

Same School. Different Story.

Perception Gaps

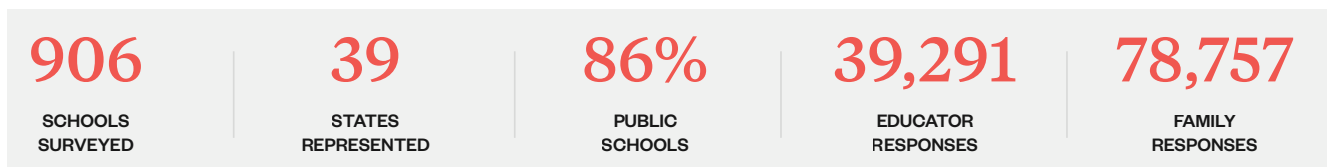
Perceptions shape reality. When educators and families see a school’s day-to-day practices through different lenses, that gap is not merely a communication problem. It can have real consequences for the kind of trust and collaboration that supports improvement. What educators experience in classrooms and what families believe is happening at home is not always the same thing, and the distance between those two vantage points varies considerably depending on what and who is asked.

Public surveys have documented this perception disconnect for years. While only about one-third of Americans express satisfaction with U.S. education overall, approximately three-quarters of parents report satisfaction with their own child’s school—a persistent gap between national perception and local experience (Gallup, 2024). In a recent survey by 50CAN (2026), almost half of families rated themselves as very satisfied with their schools, and 68% would send their child to the same school given any choice. Interestingly, low-income families showed the largest gains in satisfaction. In a policy environment where families have more school choice options than at any historical moment, those perceptions carry real weight: how families assess their child’s school shapes not only their satisfaction but their decisions. These numbers suggest families hold generally favorable views of their children’s schools, but important questions remain unanswered.

The Sutherland Institute (2024) documented one dimension of this divergence in Utah. Ninety-six percent of parents reported being somewhat or very involved in their

child’s education, while 63% of teachers characterized families that way. Of those 96%, 58% of parents described themselves as very involved; however only 7% of teachers described parents the same way. Gaps this large do not signal dishonesty on either side. They reflect genuinely different frameworks for what involvement, engagement, and quality actually mean.

Cognia’s accreditation survey data offer a chance to examine these questions at a finer grain than national polls allow. Rather than asking educators and families to rate schools in the abstract, Cognia’s surveys ask both groups about the same concrete, observable practices. This design is a direct product of the accreditation process because Cognia collects survey data as part of a continuous improvement framework. Schools are already engaged in structured self-examination when these surveys are administered. That context shapes what gets asked and how. Most large-scale perception research surveys question one stakeholder group at a time, making it difficult to compare how educators and families experience underlying practices in the same schools. The data used for these analyses include matched educator, family, and student survey responses from the same schools, enabling direct comparisons that single-stakeholder surveys cannot support. The result is a dataset that can surface not just whether gaps exist, but where they concentrate, how they vary by school context, and what patterns hold across a nationally diverse sample. What follows draws on that matched dataset across schools in 39 states, examining where perceptions converge, where they diverge, and what the patterns may suggest for schools engaged in continuous improvement.



Where families and educators are on the same page

Overall, educators rated school practices higher than families did, but the size of that gap differed substantially depending on the topic. Across 12 matched item pairs, the clearest pattern is that perception gaps are domain-specific: the largest discrepancies concentrate in items about learner-centered instruction and personalization, while items about relationships, well-being, and safety show notably less divergence. On relational and cultural items, whether children are treated with respect, families feel welcomed, and students' safety and well-being are a priority, educator and family ratings were notably close. In some cases, family scores equaled or slightly exceeded educator scores. This pattern held consistently across school size, governance type, and poverty level.

Together, these school culture-related items suggest that foundational conditions for family-school partnership such as feeling welcomed, cared for, and safe, are shared ground.

