

Empowering Underserved Communities to Thrive: Understanding the Early Impacts of a Charter School Model and the Support Needs of Families

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Executive Summary

This study examined the early impacts of a charter school in Edmonton, Thrive Elementary School, and a targeted educational module for newcomer parents in the LINC program at NorQuest College, with the aim of enhancing our understanding of gaps in educational supports for low-income and newcomer families in Edmonton and the impacts of targeted programming or support for underserved communities. Thrive Elementary serves K-6 students from low-income backgrounds, offering a holistic educational model that includes wraparound supports, such as a nutrition (free meal) program, transportation, after-school programs, and access to family resource workers on site. It also collaborates with community organizations and provides hands-on STEM learning to students. This study assessed the early impacts of Thrive Elementary's innovative model on student outcomes and parental satisfaction. It also aimed to identify the current challenges and barriers faced by low-income and newcomer families with respect to accessing education and educational services. In addition, it obtained data from newcomer parents in the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program to further inform our understanding of gaps related to access to education for newcomers and assess the impact of a targeted module for newcomer parents in enhancing parents' knowledge and confidence in navigating the education system in Alberta.

This research used a mixed methods approach (quantitative surveys and semi-structured interviews) using data collected from Thrive Elementary parents, teachers, and newcomer parents attending NorQuest College. In total, 46 parents complete the survey at Thrive Elementary, with 74% identifying as newcomers to Canada and 50% reporting that their children were also newcomers. Most participating parents reported that their children were in K-3, with 62% having attended Thrive for a year or less. Additionally, 9 parents and 3 teachers participated in in-depth interviews to provide qualitative insights based on their experiences. Data on educators came from 7 teachers - four teachers who completed open-ended survey responses and three who completed semi-structured interviews, and shared their perspectives on student progress, challenges in supporting diverse learners, and professional development activities. For the third group of research participants, newcomers attending CLB 6 and above LINC classes at NorQuest College, participants completed a survey that included both closed- and open-ended questions, covering topics such as access to information, confidence in navigating the education system, and the availability and use of educational support services. The majority (79%) of this group were women and 67% were parents. The survey included questions about broader challenges in accessing educational services and navigating the education system in Canada. Overall, the research provided data from diverse sources and insights with respect to the educational needs and experiences of underserved communities in Edmonton.

Highlight of findings

Thrive Elementary surveys

- Many parents reported that, prior to attending Thrive, they lacked access to STEM programs (53%), extracurricular activity opportunities (50%), socialization opportunities for their children (42%), and after school-care (39%).
- Parents reported high satisfaction with Thrive Elementary School services: 90% satisfied or very satisfied with facilities; 79% would highly recommend the school to other parents (rated 9 or 10 on a scale of 0 to 10).
- Parents valued parent-school communication (93%), STEM (85%), health and wellness services (76%), inclusive teaching (74%), Thrive Time (74%), free nutrition (72%) and the Thrive curriculum (70%), with a large majority citing these as “very important.”
- A majority of parents reported strong satisfaction (% very satisfied) with improvements in both non-academic and non-academic skills: language skills (52%), creativity and innovation (55%), interpersonal skills (60%), social participation (58%), and confidence and self-esteem (58%).
- A majority (57%) of parents said they never or rarely use support services available at Thrive Elementary. Respondents mainly cited lack of awareness about services or lack of information about how to use or access services (31%) and scheduling conflicts (17%) as main barriers to utilization of services.
- In open-ended feedback, parents highlighted improvements on social and academic skills, problem solving skills, communication skills, independence, conflict resolution and collaboration. They highlighted the positive roles of the STEM program, the nutrition program, Thrive time, parenting classes, and the school/class size.
- Parental challenges noted in open-ended feedback focused on the need for additional academic support (e.g., Math) and additional homework assignments.
- Participating teachers highlighted the lack of reliable support from home or outside the classroom as a key challenge and emphasized the need for stronger home-school connections and more individualized support. PD related to trauma-informed practices, ESL support, and more team building exercises were recommended by teachers.

Thrive Elementary interviews

Parents’ feedback

- Thrive Elementary parents saw significant improvements in their children’s learning, emotional regulations and acquisition of social skills. Teachers’ attention to students and availability of supports that helped reduced barriers to education made it a success.
- Parents felt that Thrive Elementary fosters belonging and inclusion in the school for students and for parents.

