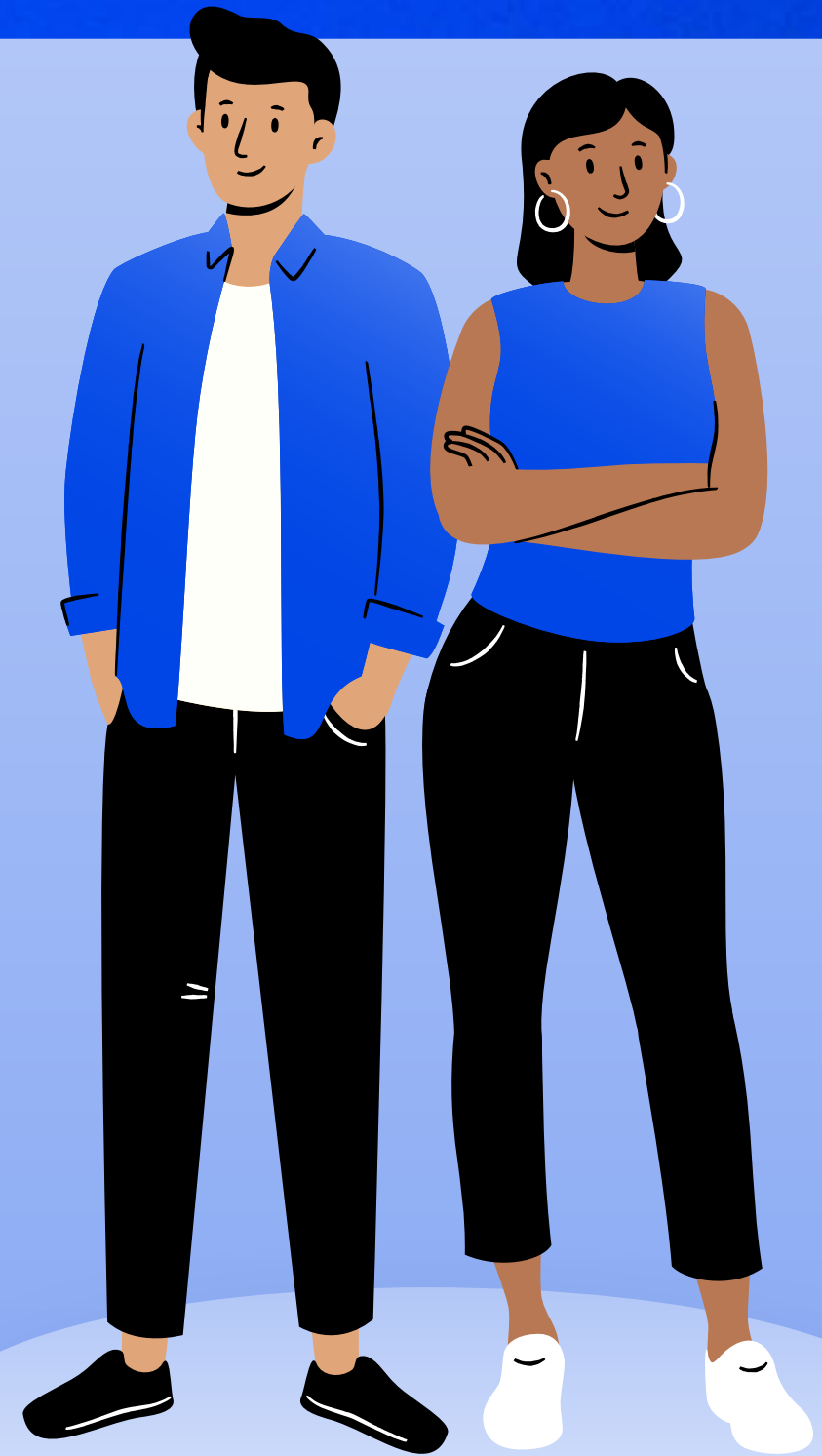


A school leader's guide to engaging the next generation of parents

mccrindle



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The evolving landscape of school-family partnerships

The dynamic between schools and families is becoming increasingly complex. While the core mission of supporting student growth remains unchanged, the methods of engagement and the expectations of parents are shifting significantly. Today's parents, largely comprised of Gen Y with Gen Z parents emerging, have grown up navigating technological and social change. They have come of age in an era of instant information, personalisation, and on-demand services, which has shaped their approach to education. This has driven a desire for greater transparency, more frequent communication, and a more collaborative role in their child's schooling. School leaders who understand this evolving landscape and adapt their strategies will be better positioned to foster strong, productive partnerships. This new reality presents a powerful opportunity to build a sense of community that becomes a school's greatest strength.



Community: the new competitive advantage

School choice is one of the most important decisions parents make, as they invest emotionally, financially, and socially in the outcome. For many, they're not just looking for a school but for a village, a place of belonging and community. In today's more socially fragmented world, school communities grow stronger when families feel connected, and students flourish when they feel known, included, and inspired. This sense of community has become a new competitive advantage, where belonging, values, and connection are woven into the school's strategy for attraction, retention, and flourishing.

A school's strength is linked to the trust between its families and its leadership, which is why there's a need to engage and build trust with the next generation of parents. These parents are co-creators of the school's culture and future. This deep-seated desire for community is what drives parent choice, but in a world of declining attendance and rising disengagement, many schools are struggling to deliver on this promise.



The challenge

Many school leaders are seeing declining parent event attendance, growing disengagement and higher expectations with less tolerance. Schools are using old models to engage a new kind of parent, and it's not working. Traditional newsletters, parent-teacher nights and long form communication styles aren't resonating with today's families. In the words of Stephen Covey, 'seek first to understand, then to be understood'. To bridge this gap and meet the expectations of today's parents, school leaders need a new framework, one that is both a process and a guide.

Navigating the new reality

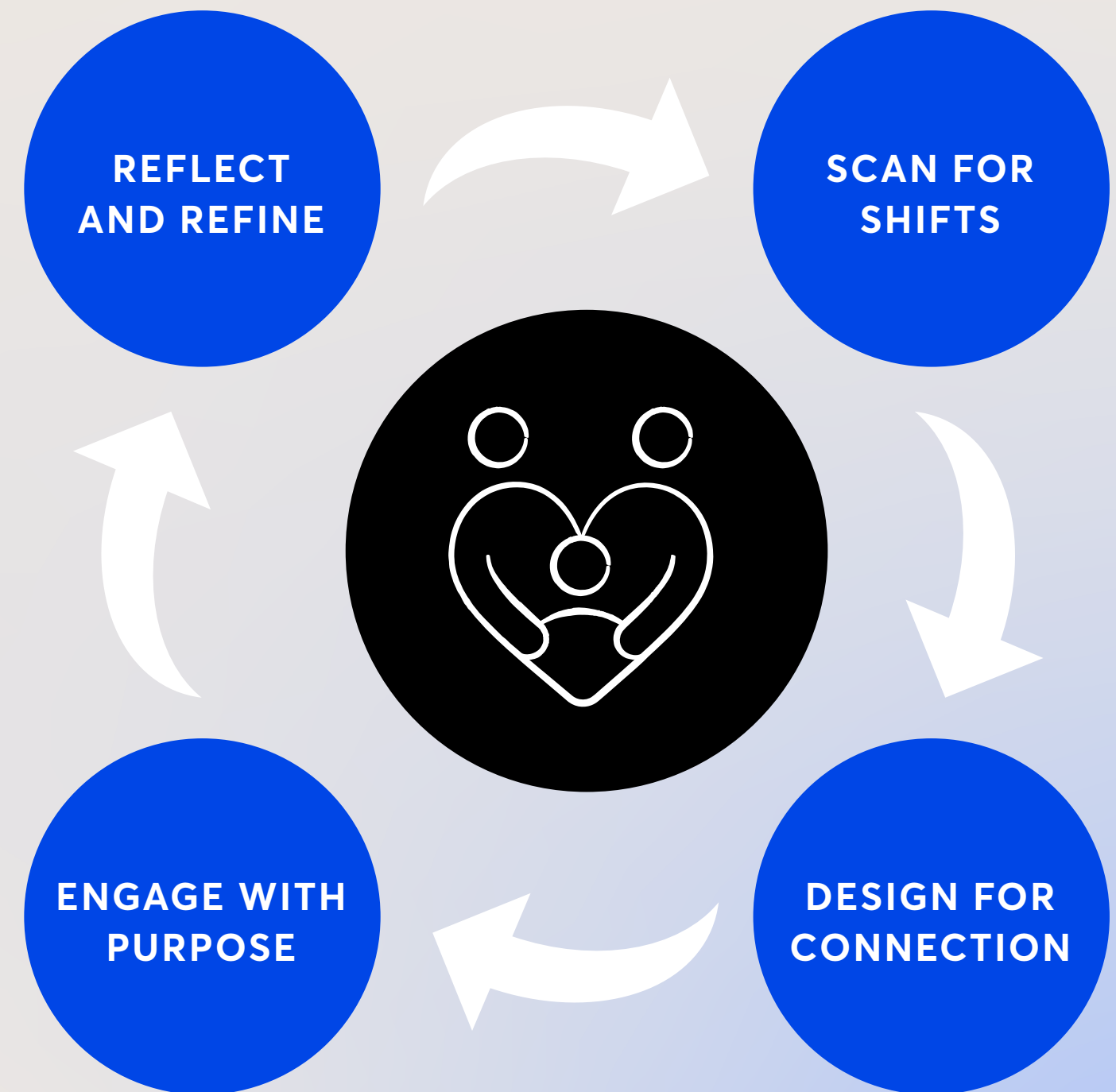
To navigate today's changing landscape, school leaders need a clear, adaptable approach to parent and community engagement, one that responds to shifting expectations and fosters a deeper sense of belonging. The Parent Partnership Cycle offers a four-stage, iterative model that enables leaders to engage parents with purpose and clarity.