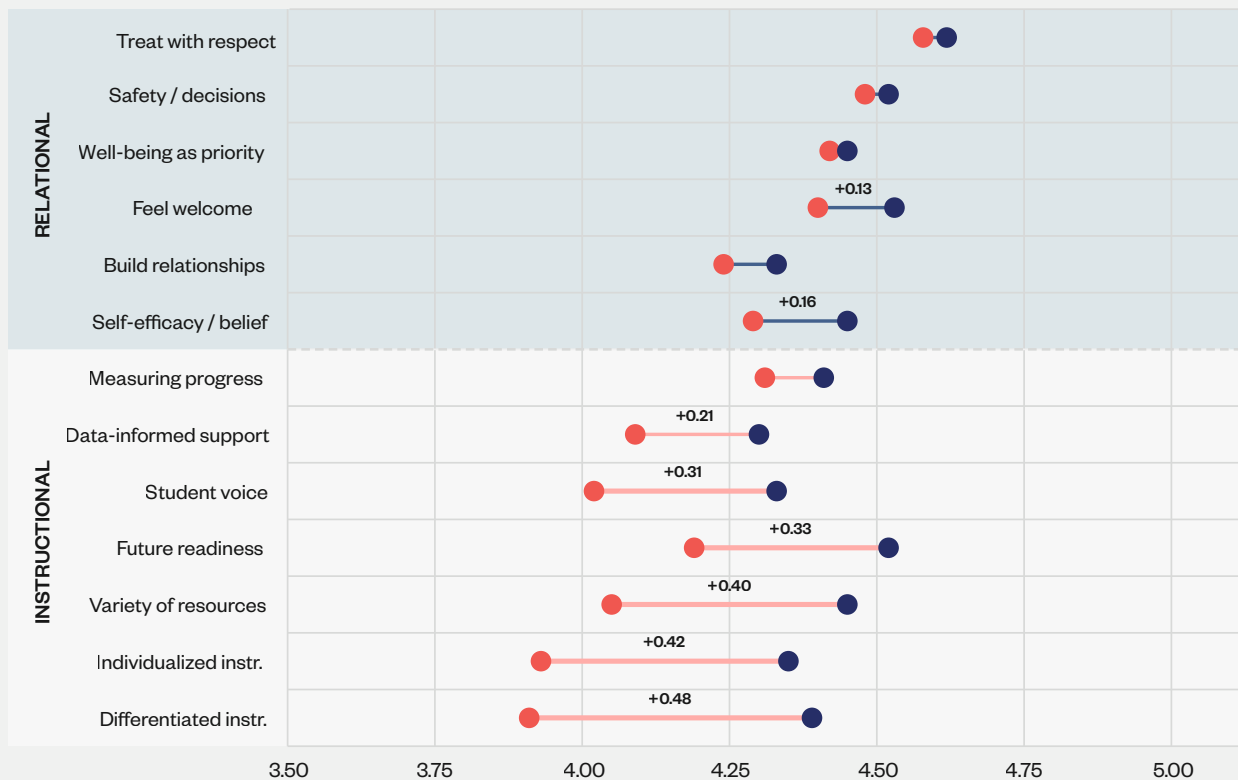
That is a meaningful starting point. The harder work, as the remaining findings suggest, lies in the instructional domain. For the schools in this sample, these items offer an initial diagnostic: where relational alignment is strong, it can serve as a foundation for more direct dialogue about what is happening in classrooms.

School characteristics

School enrollment size demonstrates the strongest structural relationship with educator-family alignment in these data. Smaller schools show consistently narrower perception gaps than larger schools, and that relationship holds across governance type and poverty level. One explanation could be that larger schools face more challenges in creating the kind of frequent, informal touchpoints that tend to build shared understanding over time, such as conversations at pickup, visibility into daily routines, and recognition by name. This finding is consistent with broader research on school size and family engagement. Smaller school environments tend to generate stronger relational networks across all stakeholder groups, and parent-teacher alignment is harder to sustain at scale (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Goldkind & Farmer, 2013).

Where educators and families don't agree

Gap values show how educators (blue) rated each practice compared to families (red) on a 1–5 scale. For example, a gap of +0.48 means nearly half a point separates the groups — roughly the difference between 'usually' and 'sometimes.'



The implication is not that large schools are struggling, but that the communication structures needed to close perceptual gaps require deliberate design in larger settings, even if they tend to emerge naturally in smaller ones. Perception gaps were generally consistent across governance types in this sample, including traditional public, charter, and private schools. Therefore, governance type does not appear to be a predictor of alignment between educators and families. Other structural factors, particularly enrollment size and poverty level, show more consistent relationships with gap size than sector does.