- Some parents indicated that it was difficult for them to reach out to teachers or build a more meaningful and stronger relations with the school. They did not know the best ways of contacting their teachers and they did not find family dinners suitable for more personal conversations.
- One perspective was that the very way the school is organized or structured might contribute to the disjunction as parents might feel intimidated by Thrive Elementary due to its high-end presentation and modern outlook.
- Usage of paid mobile applications to access students' data also posed a barrier and served as a gate keeper for parents with low social and economic status.
- Family dinners became an opportunity for newcomer parents to socialize and meet new people whereas food, clothing, and other supportive services made a difference for family from low social and economic status.

Teacher's feedback

- Participants mentioned educational assistants, behavior specialist, and speech pathologist whose availability on site facilitated easy access and prompt help to students when needed.
- Not only do educators intentionally work on creating inclusive environment, but they also make inclusive assignment by adjusting level of difficulty for students to provide growth opportunities for all.
- Participants pointed to parent-school relationships as their biggest challenge. This challenge is manifested in low parental engagement in their children's education and school activities, such as family dinners. In addition, different cultural expectations exacerbated this situation.
- To improve parent-school relations, teachers proposed focusing more on personal interactions with parents and/or creating a more formal system of regular one-on-one meetings with parents (e.g. monthly, quarterly etc.).
- To improve learning outcomes, one of the educators proposed to have an occupational therapist at the school and more teaching assistants, especially for older students with more complex assignments and higher expectations
- Teachers were interested in professional development and mentioned that they did take part in certain PD opportunities, but it was not enough as courses on literacy and writing, working with ESL students, may be needed.

Newcomer parents' survey at NorQuest

- Participants cited that employment opportunities and the job market (67%), housing and accommodation (39%), laws and the legal system (31%), and education and the education system (28%) as difficult or extremely difficult to find information on.
- Most participants said that they will use information provided in the module in their decision making (95%), now feel confident communicating with their child's teachers (93%), now understand different education options in Alberta (92%), and the information they received was useful for them (88%). The education in Canada module helped improve confidence in communicating with teachers (93%) and understanding education options (92%).
- Gaps persist in understanding how to access education and navigate the school system in Canada. Only 72% said they now understand Alberta's education system. Only 74% said they learned a lot about resources for parents in Canada.
- Lower SES participants were less likely to agree that the module helped them understand different education options in Canada. They were also less likely to indicate they access language support services for their children (48% vs. 73%).
- Top challenges for newcomer parents include language/cultural barriers (41%), cost of education (37%), and balancing work/family (33%).

Background

Disparities in educational access, particularly in underserved and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, have been a long-standing aspect of the educational landscape of Alberta. For this reason, the development of inclusive curricula, appropriate learning supports, and a more equitable education system were identified by the Alberta Teachers' Association as key issues in education for the province (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2023). Underserved groups and communities face many barriers that hinder the academic and social success of learners. For parents, navigating the complexities of educational options and the resources available to support their children's education is often very challenging. This is often compounded by lack of access to information, resources, and inclusive services that support their children's academic and social success. Therefore, there is increasing need for educational options, learning supports, and targeted efforts to help bridge the gap and ensure that families, regardless of their socio-economic, linguistic, or demographic backgrounds, have the knowledge and resources that will empower them to thrive. Furthermore, there is crucial need for research that enhances understanding of existing needs and examines the effectiveness of targeted efforts to develop actionable insights that will help shape educational programming and policy.

This study aims at both identifying existing needs and challenges in underserved communities, particularly focusing on socioeconomically disadvantaged and newcomer communities, with the objective of assessing the impacts of targeted programs and efforts to bridge the information, resource, and opportunity gaps that exist in these communities. Through a case study of a charter school model (Thrive Elementary School) that serves communities in central Edmonton, and other targeted programming for parents and families, this project aims to enhance understanding of the role, as well as impact, of such targeted efforts to inform knowledge of best practices, future programming, and further research. The first component of the study focuses on the impacts of targeted efforts offered by Thrive School's educational model, which currently serves K-6 students from low-SES backgrounds in central Edmonton, on a range of academic and social outcomes. This part of the research examines the degree to which the Thrive model and approach addresses existing opportunity and experience gaps for families and its implication for outcomes including skills progress, socioemotional development, sense of belonging, and the home-school connection. The second component turns to the impact of targeted programming or module for newcomer parents currently attending the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program at NorQuest and their feedback regarding the challenges related to accessing educational services and resources in Canada. The module is developed with the aim of increasing knowledge of educational services and supports among newcomers in Edmonton. By assessing the impacts of a particular charter school model and the role of targeted programming and support for families and educators, this study goes beyond academic outcomes in assessing the impacts of educational interventions that are designed to increase educational access and ultimately shed light on best practices that enhance learners' educational experiences and social outcomes.