The cycle begins with Scan for Shifts, where leaders observe and interpret changes in family dynamics, community needs and broader social trends. These insights inform the next stage, Design for Connection, where strategies are developed to build stronger, more inclusive partnerships between schools and families. In the third stage, Engage with Purpose, leaders put these strategies into action through consistent and meaningful interactions that nurture trust and connection. The final stage, Reflect and Refine, invites leaders to assess impact, gather feedback, and make thoughtful adjustments that strengthen future engagement.

This guide provides practical tools to move beyond traditional parent-teacher interactions and static communication methods. It supports leaders in building authentic relationships, communicating effectively, and using technology in ways that enhance participation and belonging. By applying this cycle, school leaders can transform potential challenges into opportunities for deeper engagement and stronger community.

THE PARENT PARTNERSHIP CYCLE

A framework for engaging parents in Thriving School Communities



By applying this cycle, school leaders can transform potential challenges into opportunities for deeper engagement and stronger community.



Scan for shifts: The modern parent

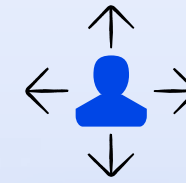


Gen Z

Born 1995-2009



Words used to describe themselves



51%

Independent



48%

Determined



46%

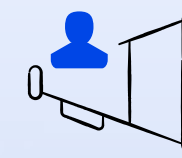
Creative

Qualities valued in a leader



58%

Approachable



57%

Clear
communication



57%

Empathy

Used to learn new skills (daily)



48%

TikTok



46%

Instagram



42%

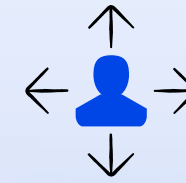
YouTube

Gen Y

Born 1980-1994



Words used to describe themselves



52%

Independent



46%

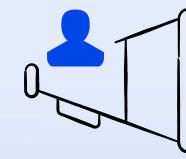
Generous



44%

Dependable

Qualities valued in a leader



60%

Clear
communication



59%

Approachable



55%

Integrity /
Accountability

Used to learn new skills (daily)



42%

Websites



41%

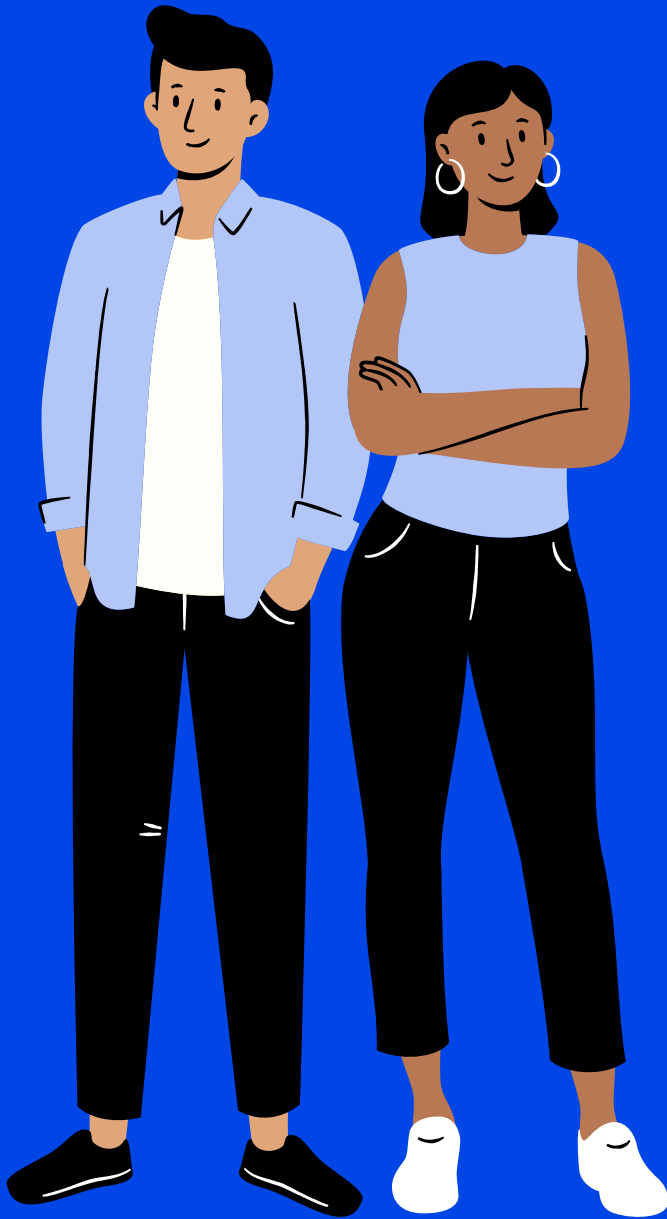
YouTube



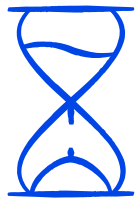
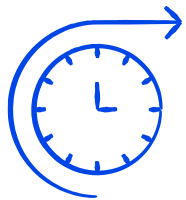
38%

Instagram

Characteristics of the next generation of parents



A school leader's guide to engaging the next generation of parents

		Parent expectations	Opportunities for schools
	Values driven	Character development, community, alignment	Lead with values and live them visibly
	Time poor	Time conscious engagement, appreciation for contribution	Celebrate and champion flexible options for parent involvement
	Digital first	Seamless, mobile, responsive communications	Upgrade tools, channels and user experience
	Partnership minded	Voice, collaboration and mutual trust	Invite and co-design with parents
	Future focused	Whole child growth and career readiness	Articulate clear and hopeful future vision