Where perceptions diverge

The most consistent educator-family gaps in these data cluster around learner-centered instruction. Educators rated items about differentiated instruction, tailored learning experiences, student voice, variety of resources,

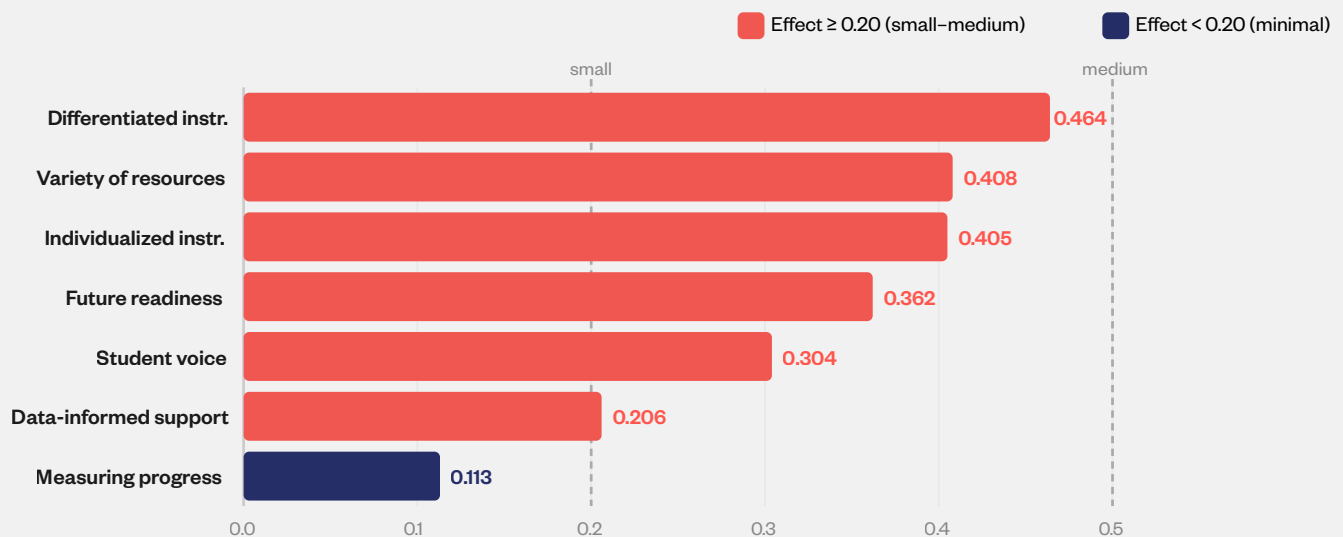
Each of these items show effect sizes in the small-to-medium range (Cohen's $d = 0.35$ to 0.44). Progress measurement is a notable exception for instruction-related items, with educator and family scores nearly identical and an effect size at essentially zero.

Why instruction gaps may be harder to close

Contributing to instructional perception gaps is a shared language problem. Terms like personalized, individualized, and differentiated carry distinct pedagogical meanings but are used interchangeably in public conversation. A 2016 survey supported by the Gates Foundation found that 93% of parents expressed support for tailoring learning to their child's individual needs, but fewer than half reported understanding what the phrase "personalized learning" actually means. This reflects a genuine disconnect in vocabulary between school professionals and the families they serve.

Instructional perception gaps: effect size by item

Cohen's d for the educator-family mean difference on each instructional item (positive = educators rated higher). Conventional benchmarks: small effect ≥ 0.20 , medium effect ≥ 0.50 .



