

# Parents and the **PARCC:**

How Teachers, Schools and  
Districts Can Engage Their Most  
Important Stakeholders



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ABOUT TEACH PLUS

The mission of Teach Plus is to empower excellent, experienced teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that affect their students' success.

# INTRODUCTION

Shifting to the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessment in a large district like Chicago Public Schools, which serves almost 400,000 students and employs over 22,000 teachers, is a challenging process.<sup>1</sup> Educators need to learn and understand the new assessment, modify their instruction to ensure that they are preparing students adequately for this new level of rigor, and communicate the changes and implications to parents. In a district of this size and student diversity, it is important for educators to identify and utilize best practices that allow them to effectively communicate with parents and guardians regarding student success.

Teach Plus, in partnership with the High Quality Assessment Project, provided training to 129 Teacher Leaders on the PARCC, how to modify instruction to align with the PARCC's level of rigor, and methods to engage parents and guardians about outcomes and resources of the new assessment. Following this training, Teacher Leaders provided the same training to over 1,200 teachers in their respective schools, helping to create a broader parent and guardian engagement strategy around the PARCC assessment across the district. Throughout these trainings, Teach Plus assessed what best practices Teacher Leaders and teachers were utilizing to ensure strong parent and guardian engagement was present in their school. The best practices were based upon national research around strong school and parent partnerships.

Based on existing research on parent and family engagement, we identified several practices that educators and schools should implement to ensure parents and guardians are engaged in their schools. For the purposes of our study, we reviewed research from experts across the field of education and identified five overall parent engagement practices. These practices are as follows:

- + Translation of all materials for non-English speaking parents and respect for all parents' cultures<sup>2</sup>
- + Open houses and training sessions at flexible times that consider parents' work schedules<sup>3</sup>
- + Prearranged visits to students' homes by teachers and other staff members<sup>4,16</sup>
- + Engaging parents in student learning (i.e. homework assignments that require parent collaboration)<sup>5</sup>
- + Encouraging parents to volunteer at the school or to be involved in the PTA or other parent organizations<sup>3,5</sup>

In Illinois, a parent engagement framework on assessments, revised on June 1, 2015, reaffirms national research on parent engagement strategies related to assessments. The Illinois framework suggests that parents should receive information about yearly assessments, that districts should share student and school data with families and help them make sense of the data, and that teachers and schools should communicate regularly about student progress.<sup>6</sup>

In this brief, we seek to understand how teachers, schools, and districts are communicating with parents about the PARCC assessment. We want to understand which best practices are being used, and whether teachers are functioning as the main conduit of information to parents about the PARCC exam. If teachers are not communicating with parents about the assessment, we want to understand why.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- + How have teachers communicated so far with parents regarding the PARCC assessment?
- + How can teachers effectively communicate the rationale, results, and usability of the new high-quality assessments to parents?
- + How well prepared do teachers feel they are to present the “basics” of the PARCC assessment to parents?
- + How well prepared are teachers to share PARCC results with parents?

Of the 1,227 teachers and Teacher Leaders who responded to our survey:

- + Fifty-four percent of respondents teach grades Pre-K through 5th grade and 32 percent of respondents teach 6th grade through 8th grade.
- + Twenty-two percent of respondents have been teaching for 0-5 years, 18 percent have been teaching for 6-10 years, 37 percent have been teaching for 11-19 years, and 23 percent have been teaching for 20 or more years.

## METHODS

On August 11 and August 16, 2016, Teach Plus trained 129 Teacher Leaders in Chicago Public Schools to deliver a PARCC 101 training on the PARCC assessment system to their peers. After the August trainings, these Teacher Leaders provided the PARCC 101 training to over 1,200 teachers in grades K-8 across the district during the in-service days at the beginning of the school year. Following all PARCC 101 trainings, Teach Plus administered surveys to collect participant satisfaction with training and to assess parent and family engagement at the teacher level, the school level, and the district/charter network level.

## FINDINGS

From the researched best practices around parent engagement, we determined the strategies that would best support parents in their understanding of the PARCC assessment system. Using these best practices as guidelines, we surveyed teachers who participated in our PARCC 101 training to assess how they have engaged with parents around the PARCC assessment. Through our survey of those who participated in Teach Plus trainings, teachers indicated which of the best practices for parent engagement are currently being utilized by teachers, schools, and the district. Highlights of that survey data are presented below.