Five characteristics of the next generation of parents



1. Values driven

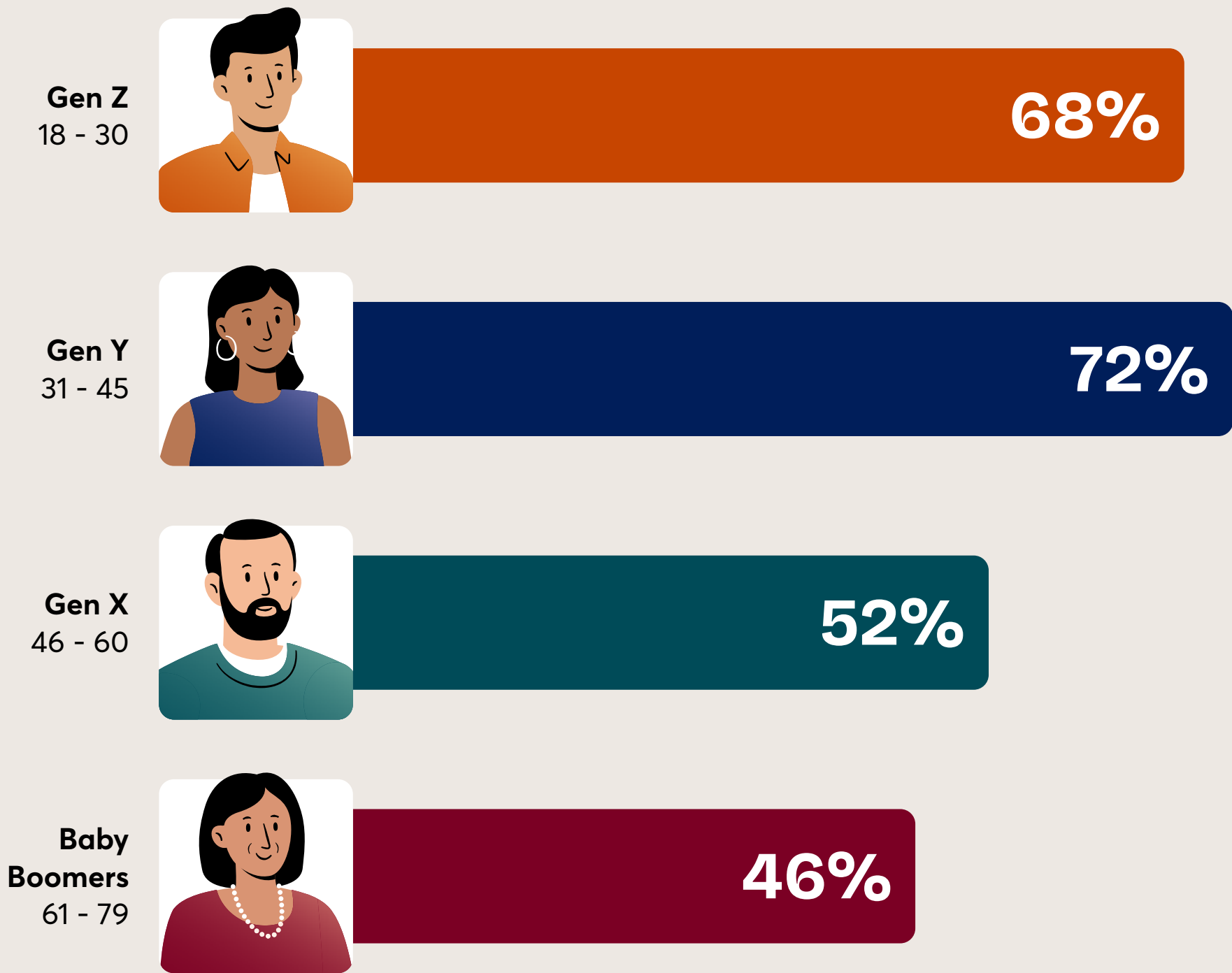


Across society there is a desire to use purchasing decisions to reflect values. Gen Y and Gen Z are the most likely to fall into this category of identity consumers, where they both believe and use their purchasing decisions to communicate values. While these behavioural tendencies are broader than school choice, it would be naïve to think they don't play a role.

01

IDENTITY CONSUMERS

THOSE WHO BOTH BELIEVE AND USE THEIR
PURCHASING DECISIONS TO COMMUNICATE VALUES



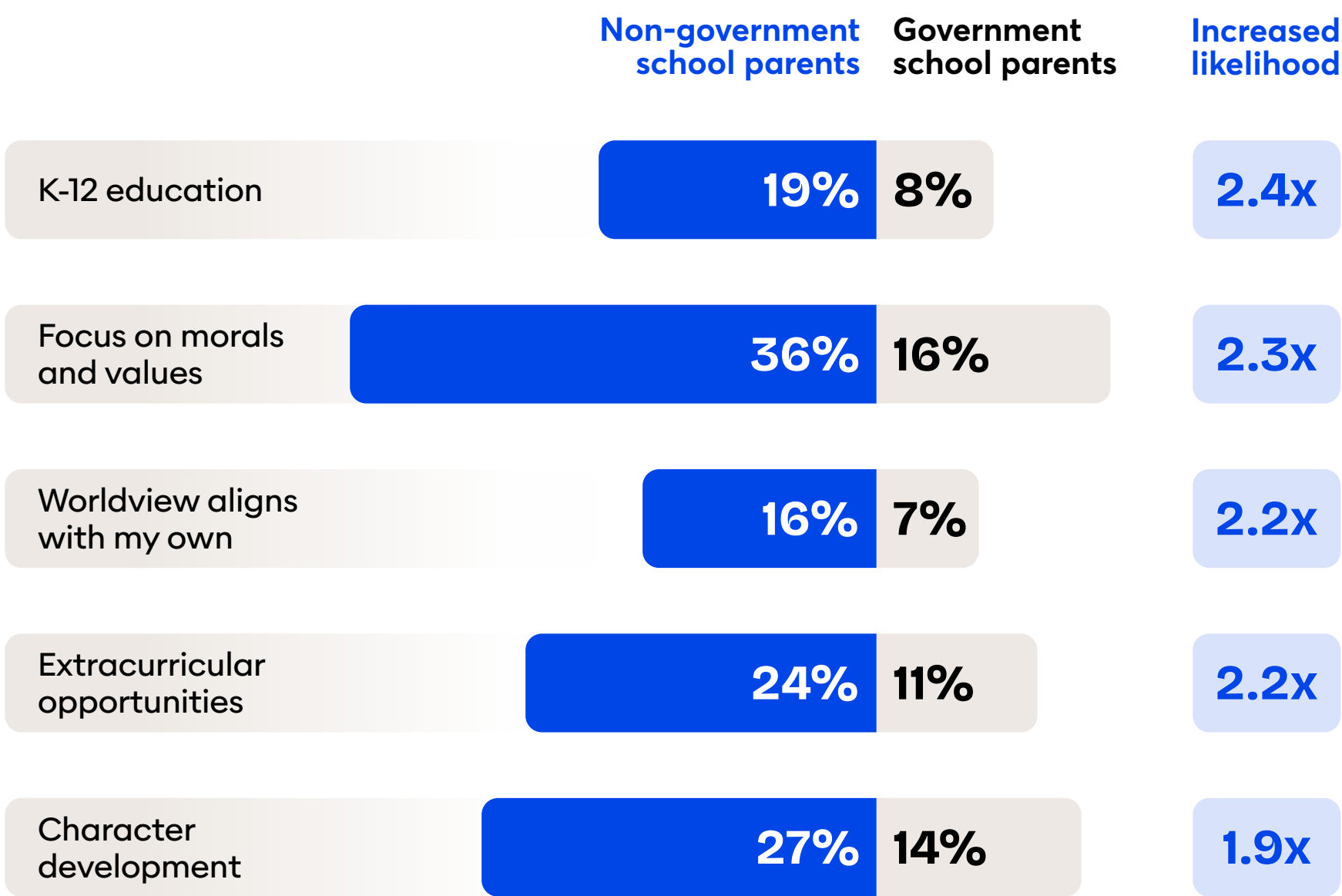
Parents aren't just looking for a good school, they are looking for a school they align with

The key influences on school choice for Government school parents are location (65%), affordability (39%) and reputation (35%). For non-government school parents, the quality of the educational program is the biggest driver (49%), followed by location (45%) and facilities and resources (42%).¹

When there is a greater financial investment in school choice, parents are prioritising values alignment and character development. Non-government school parents (36%) are 2.3 times more likely than their government (16%) counterparts to have their school choice decision influenced by a focus on morals and values. They are also 2.2 times more likely to be influenced by the worldview aligning with their own (16% cf. 7%), and 1.9 times by a focus on character development (27% cf. 14%).

