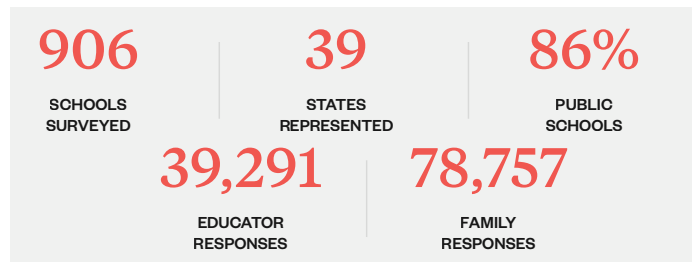


Understanding the Perception Gap Between Educators and Families

Ask a teacher how things are going at a school, then ask a parent. You will often get two different answers, even when they are talking about the same classroom and the same child. That gap matters more than it used to. Families today have more school choice options than at any point in recent history, and how they perceive their child's school shapes not only their satisfaction but also their decisions. At the same time, much of the research on school quality surveys one group at a time, making it difficult to know whether educators and families are actually seeing the same school differently—or simply responding to different questions. Cognia's accreditation survey data make that direct comparison possible by examining matched responses from educators, families, and students across schools in multiple states. This brief explores where those perspectives align, where they diverge, and what those patterns suggest for schools working to improve.

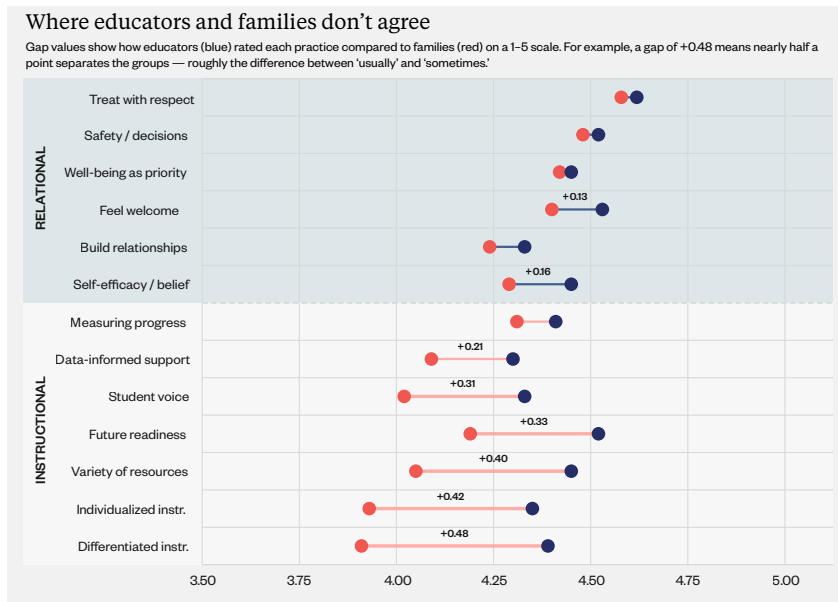


Areas of alignment

On questions related to relationships, educators and families largely shared common ground. Ratings were closely aligned on whether students are treated with respect, whether families feel welcomed by the school, and whether student safety and well-being are priorities. In some cases, families rated these areas just as highly as educators did. This alignment suggests that many schools have successfully built strong relational foundations and positive school climates that are visible to both internal and external stakeholders.

What we found

Perception gaps are real and they are domain-specific. Across the data, educators consistently rated school practices more favorably than families did, but the size of that gap varied substantially depending on the topic. The closer the topic was to relationships, the more closely educator and family perceptions aligned. The closer it was to instruction, the wider the gap became. These patterns were consistent across matched survey items and held even when looking across different school contexts.



Where perceptions diverge

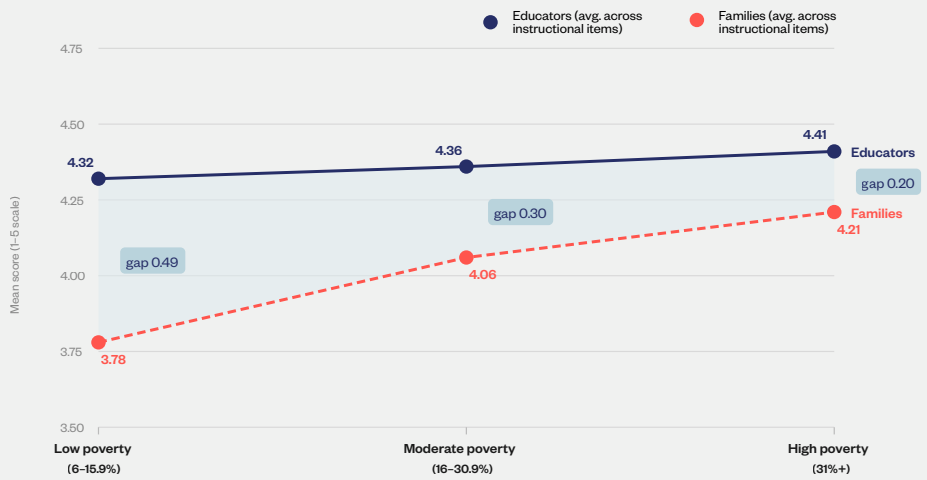
The largest gaps appeared around instruction. Families rated practices related to personalized learning, differentiated instruction, and the use of varied learning resources lower than educators did. Educators, who design and implement instructional strategies, may see personalization in lesson planning or assessment adjustments that are not always visible to families. Families, meanwhile, tend to evaluate instruction based on what their child experiences and can describe at home. When those experiences do not clearly signal tailored learning, perception gaps emerge.

A counterintuitive finding on poverty

One of the most striking findings was that schools serving higher-poverty communities showed smaller educator-family perception gaps than lower-poverty schools. Educator ratings remained relatively stable regardless of poverty level. What changed were family ratings. Families in higher-poverty schools rated instructional practices more favorably, narrowing the gap. This does not mean instruction is stronger in higher-poverty schools. Rather, research on school-family communication suggests a different explanation: schools in higher-poverty communities often build strong, two-way communication cultures out of necessity. Frequent, direct conversations help families better understand what the school is trying to do, reducing misalignment.

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.



What this means for schools

Perception gaps are normal. They are a natural result of people experiencing the same place from different vantage points. The question is not whether gaps exist, but whether schools have structures in place to surface them, understand them, and respond. Schools can start by building on what is already working. Strong alignment on relationships provides a foundation for more challenging conversations about instruction. Schools should also name what they mean by personalized and differentiated learning, using concrete examples that families can picture for a specific child in a specific classroom. Finally, family perceptions should be treated as data, not noise. When families and students signal the same concerns, those signals deserve a direct and thoughtful response. Schools that intentionally build regular, two-way dialogue with families are better positioned to close perception gaps and strengthen trust over time.

This brief summarizes key findings from a larger study. To read the full analysis, including methodology, item-level data, and findings by school poverty level, see 'Same School. Different Story,' available at cognia.org.