**FINDING #1:** The majority of schools have sent materials on PARCC to parents, but less than half have done so in various languages and only a handful of teachers have done so on their own.

Our first finding focuses on how teachers, schools, and the district engage parents around PARCC through informational materials. Research from the Education Public Interest Center and the Illinois State Board of Education shows that effective parent engagement should include sharing materials with parents, translation of all materials for non-English-

speaking parents, and respect for all parents' cultures.<sup>2,6</sup> According to the research, barriers to parent engagement for English Language Learners' (ELL) parents include the following: (1) school-based barriers; (2) lack of English-language proficiency; (3) parental education level; (4) disjuncture between school culture and home culture; and (5) logistical issues.<sup>2, p.8</sup>

When it comes to sharing PARCC information and results with parents, this research suggests that teachers and schools should aim to share PARCC information regularly and in the parents' native languages.

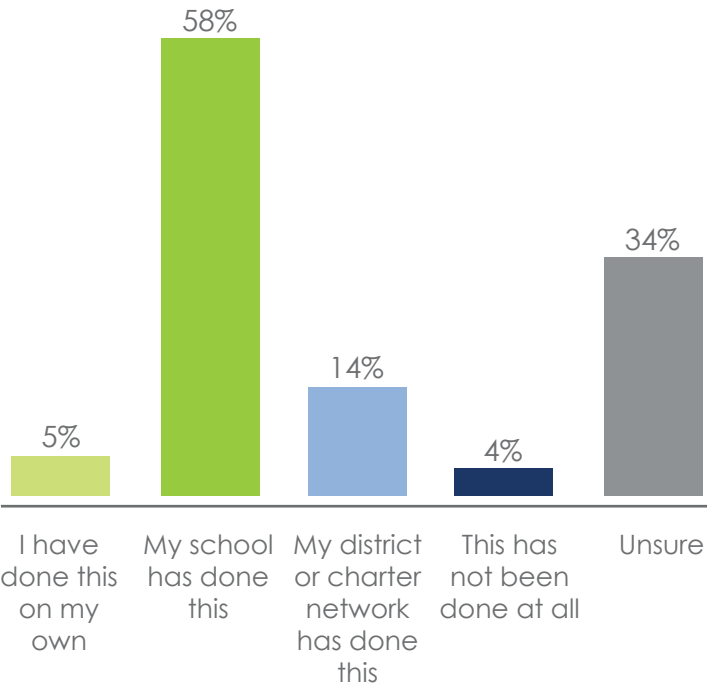
In our survey, 58 percent of teachers indicated that their school had sent home informational materials about PARCC, while 34 percent of teachers were unsure if this had been done and only 5 percent had done this on their own (see Figure 1).<sup>7</sup> Our survey also showed that 40 percent of teachers indicated that their school has shared materials with parents regarding PARCC that were translated into various languages, while 42 percent were unsure if this had been done and only 2 percent had done this on their own (see Figure 2).<sup>8</sup>

Teachers report a large gap between what schools are doing and what teachers are doing

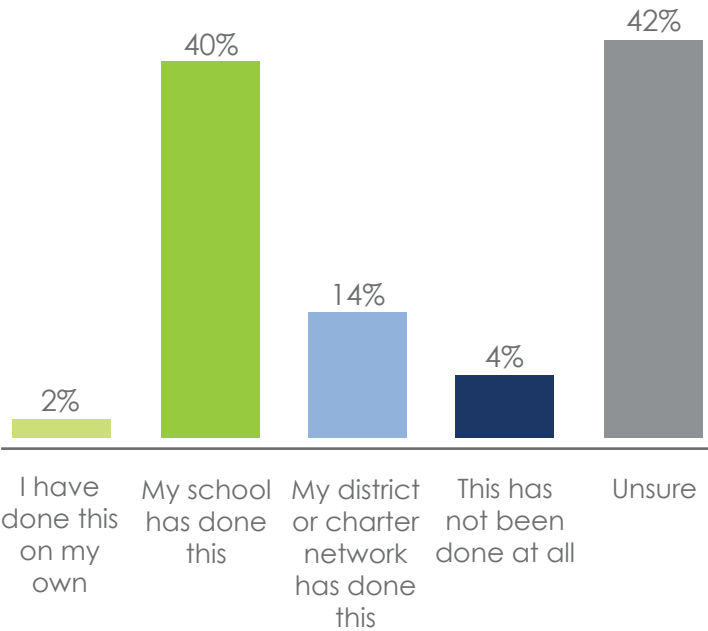
on their own. When it comes to informational materials, this gap is perhaps not surprising. For example, it is not reasonable to expect teachers to translate instructional materials into a variety of languages. However, in diverse school districts, it is important that communication to parents is frequent, comprehensive, and translated into the languages parents can access.<sup>2</sup>