Addressing the socio-economic gap: a charter school model

Charter schools have been present in the Albertan educational ecosystem since 1994 and play an important role in the public education system, not only because they aim to serve disadvantaged communities and families in the province, but also because they are viewed as “incubators of research and finely-tuned innovative practices” (Bosetti, Brown, Hasan, & Van Pelt, 2015). The broader literature on charter schools, while focused on the United States, suggests academic benefits for students from economic disadvantaged backgrounds and demographic minority groups. Research has shown that charter schools “are particularly effective in improving student performance for those students who are underserved by traditional public schools” and research on charter schools in Alberta indicates that they “provide enhanced student learning outcomes” (Bosetti, Brown, Hasan, & Van Pelt, 2015). The literature on Alberta specifically indicates an advantage for charter schools when it comes to learning outcomes, such as “enhanced scores, higher

rankings, and more benchmark achievement for charter students than for their counterparts” (Bosetti, Brown, Hasan, & Van Pelt, 2015).

While prior research has documented the innovative practices that fuel charter schools and their positive impacts on student achievements, there is a relative lack of research, however, on the specific barriers they help address, their role in access to various services, and their overall implications for outcomes beyond standard measures of academic performance (e.g., STEM-related outcomes) or social outcomes, including social capital and well-being, which are crucial for well-rounded educational experience. Furthermore, given the diversity of charter school models, with each school implementing unique educational approaches, there is a critical need for research to understand the specific implications of these varied models on student outcomes and educational access, and the experiences of specific demographic groups. This includes, for instance, lone-parent families or newcomer families – who may disproportionately experience multiple or intersectional disadvantage because of socioeconomic status, visible minority status, language barriers, and/or newcomer status.

The Thrive model provides targeted educational programming for students from low-SES family backgrounds with the goal of providing them with the opportunity to acquire and apply the knowledge and attitudes that promote well-being and lifelong learning, to thrive in a culture of academic success, and to develop core stem skills and competencies that prepare them to excel in high school and beyond. The Thrive model also emphasizes targeted professional learning opportunities, designed to provide educators and leaders with the required knowledge and tools, and “undertake training that enables them to better support students from disadvantaged backgrounds through a more in-depth understanding of key areas such as trauma-responsive practices, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), anti-bias training, awareness of low-SES background risk factors and knowledge of neuroscience and the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) – which include poverty – on brain development and learning.” By aiming to address barriers that learners from low-SES backgrounds face and enhancing and facilitating access to supportive resources, the Thrive model may be uniquely equipped to support and provide inclusive education to students with various family backgrounds in the Edmonton region, including newcomers to Canada. Its emphasis on fostering and strengthening the home-school connection also provides opportunities for parents who may need the additional support due to economic, social, sociocultural barriers to full participation in educational institutions.

Understanding needs and barriers for newcomer families

As the demographic landscape of Canada becomes increasingly more diverse, there is growing need for more inclusive and accessible institutions and communities across the nation. The share of the population that is either foreign-born or second-generation immigrant is expanding and rising even faster among the

youth (i.e., those 15 years old or younger). Recent census data highlights that one in three (32%) children younger than 15 years had at least one parent born abroad in 2021, increasing from 27% in 2011 and 29% in 2016, and projected to reach up to 49% by 2036 (Statistics Canada, 2016, 2022). This demographic shift among the youth, and the rapidly changing geography of newcomers' destinations in Canada, highlight the need to better understand the integration challenges and barriers of newcomer parents and their children, so that newcomer-serving organizations, including educational institutions, are well-equipped and resourced to meet their diverse needs and enhance their outcomes.

Newcomers face significant changes in their life circumstances during the immigration and settlement journey, and experience numerous challenges related to integration in Canadian communities. These challenges are often compounded for newcomers with families due to barriers related to access to parenting support and critical services or resources, cultural and linguistic adjustment, housing and transportation, and socioeconomic status. Research has documented that newcomers often experience “systemic obstacles that impede their integration and inclusive access to programs, services, and community opportunities” (Brown, et al., 2020). In addition, newcomer families are at a higher risk of experiencing poverty and economic disadvantage, trauma, and undiagnosed learning disabilities, with potentially adverse consequences for the academic and social outcomes of children of newcomers. Therefore, newcomer families and their children have higher needs for targeted support in order to facilitate their successful integration in Canadian schools and institutions.

