show survey responses for the 22 parents who answered the survey in Year 1 and Year 2. The charts show positive responses (agree, strongly agree) to the right of a vertical baseline and negative responses (disagree, strongly disagree) to the left. The numbers on either side show the total percentage for positive responses (right) and negative responses (left). The numbers in the middle show the percentage of “mixed feelings” responses. For each question, the bottom bar shows results from Year 1 and the top bar shows the results from Year 2. For example, year-to-year comparisons in self-efficacy show a decrease in positive responses on the first item (“I have all the skills necessary to be a good parent to my child”) and increases in positive responses across the other three items.

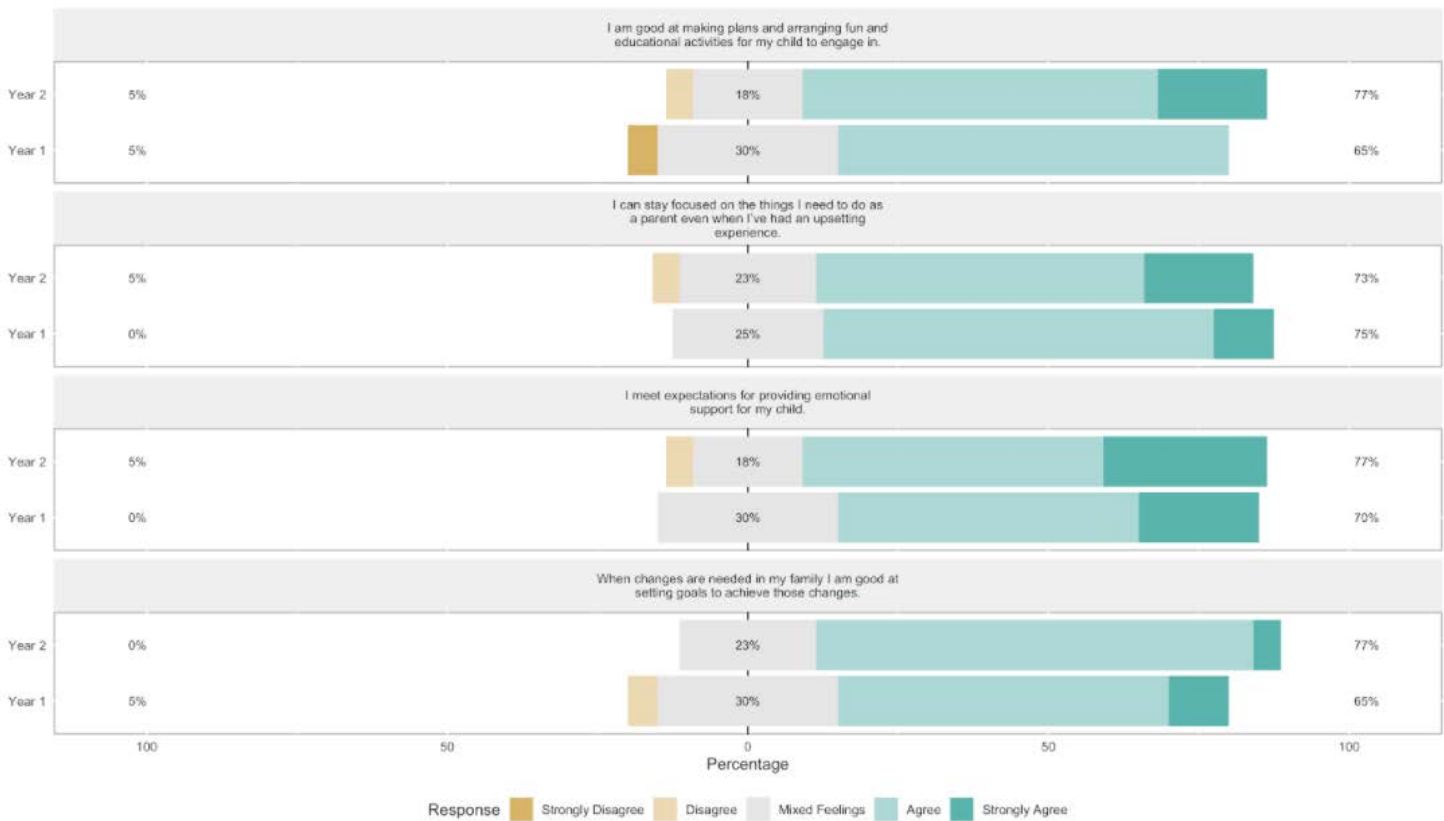
Self-Efficacy



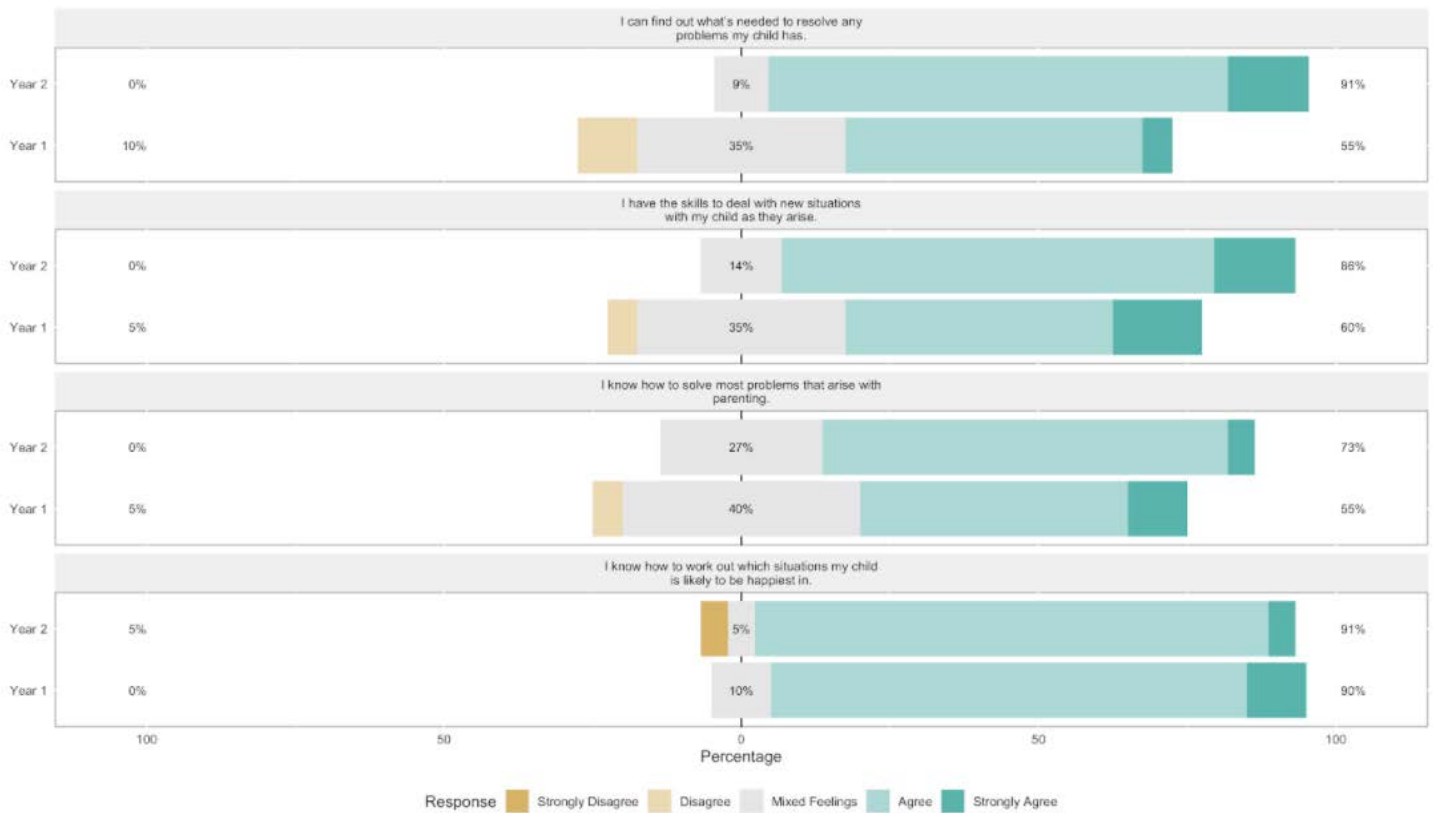
Personal Agency (Note: negative answers associated with *higher levels* of agency in scale)