While the quality of the educational program is essential, it is a baseline expectation rather than a key differentiator. Parents are evaluating schools on the character of students they develop, the culture and community impact. Many parents now look for emotional alignment and trust in staff, not just professionalism.

WHAT INFLUENCED YOUR DECISION TO SEND YOUR CHILD TO THEIR SCHOOL?
AREAS OF GREATEST DIFFERENCE —
NON-GOVERNMENT VS. GOVERNMENT SCHOOL PARENTS



Considerations for engagement



Is your school community communicating its values clearly and consistently?



Do your practices match your promise?



Are families proud of your school community, not just the academic outcomes?

2. Time poor

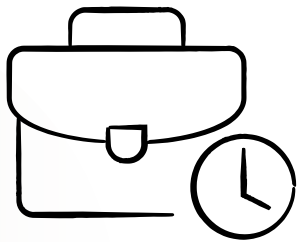
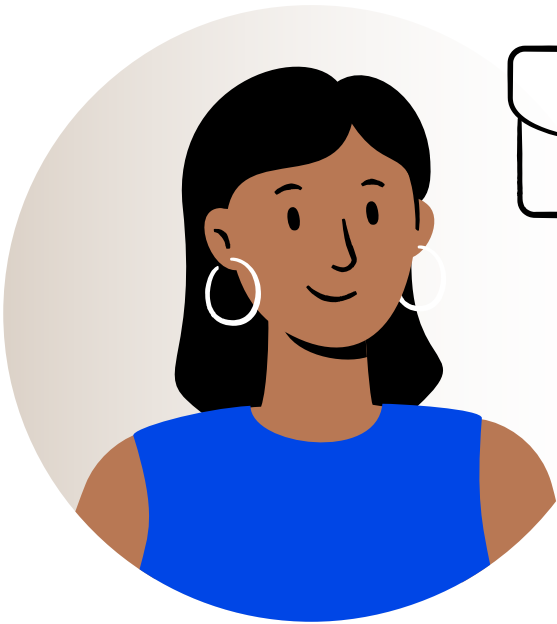


Gen Y and Gen Z parents are navigating a unique time in history where traditional family roles are redefined. Many are time-poor with both parents working to address the cost of living challenges. Today three quarters of females in their family forming years (76.5%, ages 30-34) are working, which is twice what it was in 1971 (38%).² Additionally, more than half of couple families with children under 15 years (52%) are always or often feeling rushed or pressed for time, which is much more than couple families with no children (29%).³

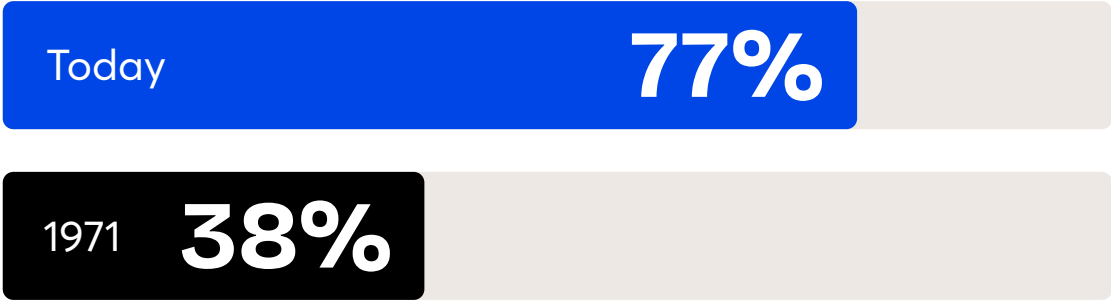
O2

Parents want to be involved but are time poor

The adjustment in parent engagement in education isn't because they care less than previous generations, but that external factors are making it more challenging for them to do so. Four in five parents (83%) believe it is extremely or very important for them to be practically involved in their child's schooling. This strong desire for involvement exists despite the reality that many parents feel they lack the time to participate in the ways they would like.



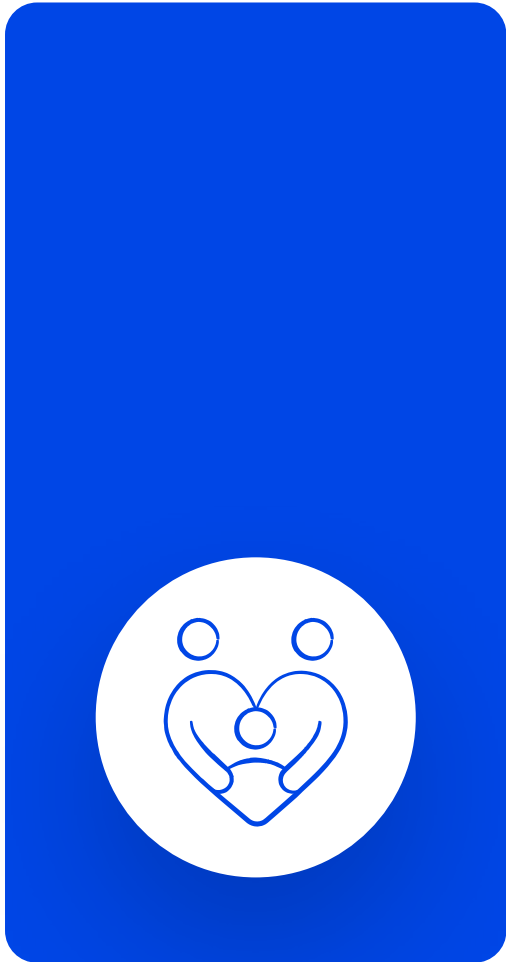
Females aged 30-34 are **2x more likely** to be working today than they were in 1971



Barriers to parent involvement

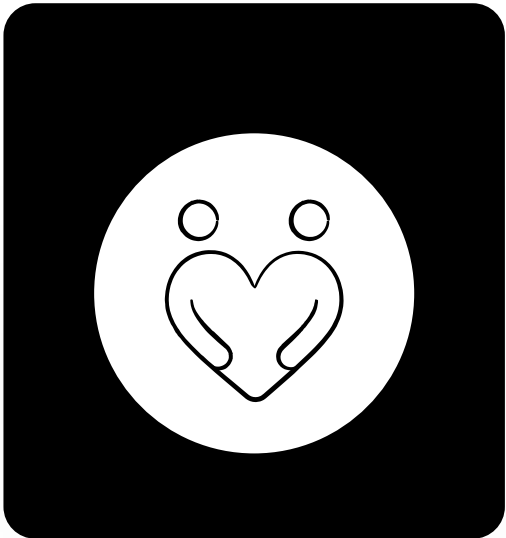
The greatest barriers to involvement are a lack of time due to work or other commitments (36%), work schedule conflicts with school hours or activities (33%) and family responsibilities that limit their availability (26%). For one in five parents (21%), however, limited communication or information from the school about opportunities for involvement is a barrier. This is closely linked to 15% of parents who don't know how to get involved or where to start, and a further 15% who feel their involvement isn't valued by the school. While parents' time constraints are outside of a school's control, clear communication, accessibility of information, celebration of parent's contributions and minimising administrative effort are all barriers' schools can work to alleviate.