The lack of timely access to information, the high cost of childcare, and experiences of economic disadvantage upon migration are all prohibitive for newcomer parents of full participation in the education system, local labor markets, and Canadian society. These barriers impact newcomers' abilities to participate in settlement programming, further education, and other Canadian institutions, as parents prioritize family responsibilities, children's welfare, and making ends meet. For instance, research by NorQuest College shows that newcomers' capacity to participate in hybrid/blended settlement language training, rather than online-only learning, is largely influenced by sociodemographic factors that correlate with family obligations. In particular, in the context of settlement training, access to different delivery modalities of Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) programming was influenced by gender, marital status, and parental status, which were the key predictors of preference for or selection of fully-online education, rather than proficiency with digital tools, highlighting the significant constraints that competing family responsibilities put on newcomer families (Tegegne, 2024). Therefore, there is a critical need to address the information and resource gaps that newcomer families face in order to enhance their access to supports that enable full participation or engagement and improve settlement and educational outcomes.

While newcomers receive information about various aspects of the settlement process in Canada upon migration, there is a relative lack of support when it comes to information about how to access educational services. As a result, newcomers often have limited understanding of the Canadian education system that prevents them from making the most of the opportunities available for them and their children. Furthermore, newcomers often lack support in navigating the challenges of parenting in Canada which often arise as a result of adjusting to a new culture and may be related to norms of socialization, parenting styles and expectations, and expectations or interactions with schools (Anisef & Kilbride, 2001). Recent research also shows that newcomer parents experience barriers and often feel disconnected from the school community and other parents (Li, Doyle, Lymburner, & Yasin Ghadi, 2016), highlighting the important role of targeted support for newcomer parents that bridges such information and support gaps. Furthermore, in an increasingly diverse student population, educators may not be fully equipped to address or accommodate the academic and sociocultural needs of newcomer students.

The need for educational programming that is more accessible to newcomer families and addresses their unique needs is clear. However, the specific needs and challenges of newcomer parents and the potential impact of targeted programming and parental support on the learning and settlement outcomes of newcomer families is not well-understood. Research suggests that newcomer schoolchildren could benefit from programming that supports and enhances language acquisition and other newcomer programs or “educational interventions designed to meet the academic and transitional needs of newly-arrived immigrants” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Newcomer families may, therefore, benefit from enhanced access to schools that are better-resourced, provide individualized attention, and focus on providing inclusive education. In that respect, due to low student-teacher ratios, higher levels of parental involvement, and flexible curriculums tailored to address specific needs, charter schools may be well-positioned to enhance newcomer success and integration. Furthermore, through the integration of effective professional development opportunities for educators, charter schools may also be better equipped to train educators to better support newcomer youth and foster an inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Research objectives

This research sought to shed light on impacts of an innovative charter school model, the Thrive Elementary model, on access to support services and resources, and social and academic outcomes of students. The goal was to increase understanding of the needs and challenges in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities and newcomer families to Canada, and also evaluate the effectiveness of targeted efforts to bridge information, resource, and opportunity gaps. The first component focused on understanding the early impacts of targeted programming offered by Thrive Elementary school, which currently serves students from

kindergarten to grade 6 who come from low-income families. The school offers a supportive environment with extra services like transportation, free healthy meals, and after-school activities. Additionally, the school provides professional training for teachers to better support students from diverse backgrounds. By obtaining quantitative and in-depth feedback from parents and educators at Thrive Elementary, the research aimed to shed light on the impacts so far of Thrive's innovative charter school model on educational and social outcomes, best practices, and existing needs and challenges that could inform future educational programming.

The second component focused on surveying newcomer parents, a key demographic group for both Thrive Elementary and NorQuest College. The survey focused on newcomer parents attending the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program at NorQuest College. In particular, the LINC program had introduced an education module for students in Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) 6 and above classes to increase understanding of the Canadian education system and available services and supports for newcomers and newcomer parents, with the aim of providing information and resources to help parents support their children's education and adjust to life in Canada. By obtaining feedback from program participants, the research sought to enhance our understanding of both existing needs and challenges among newcomer families the awareness and behavioral impacts of targeted programming for newcomer parents in the LINC program.