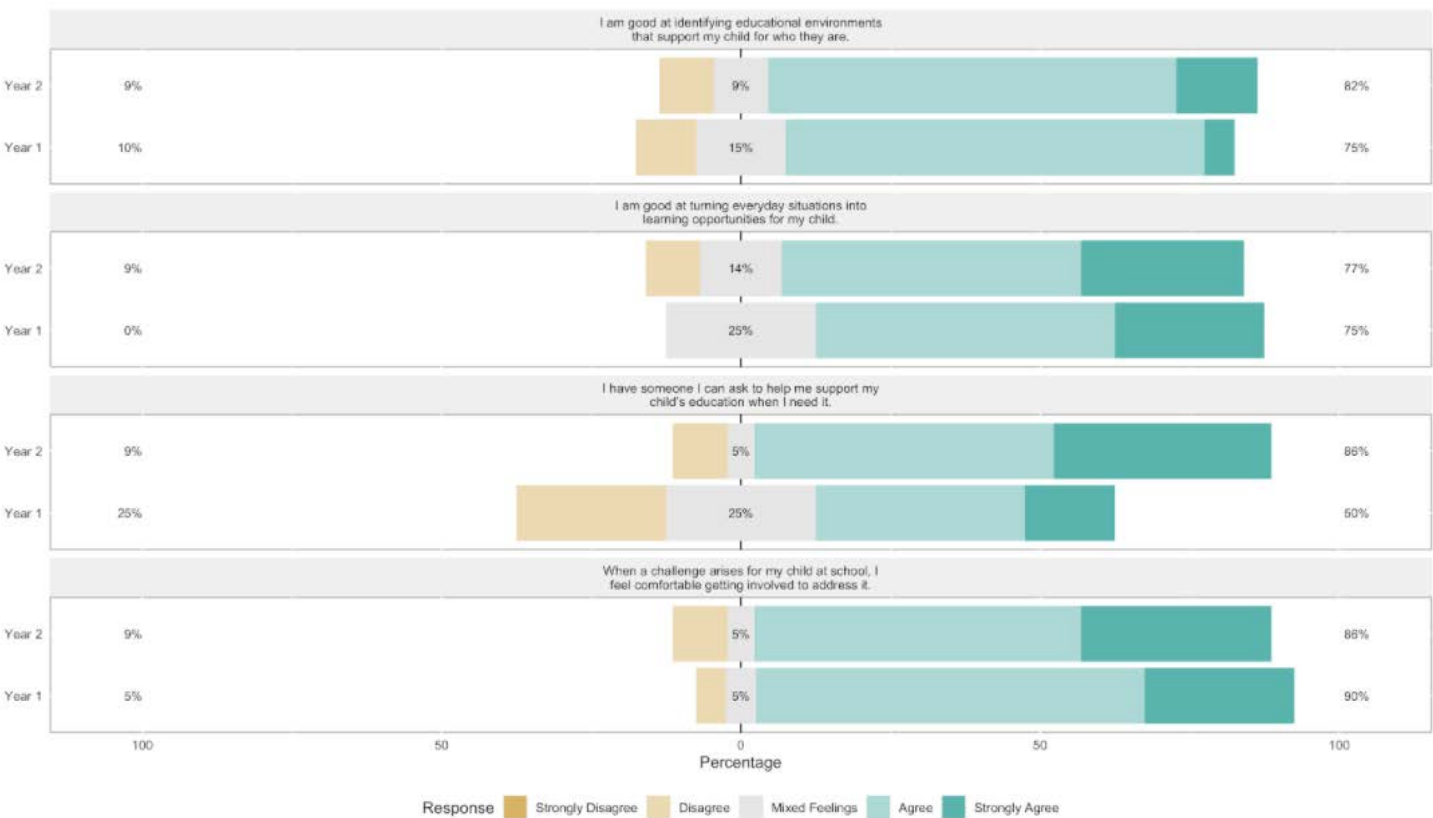
Self-Management



Self-Sufficiency



RESCHOOL Questions



Acknowledgments

This project has been made possible in part by a grant from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative DAF, an advised fund of Silicon Valley Community Foundation. Brooke Brown and Chelsea Waite offered thoughtful feedback and helped to sharpen the report's analysis and recommendations. While this report draws upon the help of many people, fault for any errors or omissions rests with the authors alone.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K-12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S Department of Education.

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