

# School Trust and Expectations During the Coronavirus Pandemic

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## **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced educators to confront past shortcomings in school-parent engagement and seek new strategies to build relationships and garner trust. This Brief investigates how school-initiated communication, and the provision of resources to families have facilitated parental trust and perceptions of past performance. We find that schools that provided direct communication and meals were perceived to perform above expectation during the pandemic shutdown. We also find that, in addition to past performance, direct communication with teachers is the only other measure that promotes trust.

The Coronavirus pandemic has created an opportunity for schools to build spaces aimed at facilitating bilateral engagement between educators and parents. The response to the pandemic has moved schooling to a distance learning format requiring collective action built on solidarity and interpersonal trust. However, it is not clear how, or if schools were able to engage parents effectively. Historically, the level of engagement required for successful participation in the K-12 school setting has been viewed as the parents' responsibility, but recent literature has called for schools to initiate and maintain collaborative efforts (Wolpert-Gawron, 2019). Despite many educators embracing this paradigm, some schools have mistakenly preserved an outdated approach by viewing parents as spectators to engagement instead of actors, whereby eroding trust from schooling communities (Cuevas, 2020).

It has been established that the intentional engagement between educators and parents, facilitated by trust, is paramount for child development (Adams et al., 2009). Studies have shown that students with collaborating educators and parents have better educational outcomes (Hourii et al., 2019; Wolpert-Gawron, 2019). Recently, the pandemic-induced transformation of school operations has emphasized parents' position as internal partners making the school-parent relationship paramount to the child's educational success. Thus, it is critical to understand how schools can effectively engage parents to instill trust and facilitate productive school-parent involvement.

This paper investigates how school-initiated communication, and the provision of resources to families, have facilitated parental trust and perceptions of school performance. We analyzed data from the third wave of the nationally-representative National Panel Study of Coronavirus pandemic (NPSC-19) in June and July of 2020 (N=5,910), including 1,802 parents with school-aged children. The survey was fielded after most schools transitioned into summer break, giving this study a novel insight into parents' past experience with their children's school and how these experiences influenced their trust in the school's ability.

Our analysis focuses on two variables of interest: trust and performance. The trust variable is a prospective framing of parents' trust in the school's capacity to meet their children's needs. In line with Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999), we outline parental trust as a sense of reliability and competence in the school's effectiveness. Specifically, the NPSC-19 asks, "How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I trust my child(ren)'s school to meet the educational needs of my child(ren) in the coming academic year." Using the 4-point Likert scale response to this survey item, we constructed an indicator variable equal to one if the respondent "agreed" and zero if the respondent "disagreed" with the statement. The performance variable is a retrospective framing of the parents' perceptions of school performance dur-

ing the pandemic. Parents were asked, "Taken all together, how would you say your child(ren)'s school performed during the COVID-19 pandemic?" Using the 5-point Likert scale response to this survey item, we constructed an indicator variable equal to one if the respondent perceived the performance of the school to be "adequate" or "above expectations" and zero if perceived to be "below expectations."

Trust and performance leverage the survey's timing, contextualized within the pandemic's progression, to connect the retrospective perception of performance to trust in the school's ability to navigate an uncertain future. We estimate the models using a logistic regression, and report the marginal effects for each independent variable. Additionally, we explain the empirical models using variables constructed from the NPSC-19 that report the mode of communication initiated by the school, as well as the type of resources provided by the school. The communication variables capture whether the school contacted the parent and how. The provision variables indicate whether the school provided resources to the parents and which kinds. Each category for communication and provision contain a series of indicator variables. The list of the variables within each category are reported in Figure 1 and Table 1. To increase the precision of our estimates we included parent and household-specific demographic characteristics (see Appendix Table A1).<sup>1</sup>

The results are presented in Figure 1 and Table 1. Figure 1, illustrates the point estimates and 95-percent confidence intervals for our variables of interest. From the performance regression, it is clear that communication was critical in how parents perceived a school's effectiveness during the pandemic— particularly, direct communication from teachers and principals. For instance, parents that received communications from their children's principal were 9 percentage points more likely to agree that their school performed adequately or above expectations. Moreover, parents whose children received a meal were about 8.5 percentage points more likely to report their school performed adequately or above expectations.

We extend our analysis to investigate trust and include the measure of performance as a covariate.<sup>2</sup> What is evident is that schools that performed well during the pandemic built up a substantial amount of trust equity. Parents whose children attended schools that performed adequately or above expectations were 12 percentage points more likely to trust that their school would meet their child's future educational needs. The only other significant measure is direct communication with teachers. Parents who received communication directly from teachers were 5.5 percentage points more likely to trust that their child's school would meet their future needs.

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<sup>1</sup>A detailed discussion of our empirical approach is presented in the Appendix.

<sup>2</sup>In the Appendix, we find that our results are robust to a mediation analysis that uses a structural equation model.