ALWAYS OR OFTEN FEELING RUSHED OR PRESSED FOR TIME



52%

of couple families with children under 15 years

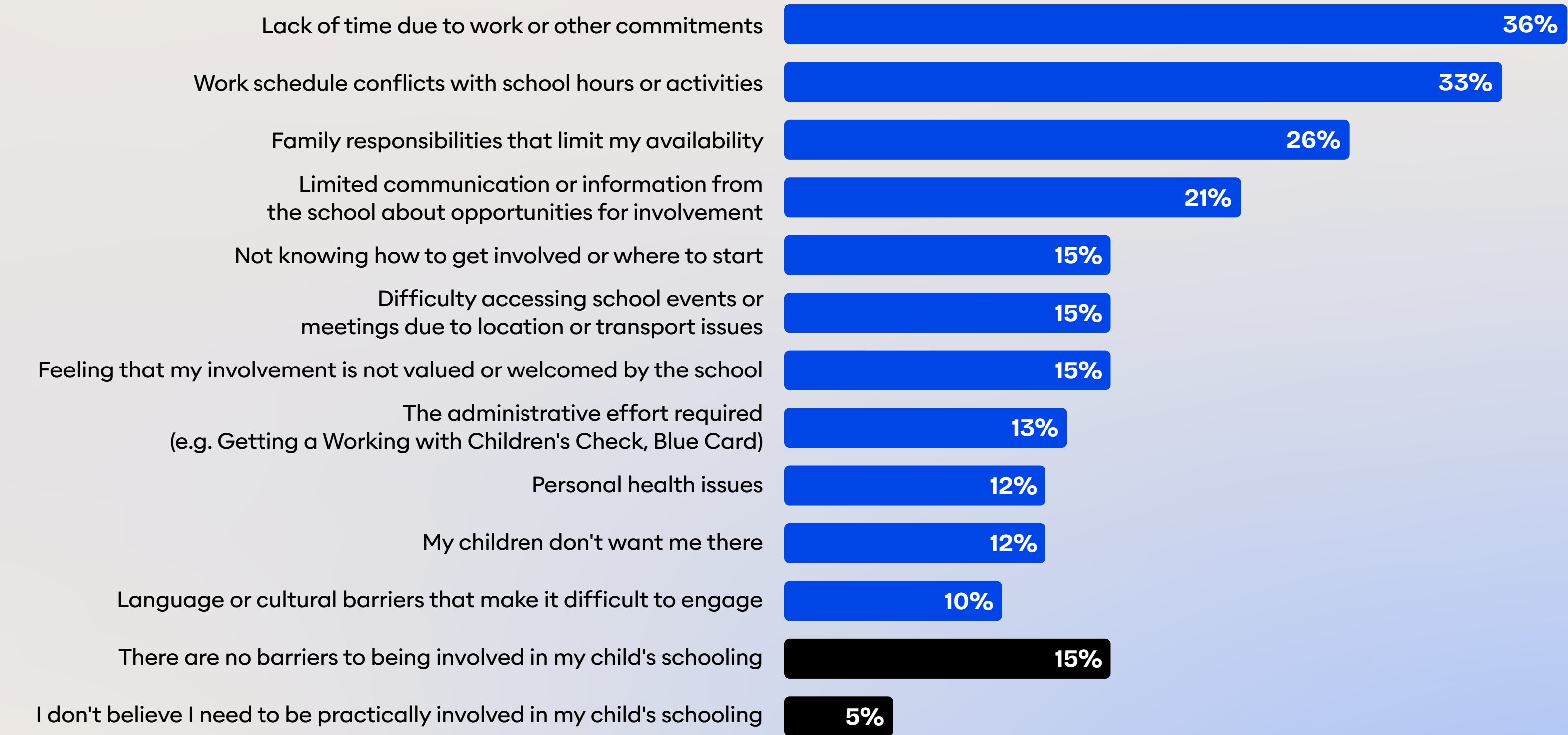


29%

of couple families with no children

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO YOU BEING PRACTICALLY INVOLVED IN YOUR CHILD’S SCHOOLING?

PLEASE SELECT ALL THAT APPLY. PARENTS, N=510



Considerations for engagement



Do you publicly value, welcome and celebrate parent involvement?



How effectively are you factoring dual income parent time constraints into your school planning?



Are you proactively minimising the administrative burden to build engagement?

3. Digitally literate, but cognitively overloaded



Gen Z and Gen Y have come of age in a digital first environment, where everything from grocery orders, to paying power bills, and keeping on top of the news cycle is done online. Information is always accessible, easy to find and provided in real-time. While this digital connection brings benefits, it can also present challenges.

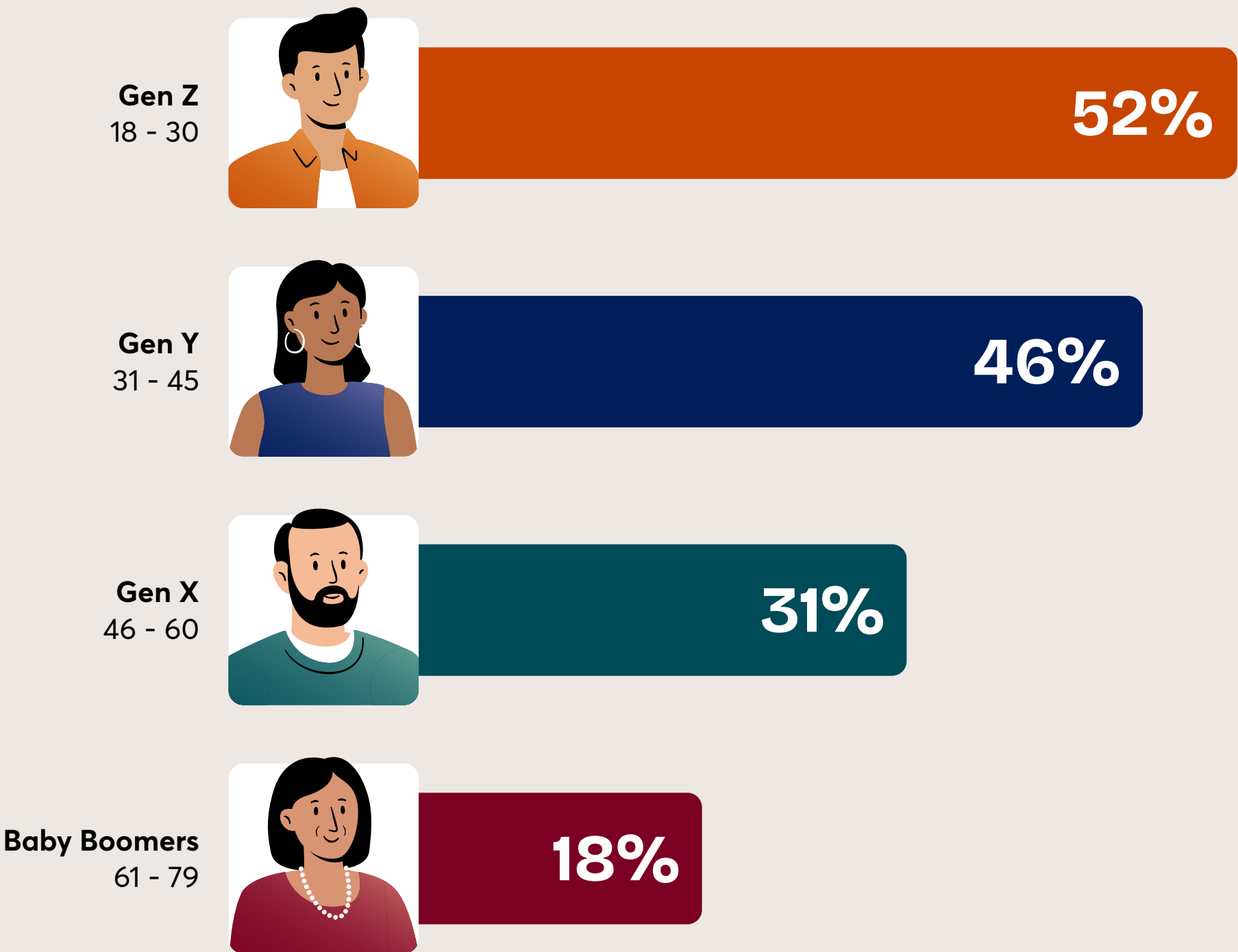
03

Information overwhelm

The time and attention people spend on their digital devices is having a negative impact on them. Today's parenting generations are disproportionately affected with half of Gen Z (52%) always or often feeling overwhelmed by the amount of activity to respond to on their digital devices, followed by Gen Y (46%), Gen X (31%), and Baby Boomers (18%).⁴