Another concern is that 40 percent of teachers surveyed were unsure what communications had gone out, suggesting that the district lacks a comprehensive communications strategy. Such strategy involves and connects the district, schools, teachers and parents. Sending home a backpack letter from the superintendent about PARCC is not enough; schools and teachers also need to be communicating with parents about the new assessments.

**Figure 1:** Informational materials about PARCC were sent to families



**Figure 2:** Materials shared with families about PARCC were translated into various languages



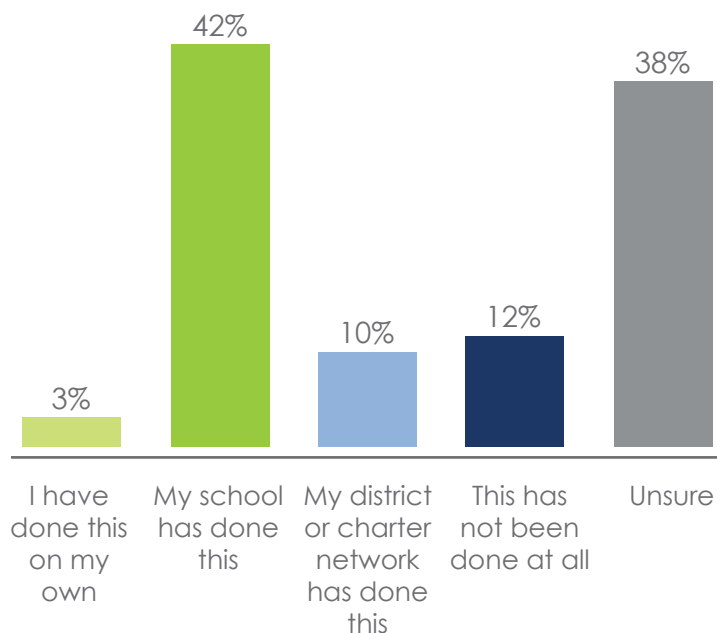
## **FINDING #2:** Slightly less than half of schools have held information sessions on PARCC or referenced PARCC results during parent-teacher conferences, and only 11 percent of teachers have had such discussions with parents on their own.

Our second finding focused on how teachers, schools, and districts engage with parents in-person around the PARCC assessment. Research from the National Education Association and the Ohio Department of Education shows that effective parent engagement should include the establishment of home-to-school parent information sessions and well-organized parent-teacher conferences and open-houses.<sup>4,5</sup> According to the research, “Parent involvement increases when the administration and staff of a school communicate a genuine desire to involve parents by considering their need.”<sup>3</sup> In considering parent engagement around PARCC assessments and results, this research suggests that teachers and schools should invite parents

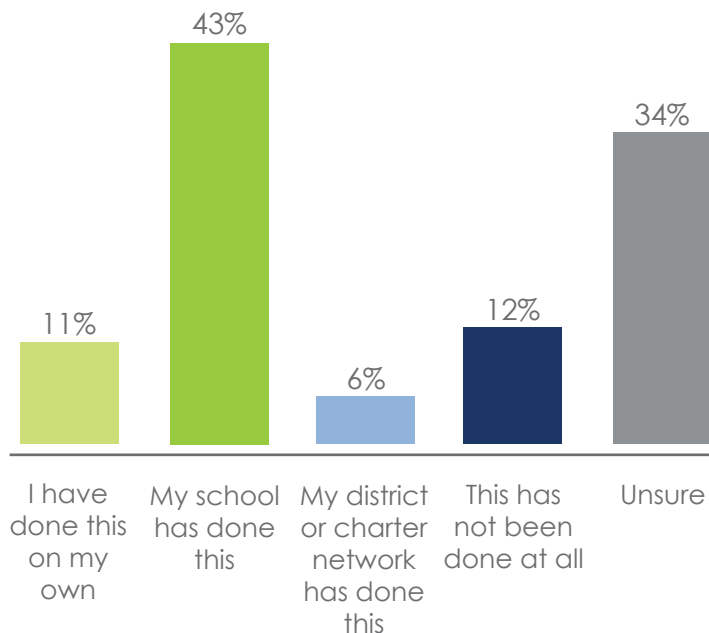
to in-person meetings to discuss PARCC, either in a large group or in a one-on-one setting.