While collaborative efforts between educators and parents have been shown to improve educational outcomes (Wolpert-Gawron, 2019), the Coronavirus pandemic has placed this dynamic at the center of effective pedagogy. This Brief examines schools' ability to instill trust and facilitate parents' involvement as proxy educators (Davis et al., 2020). During times of uncertainty, direct communication from schools is essential to enhance, maintain, or build relationships with parents. The Coronavirus pandemic has created a new landscape by which educators and parents can be equal participants in an intentional process of building solidarity – an opportunity to incorporate parents as authentic members in the educational process and for schools to strengthen their commitments as a community cornerstone.

## References

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Figure 1: Performance and Trust

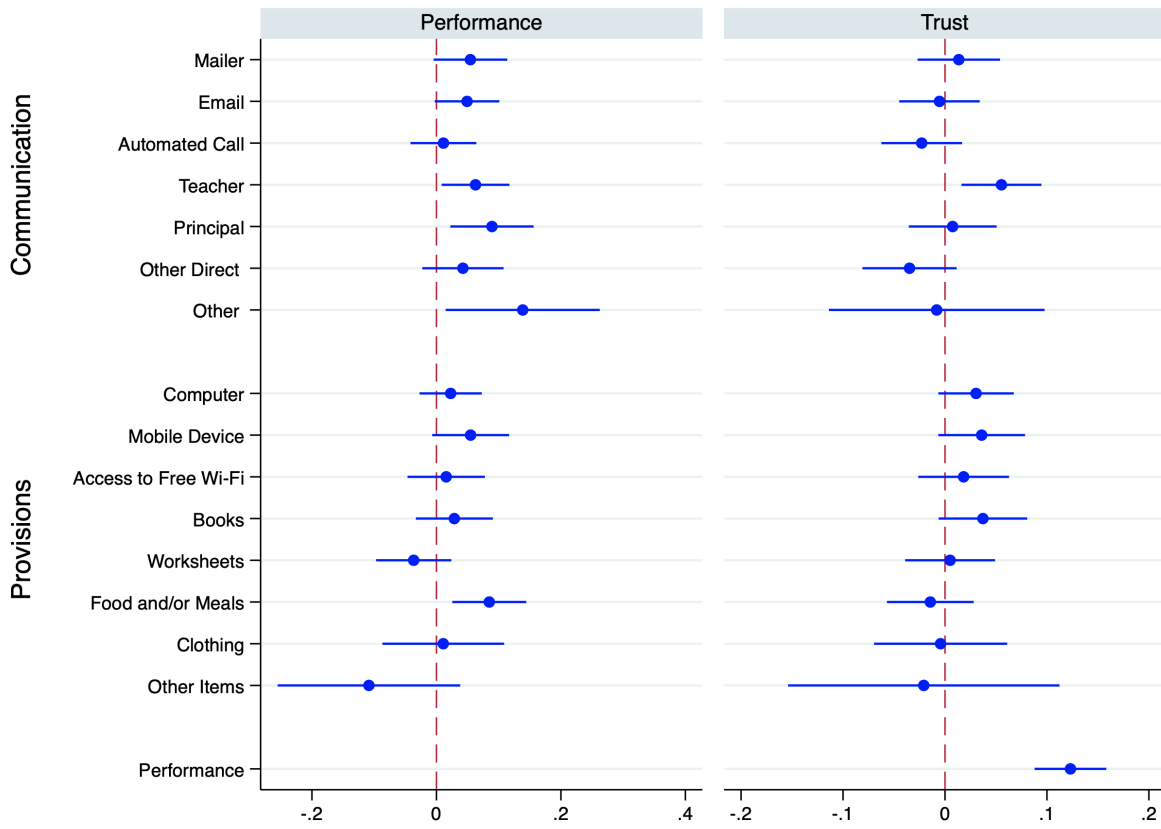


Table 1: Trust and Performance

	(1)	(2)
	Future Trust	Past Performance
Mailer from School	0.0136 (0.0206)	0.0546* (0.0302)
Email from School	-0.00541 (0.0201)	0.0492* (0.0265)
Automated Call from School	-0.0228 (0.0202)	0.0113 (0.0270)
Direct Communication with Teacher	0.0554*** (0.0200)	0.0628** (0.0278)
Direct Communication with Principal	0.00753 (0.0220)	0.0893*** (0.0341)
Direct Communication with Other Staff	-0.0348 (0.0236)	0.0426 (0.0333)
Other Communication from School	-0.00811 (0.0539)	0.139** (0.0631)
Computer Provided	0.0305 (0.0189)	0.0229 (0.0255)
Mobile Device Provided	0.0360* (0.0217)	0.0550* (0.0315)
Access to Free Wi-Fi Provided	0.0183 (0.0227)	0.0157 (0.0317)
Books Provided	0.0372* (0.0221)	0.0288 (0.0316)
Worksheets Provided	0.00502 (0.0225)	-0.0365 (0.0308)
Food and/or Meal Supplements Provided	-0.0144 (0.0217)	0.0849*** (0.0303)
Clothing Provided	-0.00429 (0.0333)	0.0110 (0.0498)
Other Items Provided	-0.0208 (0.0679)	-0.108 (0.0748)
School Above Expectation During Pandemic	0.123*** (0.0179)	– –
Observations	1655	1656
R-squared	0.098	0.105