Information without curation can lead to disengagement. The inverse is also true: clear communication helps build engagement. More than nine in ten highly engaged parents (92%) strongly/somewhat agree that there is clear communication between home and school, compared to 58% of low engaged parents.⁵

ALWAYS OR OFTEN OVERWHELMED BY THE AMOUNT OF ACTIVITY TO RESPOND TO ON THEIR DIGITAL DEVICE



Create a seamless digital experience

With many parents highly digitally literate and time poor, they are looking for seamless digital experiences that cut through the noise with relevant information and real-time access. They want to engage on their time, in their way, not just when the school dictates. Clunky parent portals, paper-based administration or long-form newsletters with perceived irrelevant information will fail to resonate. Schools need to identify the right channels for the right messages. In keeping with their digital-first approach, parents appreciate intuitive digital experiences that prioritise simplicity and relevance.



Considerations for engagement



How intuitive and useful is your parent tech ecosystem?



Is your communication designed with mobile-first attention spans?



Are you using the right channels for the right kinds of messages?

4. Partnership minded



Agency, collaboration, and empowerment are the hallmarks of today's parents. Like generations before they have challenged workplace culture and are masters of the side hustle. This pace of life can at times, lead parents to look to outsource to schools, but ultimately there is a desire for agency and contribution.

04

Many parents are looking to be active collaborators, not passive participants

More than a third of parents (37%) see the relationship between parents and the school as a true partnership (with parents and the school working closely together to support the child's academic and personal development). Half, however, see it as a collaborative partnership (parents are involved but the school takes the lead in ensuring the child's success – 51% parents). Just 11% of parents see it as a transactional relationship (where the school provides a service and parents expect results with minimal involvement).⁶ This minority of parents, however, can cause challenges when they exert their agency and empowerment without an attitude of partnership.



HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTS AND THE SCHOOL IN SUPPORTING THE BEST OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS?

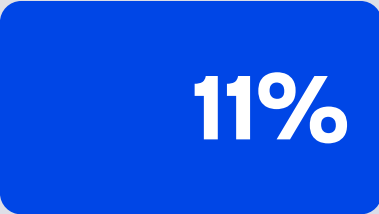
A true partnership —
Parents and the School work together closely to support the child’s academic and personal development



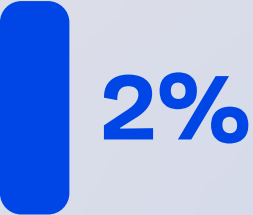
A collaborative relationship —
Parents are involved but the School takes the lead in ensuring the child’s success



A transactional relationship —
The School provides services and Parents expect results, with minimal involvement



A distant relationship —
Parents and the School have limited interaction, with the school primarily responsible for the child’s education

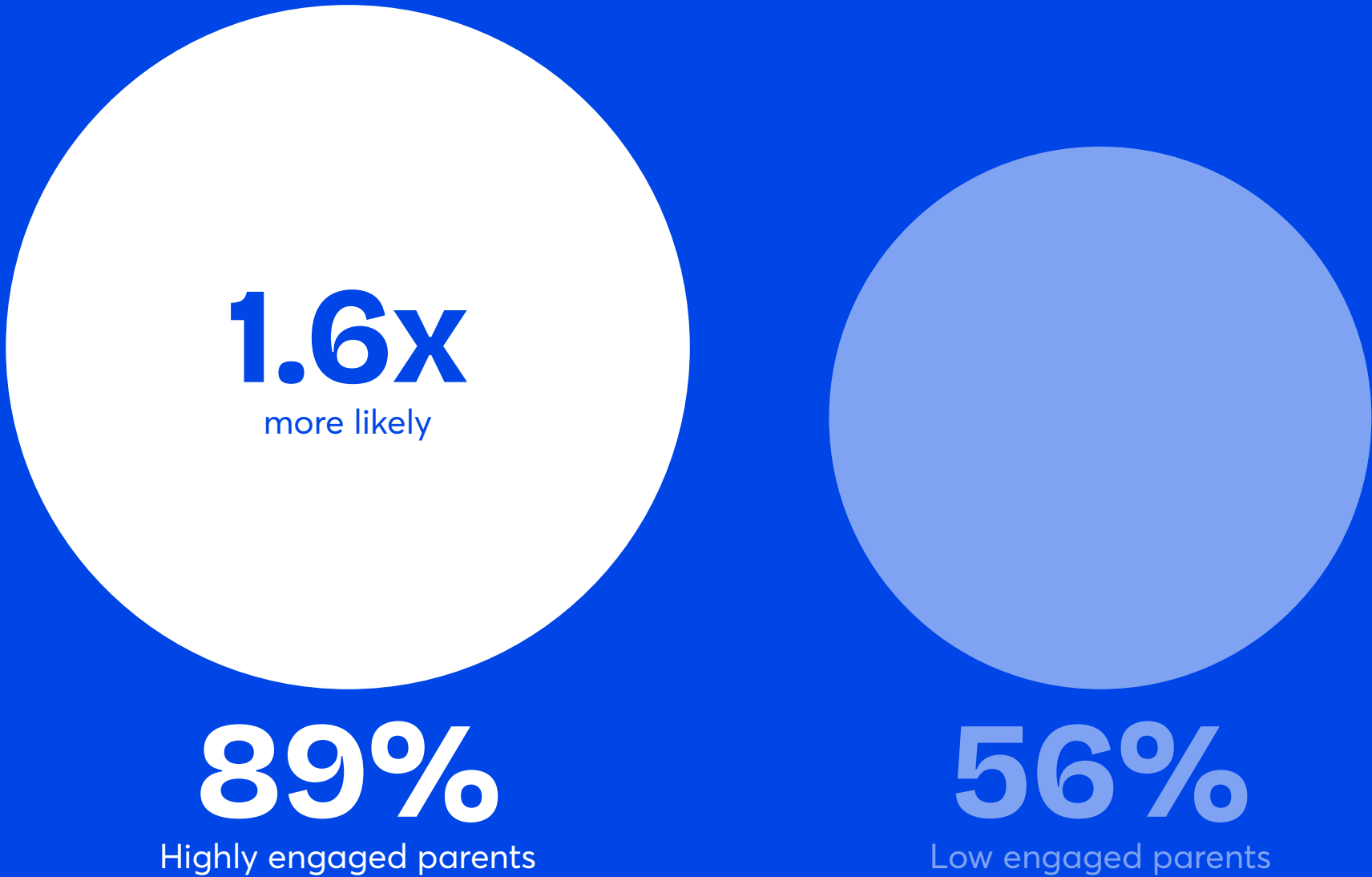


Build partnerships through consistency, trust and contribution

The best student outcomes are achieved when there is a true partnership between parents, students and educators. Strong partnerships can also help build parent engagement. Almost nine in ten highly engaged parents (89%) strongly/somewhat agree staff, parents, and students work closely together to help students succeed, compared to 56% of low engaged parents.⁵ Great partnerships are built through consistency, trust and contribution. Explore ways to provide parents appropriate transparency, input opportunities and contribution outside of traditional volunteering.

STAFF, PARENTS, AND STUDENTS WORK CLOSELY TOGETHER TO HELP STUDENTS SUCCEED

STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT AGREE



Considerations for engagement



How can the parent community be engaged in co-creation not just feedback?



Where might parents feel talked at, rather than invited in?