In our survey, 42 percent of teachers indicated that their school has held informational sessions about PARCC, while 38 percent of teachers were unsure if this had been done and only 3 percent had done this on their own (see Figure 3).<sup>9</sup> Our survey also showed that 43 percent of teachers indicated that their school referenced PARCC tests and/or PARCC results during parent-teacher conferences, while 34 percent were unsure if this had been done and only 11 percent had done this on their own (see Figure 4).<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 3:** Holding information sessions about PARCC



**Figure 4:** The PARCC test and/or PARCC results were referenced during parent-teacher conferences



Again, teachers report a large gap between what schools are doing and what teachers are doing on their own. While it is understandable that schools and not teachers would hold information sessions, it is still surprising that only 11 percent of teachers reported referencing PARCC results during parent-teacher conferences. One potential reason was the late reporting of scores in the 2015-2016 school year, with scores released very late in the first

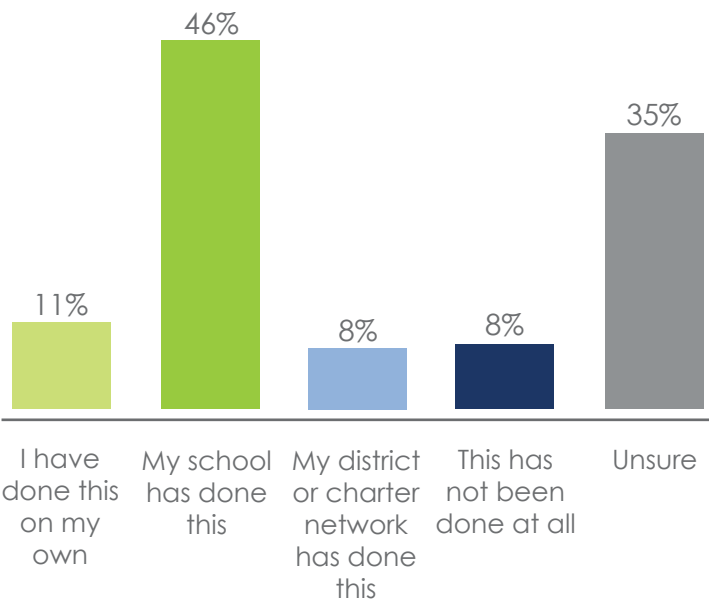
semester. Regardless of the reason, parents look to teachers as a main conduit of information about their children's education. For parents to understand and support PARCC, the district needs to support teachers and schools in providing parents with informational sessions about PARCC and ensuring that parent-teacher conferences directly reference the PARCC test or PARCC results.<sup>5</sup>

**FINDING #3:** Slightly less than half of schools have encouraged parents to explore PARCC practice tests with their children, but only 11 percent of teachers have had such discussions with parents on their own.

Our third finding focused on how teachers, schools, and districts encourage parents to access PARCC materials, like practice tests, with their children. Research from the Ohio Department of Education and Illinois State Board of Education shows that effective parent engagement should involve the “strengthening of families’ knowledge and skills to support and extend their children’s learning at home.”<sup>5,6</sup> According to research conducted in Ohio, “The involvement of parents and families in their children’s education is critical to students’ academic success.”<sup>5</sup> To engage parents in meaningful ways on the PARCC assessment, this research suggests that teachers and schools should provide parents with access to PARCC materials that their children are interacting with on a regular basis in school, including access to practice test materials.