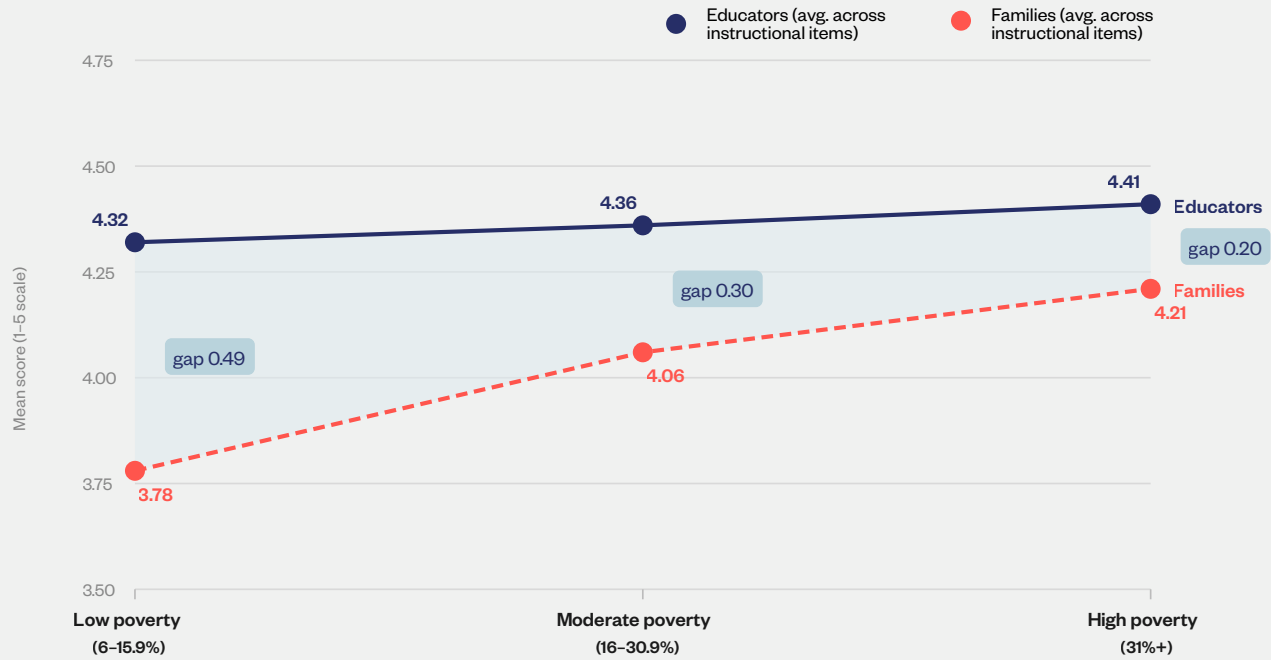
and future-readiness opportunities noticeably higher than families who were asked about those same practices in their children's schooling. The direction of the gap is consistent across items, and the effect sizes are meaningful.

The three items with the largest gaps measure instruction tailored to learner needs, differentiated learning experiences, and variety of resources used in instruction.

There is also evidence that educators may not always be aware of how visible their instructional adaptations are to students. In a study of over 800 students and 800 teachers in Australian schools, Handa (2020) found that teachers consistently rated their own differentiation efforts higher than students perceived them. While that study focused on students rather than families, the directional pattern is similar to what appears here. If students and educators within the same classroom hold different views

How school poverty level relates to perception gaps

Average educator and family means across 7 instructional items, by school poverty band. Educator scores remain relatively stable; family scores rise with poverty level, narrowing the gap.



of what personalization is happening, families who observe outcomes at home and hear their children's accounts are likely to hold different views as well. A large-scale study of nearly 5,000 teachers (Whitley et al., 2019) adds another dimension: even among educators who broadly endorsed differentiated instruction, actual classroom practice varied considerably, and teachers themselves described widely varying understandings of what differentiation looks like in practice. Instructional perception gaps may reflect not just a communication challenge between schools and families but authentic variation in how practices are conceived and enacted within schools. Taken together, these findings point to a concrete starting place: naming and sharing what learner-centered practices actually look like in a given school is a practical step that does not require new programs or resources—only more deliberate communication.

How poverty relates to perception gaps

Although potentially counterintuitive, schools serving higher-poverty student populations show smaller perception gaps, not larger ones. Educator scores are relatively stable across poverty bands, with ratings largely consistent as poverty level increases. What shifts are the

family ratings. Families in higher-poverty schools report more favorable perceptions of the instructional practices their children are experiencing, and those higher family ratings narrow the gap.