Are systems being built for parent collaboration or passivity?

5. Future focused



Today's parents are parenting in a world shaped by constant change and uncertainty. This has made them incredibly future-focused. They're not just concerned with today's grades, but with how their child's education will prepare them for a complex, unpredictable future. This perspective is driven by a desire for their children to have greater economic stability and to thrive in a world of disruptive technology and changing career pathways.

05

Holistic development and career readiness

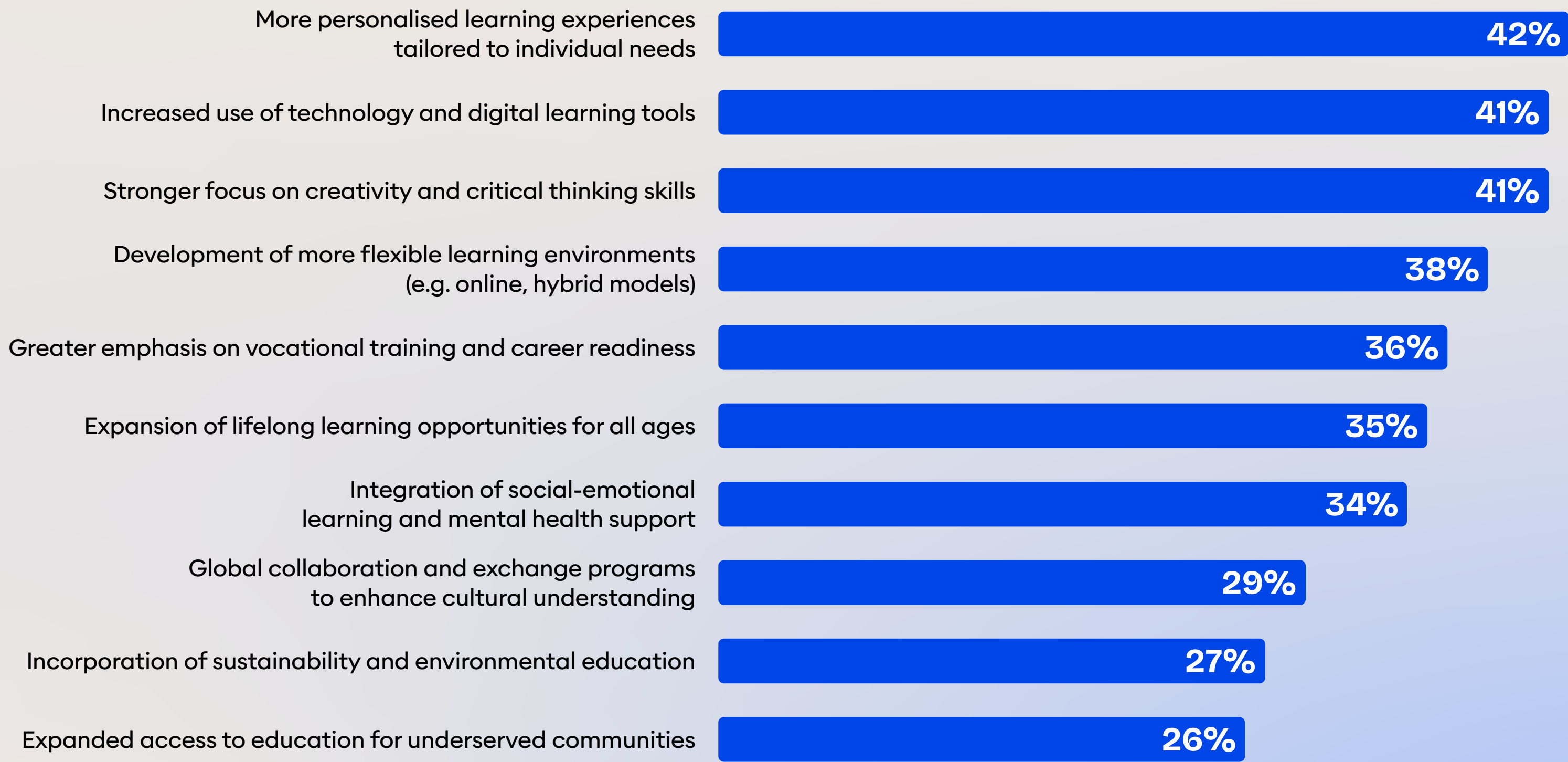
This future-focused mindset extends beyond academics to a strong demand for personalised and holistic development. Parents want real-world relevance and life-readiness to be an integral part of schooling, ensuring their child is equipped for life after graduation. When considering opportunities for the future of education, the demand for this kind of education is clear with 42% of parents wanting more personalised learning experiences catered to individual needs and 36% of parents desiring a greater emphasis on vocational training and career readiness.⁶ Beyond academic knowledge, parents are seeking a curriculum that actively builds life-readiness and future-ready skills like character, confidence, and adaptability.

Invite parents into the story

Parents want to partner with schools to understand not just what their child is learning, but who they are becoming. In fact, highly engaged parents are 1.4 times as likely as those with low engagement to strongly/somewhat agree students are developing good character at their school (86% cf. 59%) and students are prepared to succeed in life after school (89% cf. 62%).⁵ Ultimately, parents are driven by a vision of their child's future and are looking for a trusted ally to help them navigate the journey toward a life well-lived.



WHAT OPPORTUNITIES DO YOU SEE FOR THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION?





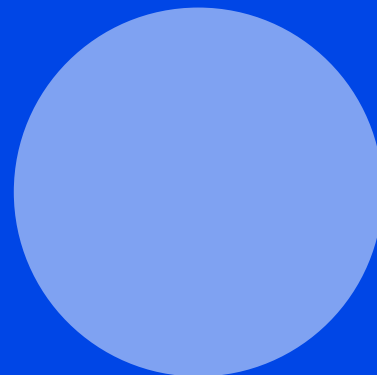
STUDENTS ARE DEVELOPING GOOD CHARACTER

STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT AGREE

1.5x
more likely

86%

Highly engaged parents



59%

Low engaged parents



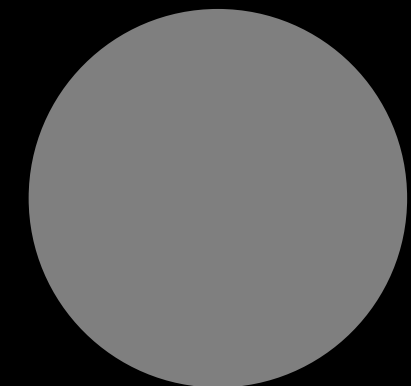
STUDENTS ARE PREPARED TO SUCCEED IN LIFE AFTER SCHOOL

STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT AGREE

1.4x
more likely

89%

Highly engaged parents



62%

Low engaged parents

Considerations for engagement



Are you clearly articulating what kind of young person the School is shaping?



Do the School's values translate into future-ready competencies (e.g. resilience, empathy, critical thinking)?



Is the School helping families see a meaningful pathway through and beyond school?

Design for connection: Leader's checklist

A checklist to help school leaders design for connection by evaluating and improving their engagement strategies with today's parents.

Values alignment



- ☐ Does our school website clearly articulate our core values and mission?
- ☐ Are our school's values visibly demonstrated in daily school life, student behaviour, and staff interactions?
- ☐ Do we actively celebrate the character development of students alongside their academic achievements?
- ☐ Have we identified a unique aspect of our school culture that we can highlight as a "value differentiator"?

Time-conscious engagement



- ☐ Do we offer flexible options for parent involvement, such as virtual meetings or asynchronous volunteer tasks?
- ☐ Is our parent calendar well-planned to avoid conflicts and give ample notice for all events?
- ☐ Do we publicly value, welcome and celebrate parent involvement?
- ☐ Are we using technology to save parents time (e.g., online booking for parent-teacher interviews)?