In our survey, 46 percent of teachers indicated that their school has encouraged parents or families to explore PARCC practice tests with their children, while 35 percent were unsure if this had been done and only 11 percent had done this on their own (see Figure 5).<sup>11</sup>

**Figure 5:** Parents and families were encouraged to explore PARCC practice tests with their children



Like our other findings, a gap persists between what teachers report that their schools are doing and what teachers are doing on their own. Teach Plus showed last year that teachers needed additional training on the PARCC, so teachers may not have been aware of the support materials for parents that were available.<sup>17</sup> Even though additional materials have been developed over the past year by a number of organizations that focus on helping parents work with their students, it may take teachers time to learn about these materials. Districts should work to spread resources that parents can use to engage with their children around assessments that they are taking in school. To do this, districts need to support teachers and schools in working with families to access PARCC resources, including practice tests.<sup>5,6</sup>

Overall, 62 percent of teachers indicated that their school is doing about the right amount when it comes to parent engagement around PARCC and 53 percent of teachers indicated that their district is doing about the right amount when it comes to parent engagement around PARCC.<sup>12,13</sup> However, the evidence from Findings 1 to 3 makes it clear that few teachers, as the most important contact point with parents, are engaging parents on their own about the PARCC exam. While teacher questions about the examination may partly explain why teachers are not engaging parents on their own, Finding 4 below suggests additional reasons why teachers may not be directly engaging with parents about the exam.

## **FINDING #4:** Teachers recognize that communicating with parents about PARCC is important but feel they lack the resources and training to do so effectively.

Research from the National Education Association finds that, “When schools build partnerships with families that respond to parent concerns, honor their contributions, and share decision-making responsibilities, they are able to sustain connections that are aimed at improving student achievement.”<sup>4</sup> Our findings indicate that teachers agree that ongoing communication about PARCC assessments is an important best practice to encourage parent involvement. These ongoing communications include parent-teacher conferences, letters and information sent home, and directing parents to PARCC resources. However, 36 percent of those responding were unsure about what sort of best practices have been utilized by their school or district to engage parents in the PARCC assessment.<sup>14</sup>

The importance of building partnerships with parents and families is more evident through what teachers suggested their school and district could do to improve parent

communication and engagement concerning PARCC or assessments in general. These suggestions include more informational sessions for parents on the PARCC assessment, providing more practice materials and resources for parents to utilize with students, and providing more training to teachers who are implementing PARCC assessments in order to ensure they can accurately and effectively communicate with parents. Teachers suggest that schools and districts “Hold PARCC informational meetings for parents. Provide teachers with important talking points and things to stress to parents about PARCC. Make sure teachers understand how to interpret score reports so that they can teach parents.”<sup>15</sup> Teachers also indicated that “more clarity given to school staff about PARCC scores” and “offering professional development to help educate teachers in order to be able to educate parents” would support teachers in engaging with parents on the PARCC assessment.<sup>15</sup>

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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## **1. TEACHERS NEED ADDITIONAL TRAINING ON THE PARCC ASSESSMENT SYSTEM TO SUPPORT THEIR INSTRUCTION OF STUDENTS AND PARENTS.**

We recommend that districts work across schools to provide effective training and support to teachers on an ongoing basis to increase their understanding of the PARCC assessment system. In order for teachers to become advocates for a testing system in their district, they need to be provided with appropriate supports from the district through the form of targeted training, ongoing PARCC feedback, and the opportunity to tie their Common Core curriculum to the goals of the PARCC assessment. The gap between what schools are doing and what teachers are doing suggests that teachers are not yet ready to be advocates for the new system. Ultimately, to get parent buy-in, there needs to be teacher support of the PARCC assessment. Providing additional training and data to teachers could be the catalyst to create the parent buy-in.

## **2. TEACHERS NEED TO USE THEIR KNOWLEDGE OF THE PARCC ASSESSMENT SYSTEM TO BETTER INFORM PARENTS.**

We recommend that schools find targeted ways to provide information to parents, outside of pamphlets that are sent home at the beginning of the year and near testing time. Schools should hold informational sessions and continue ongoing communication throughout the year to parents about the PARCC assessment system. Teachers should discuss students' PARCC score reports with parents during parent-teacher conferences, and point parents toward resources that can help their students. As teachers are able to inform parents about the assessment system in more meaningful ways, parents and guardians will begin to see the value of the system and be able to share this with other parents and guardians.