Research on school-family communication practices offers one explanation. Leenders et al. (2018), in a study of Dutch primary schools, found that schools serving lower-socio-economic status communities had developed notably stronger two-way communication cultures than their mainstream counterparts, normalizing informal contact, open conversations about roles and expectations, and direct family input into decisions. The authors suggest that high-poverty schools may, out of necessity, build the relational infrastructure that surfaces and resolves misalignment, while lower-poverty schools may allow misalignment to persist where that urgency is less felt.

Research on higher-income parent behavior offers an additional lens for this trend. Studies suggest that families in lower-poverty schools tend to be more critical in their evaluations and more likely to voice dissatisfaction, not necessarily because quality is worse, but because they have greater capacity and more established cultural norms for scrutiny and advocacy (Calarco, 2018; Jacob & Lefgren, 2007). On the question of overall satisfaction, the evidence can be counterintuitive: in a survey of Texas parents, Falbo et al. (2003) found that low-income parents expressed greater school satisfaction than higher-income

parents, a pattern consistent with these data. These results should be interpreted with caution and care. Smaller perception gaps in higher-poverty schools are not evidence of higher instructional quality in those settings, nor do they imply that families in lower-poverty schools are wrong to be more critical. Rather, they reflect observed differences in perceptions and gaps—differences schools and communities should unpack together. For lower-poverty schools in particular, the pattern suggests an opportunity: where families hold high expectations and perceive a gap in instructional personalization, that gap is a signal worth examining rather than explaining away.

Where communities go from here

These findings are a joint invitation to reflect and build shared understanding. The presence of educator-family perception gaps is not evidence that something is broken. Gaps are a natural feature of any system where multiple stakeholders engage with complex work from genuinely different vantage points. What matters is whether schools have the structures and conversations in place to surface those gaps, understand them, and use them productively. An important note: while these analyses were based on educator and family perceptions, students corroborate their families' beliefs. Student perceptions directionally mirror family perceptions on instructional items. The convergence between two independent groups (students and families) lends some additional confidence to the finding and makes it more difficult to attribute the gap solely to family unfamiliarity with school practices. Further, students in higher-poverty schools also rated learning experiences more favorably. The alignment of family and student ratings across poverty bands makes it difficult to interpret the high-poverty pattern as simply reflecting lower expectations or diminished scrutiny.

The relational foundation in this sample appears relatively solid. Families and educators broadly agree on questions of respect, welcome, and safety, and that shared ground is not a minor finding. Research on parent-teacher relationship quality (Minke et al., 2014) found that when both parents and teachers held a mutually positive view of their relationship, teachers rated student behavior and skills more favorably. However, importantly, relationship quality alone did not affect academic test scores. The implication is that relational capital matters, but it needs to be channeled

into substantive conversations about learning to translate into outcomes. Where alignment already exists on the foundational items, that trust creates an opening for harder conversations about instruction that might otherwise be difficult to initiate.

Awareness is a necessary first step. Schools already investing in family communication may be surprised by what a more granular look at instructional items reveals, and the specific domain where gaps concentrate, (learner-centered practices) is precisely the domain where shared language is most elusive. The Gates Foundation and Gallup findings on parent familiarity with personalization terminology suggest that closing these gaps may require not just more communication but more deliberate communication about what differentiated and personalized learning actually look like for a particular child in a particular classroom.

The patterns across school size and poverty level also carry practical weight. Smaller schools and higher-poverty schools may show greater educator-family alignment in these data through different mechanisms: one rooted in structural proximity, the other in communication practices developed out of necessity. Schools that want to reduce instructional perception gaps do not need to change their size or demographics. They can ask what intentional practices in those environments might be adapted to their own context, and whether existing data collection efforts capture the information needed to understand those gaps. Structured surveys are one such tool; administered across educator, family, and student groups within the same schools, they make visible the kinds of domain-specific gaps documented here. Knowing where alignment exists and where it breaks down is itself actionable information—it shapes which conversations to prioritize, which stakeholder groups to engage more directly, and where communication about learner-centered practices must improve. The goal is not consensus for its own sake. Families and educators will sometimes see things differently, and that difference can be a resource for reflection rather than a source of friction. Shared understanding, common language, and honest communication foster productive dialogue that is foundational for continuous improvement.

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