Communication & digital experience



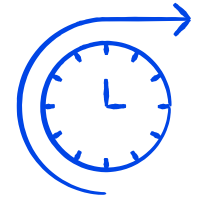
- ☐ Is our parent tech ecosystem intuitive and mobile-friendly?
- ☐ Do we use different channels for different types of messages (e.g., urgent alerts via text, weekly updates via a digital newsletter)?
- ☐ Are our communication efforts consistent and proactive, rather than reactive?
- ☐ Have we streamlined administrative tasks (e.g., permission forms, payments) to be as frictionless as possible?
- ☐ Do we regularly gather feedback from parents on their digital experience with the school?

Fostering partnership



- ☐ Do we have clear, consistent policies for parent communication and collaboration?
- ☐ Are there opportunities for parents to contribute to the school community beyond traditional volunteering (e.g. through advisory committees or co-creation projects)?
- ☐ Do we proactively communicate how parents can partner with the school to reinforce what is being taught in the classroom?
- ☐ What do parents feel when they walk into our school?
- ☐ Do our parent engagement efforts reinforce the idea that families and the school are working together toward a shared goal?

Future focus & outcomes



- ☐ Do our school's marketing materials and conversations with prospective parents clearly link our educational approach to a student's future success?
- ☐ Are we showcasing how our curriculum develops critical thinking, adaptability, and other "future-ready" skills?
- ☐ Do we provide families with a clear and meaningful pathway for their child's future, whether that's through vocational training, university, or other options?
- ☐ Do our parent-teacher conferences and communication focus on who the child is becoming, not just what they are learning?

How we can help

This guide highlights how today's parents are fundamentally reshaping what it means to be part of a school community. Their expectations around communication, partnership, and belonging are evolving. Schools that fail to adapt to these new realities risk missing a powerful opportunity to build trust, deepen engagement, and support student success.

At a time when strong school–family partnerships are essential for learning outcomes, staff wellbeing, and community cohesion, leaders need more than good intentions. They need clear insights, practical tools, and trusted support to respond in ways that are both meaningful and sustainable. Thriving communities are built on a foundation of trust between families and schools.



Unlock authentic parent insights to design for connection

Do you need help understanding your parents and designing for deeper connection? We can help by conducting a survey of your parent community, and/or facilitating tailored parent consultation workshops. These consultative approaches provide a space for families to share their honest experiences, values, and needs, giving you a richer understanding of how they engage with your school. These methodologies surface authentic feedback and help lay the groundwork for stronger, more meaningful relationships between families and staff.

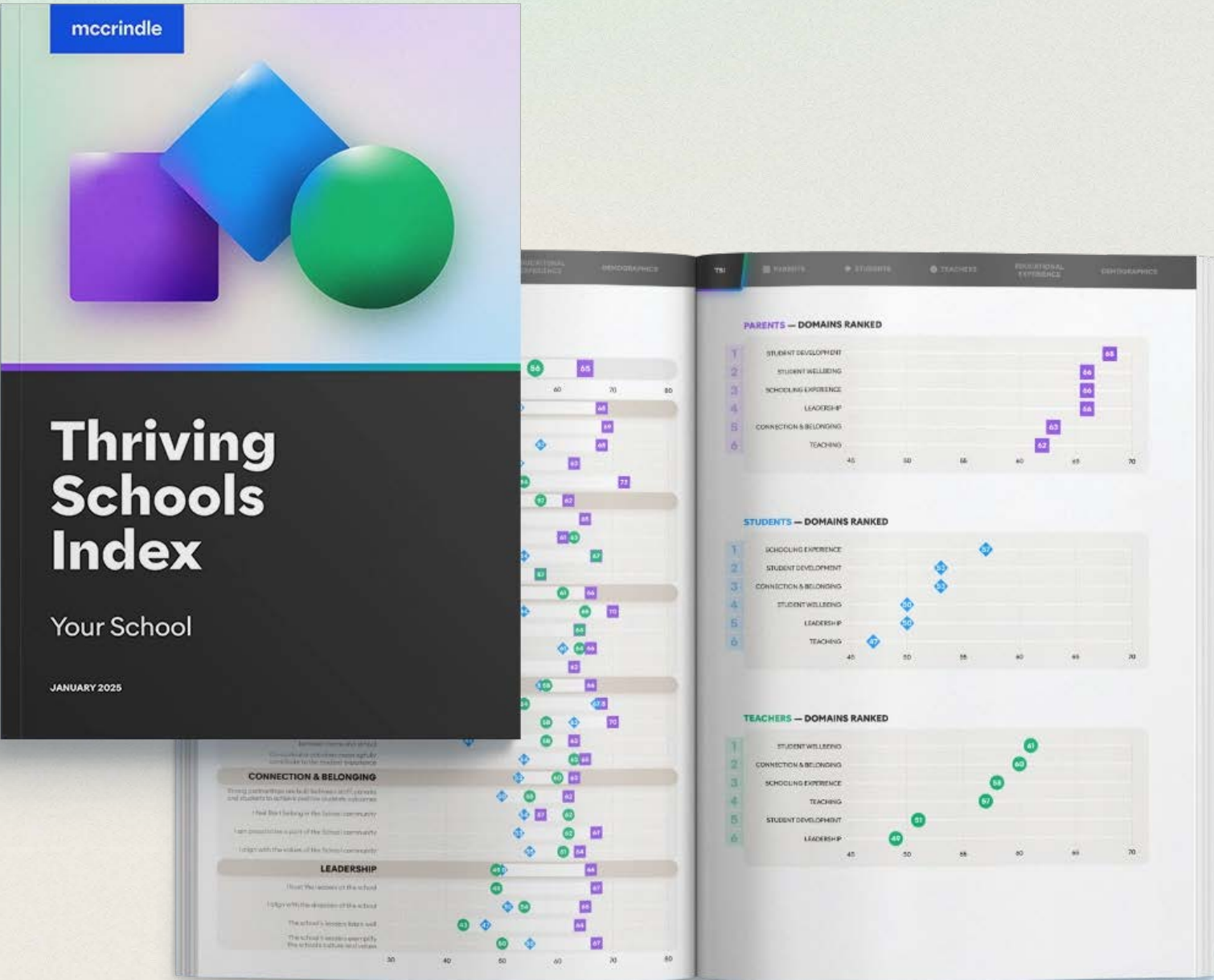
Measure what matters using the Thriving Schools Index (TSI)

A thriving community is the hallmark of a great school. The true measure of a flourishing school goes beyond academics; it's the ability to foster student wellbeing, champion innovative teaching, and build a strong sense of connection and belonging among students, staff, and parents. Today's school leaders face a constant barrage of information and a new set of expectations. They need clear, actionable insights to confidently move from being reactive to being strategic.

This is where McCrindle's Thriving Schools Index (TSI) comes in. It is a research-driven, multidimensional tool that measures what truly drives success in 21st-century education. The TSI is a streamlined survey that respects that parents are time-poor; it takes just 10 minutes to complete, which significantly helps engagement. It provides a simple, key metrics report that empowers school leaders with the confidence to lead boldly and invest resources where they will have the greatest impact, ultimately helping them build an environment where every member of the school community can thrive.

Find out more and explore how the Thriving Schools Index can help you turn insights into action.

FIND OUT MORE



Research methodology

A school leader's guide to the next generation of parents draws insights from several McCrindle reports. This guide is designed to provide school leaders with an understanding of how the parental engagement landscape is shifting and outlines opportunities to respond.

Graphs and rounding

Data labels on the graphs in this report have been rounded and may, therefore, sum to 99% or 101%. Any calculations where two data points have been added are based on raw data (not the rounded data labels on the graph) which have then been rounded once combined.

References

- 1 McCrindle, Building thriving School Communities, 2024
- 2 Australian Bureau of Statistics, Employment in the 2021 Census, 2022
- 3 Australian Bureau of Statistics, How Australians use their time, 2022
- 4 McCrindle, 2025 Trends of the year, 2025
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