## **3. DISTRICTS NEED TO PUT TOGETHER A COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY ON HOW TO COMMUNICATE AND SHARE PARCC RESULTS AND RESOURCES WITH FAMILIES.**

We recommend that districts take the lead in communicating the usefulness and utility of the assessment to schools and teachers, and continue to emphasize the alignment of the PARCC assessment with college and career readiness. Schools should support that vision by creating structures (such as information sessions) to educate parents about the assessment. Teachers can then support that vision by discussing student PARCC results with individual parents as part of their ongoing parent and community engagement.

## **CONCLUSION**

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Teachers and schools play a pivotal role in parent engagement, but must be supplied with the appropriate training and tools to execute on parent engagement in the most impactful ways. What we have heard from teachers in Chicago is that they want the additional tools and training to be able to support parents around PARCC. A comprehensive district communications and training strategy around PARCC that clearly identifies roles for the district, school, and teacher will help parents understand the meaning of the new assessment and how to help their children prepare for PARCC.

## ENDNOTES

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6. Illinois State Board of Education. (2015). ISBE Family Engagement Guide. Retrieved August 20, 2016 from <http://www.isbe.net/family-engagement/html/framework.htm>.
7. Question: "When it comes to parent and family engagement, we are interested in knowing which, if any, of these activities you, your school, your district (or charter network) did in the last school year - Informational materials were sent to parents." (n=1337) Responses: "I have done this on my own" (5.0 percent), "My school has done this" (57.7 percent), "My district or charter network has done this" (13.7 percent), "This has not been done at all" (3.7 percent), "Unsure" (30.1 percent).
8. Question: "When it comes to parent and family engagement, we are interested in knowing which, if any, of these activities you, your school, your district (or charter network) did in the last school year - Materials shared with families about PARCC were translated into various languages." (n=1337) Responses: "I have done this on my own" (2.2 percent), "My school has done this" (39.7 percent), "My district or charter network has done this" (13.5 percent), "This has not been done at all" (7.0 percent), "Unsure" (42.1 percent).
9. Question: "When it comes to parent and family engagement, we are interested in knowing which, if any, of these activities you, your school, your district (or charter network) did in the last school year - Holding information sessions about PARCC." (n=1337) Responses: "I have done this on my own" (3.4 percent), "My school has done this" (41.5 percent), "My district or charter network has done this" (10.0 percent), "This has not been done at all" (11.7 percent), "Unsure" (37.8 percent).

10. Question: "When it comes to parent and family engagement, we are interested in knowing which, if any, of these activities you, your school, your district (or charter network) did in the last school year - The PARCC test and/or PARCC results were referenced during Parent-Teacher conferences." (n=1337) Responses: "I have done this on my own" (11.0 percent), "My school has done this" (43.0 percent), "My district or charter network has done this" (5.6 percent), "This has not been done at all" (12.5 percent), "Unsure" (33.7 percent).

11. Question: "When it comes to parent and family engagement, we are interested in knowing which, if any, of these activities you, your school, your district (or charter network) did in the last school year - Parents and families were encouraged to explore PARCC practice tests with their children." (n=1337) Responses: "I have done this on my own" (10.7 percent), "My school has done this" (46.4 percent), "My district or charter network has done this" (7.8 percent), "This has not been done at all" (8.2 percent), "Unsure" (34.6 percent).

12. Question: "When it comes to engaging parents around PARCC, how do you feel about the amount your school and district are doing? - Is your school doing not enough, about the right amount, or too much when it comes to parent engagement around PARCC?" (n=390) Responses: "Not enough" (14.9 percent), "About the right amount" (62.1 percent), "Too much" (0.8 percent), "Unsure" (22.3 percent). Results may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

13. Question: "When it comes to engaging parents around PARCC, how do you feel about the amount your school and district are doing? - Is your district doing not enough, about the right amount, or too much when it comes to parent engagement around PARCC?" (n=388) Responses: "Not enough" (20.6 percent), "About the right amount" (52.8 percent), "Too much" (1.8 percent), "Unsure" (24.7 percent). Results may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

14. Question: "What best practices have you, your school, or your district employed to communicate with or engage parents concerning PARCC or assessments in general?" Findings are in reference to responses on this question.

15. Question: "What suggestion do you have for your school, district, or state about improving parent communication or engagement concerning PARCC or assessments in general?" Findings are in reference to responses on this question.

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