Programming components

- 1. The Thrive model.** The Thrive charter school is “dedicated to serving K-6 students from low-SES backgrounds in central northwest Edmonton that supports holistic well-being and provides rich opportunities for engagement and academic challenge in a nurturing small school environment.” Through collaboration with the Jasper Place Family Resource Center, it also provides various services on-site, which enhances access for students and facilitates usage. Moreover, through collaboration with STEM Innovation Academy, it provides hands-on STEM learning that goes beyond the provincial curriculum. In order to mitigate socioeconomic and systemic barriers to access, Thrive provides access to wraparound supports, yellow bus transportation, a nutrition program, and various co-curricular and after-school programming at no cost to families. Furthermore, by providing important training to educators in various areas, including the role of systemic barriers in learning, culturally responsive pedagogies, trauma-responsive practices, and anti-bias education, among others, the model helps to provide an inclusive and optimal learning environment for newcomer children.
- 2. Professional Development (PD).** PD opportunities are regularly provided to educators at Thrive aimed at increasing educators’ awareness of students’

needs and barriers in a multicultural context. Extant research in education recommends training and “professional development aimed towards inclusive education for all” (Woodcock & Jones, 2018) to enhance teacher self-efficacy in a culturally diverse environment. In addition, providing professional development opportunities that support innovative educational approaches is central to charter schools, and a critical component of effective educational programming for underserved communities, including English language learners is to understand barriers to academic success and educating teachers to “accommodate differences in the learning of all students, including those of language minority students” (Li, Doyle, Lymburner, & Yasin Ghadi, 2016). Therefore, professional development opportunities that enhance educators’ understanding of the educational needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and their support needs will be key to ensuring that the Thrive model provides inclusive education to students and that educators are better equipped to address or accommodate students’ unique needs and challenges in order to enhance long-term outcomes. For instance, PD activities scheduled for 2024-25 at Thrive include Resilience Masterclass Training for all staff, Schoology (Learning Management System) training, Pearson Education Literacy, and a bi-weekly Collaborative Response Model (Trauma-Responsiveness Practice) to discuss the top of the pyramid students’ needs and the school’s response to best support students and families. In addition, selected staff will also lead some sessions or guest present as part of the Education in Canada Module developed to support newcomers and newcomer parents attending the LINC program at NorQuest College

3. **“Education in Canada” module** (for newcomers in LINC). NorQuest College provides targeted programming for newcomers through the LINC program. In Winter 2025, the LINC curriculum included “Education in Canada” module for participants attending NorQuest College in CLB 6 and above LINC classes. This module is aimed at increasing newcomers’ knowledge related to the education system in Canada, various education options in Alberta, and resources related to parenting or supports available to them with respect to educating their children, and referrals to organizations in the community to assist them in meeting their parenting goals and enhancing their children’s academic and social outcomes. NorQuest College’s prior research on the LINC program highlights the barriers that newcomer parents experience due to family and competing responsibilities. The current research sought to obtain feedback on the module and identify existing information and service gaps related to access to education services to inform future programming for newcomer parents.

Data and methodology

The data for this study came from surveys and in-depth interviews with parents and educators at Thrive Elementary. The parents survey sought to identify the challenges and needs of parents and their children with respect to services and resources related to parenting, childcare, and education in their community. Survey questionnaires were used to gather data on experiences, perceptions, and outcomes, and the data was used to shed light on the school's early impacts on student outcomes and to obtain feedback from participants that could help shape future programming and improvements.

A set of interview questions were also developed for project participants at Thrive Elementary (both parents and educators) that allowed follow-up questions intended to provide in-depth data on their experiences, impact of attendance at Thrive, student outcomes (including academic performance), and the home-school connection. In-depth interviews were conducted with parents and educators at Thrive designed to identify resource and service gaps and the impact of Thrive's educational programming designed to support families from lower SES backgrounds. This mixed-method approach provided a combination of quantitative survey data and in-depth qualitative data that provided a more complete picture of the impacts of the Thrive model so far and where the potential gaps may be. Descriptions of the research instruments and research participants are provided below:

Data sources

- 1. Parents at Thrive Elementary.** Parents at Thrive were invited to complete the survey as well as consent and participate in a one-hour in-depth interview. The parents' survey includes questions that document barriers faced in accessing educational services, levels of access to community resources, feedback on progress related to social and academic skills, satisfaction with services at Thrive Academy, the school environment, and the adequacy of resources provided. It evaluates parent-reported outcomes in areas such as digital literacy, STEM, creativity, language proficiency, numeracy, communication skills, and social skills. The survey also includes open-ended questions about current concerns, challenges, and the self-reported impact of the Thrive model. Forty-six (46) parents completed the survey. In addition, interviews with 9 consenting participants were conducted to gather in-depth qualitative data on parents' experiences with Thrive Elementary. The interviews covered the parent's experience with the school, current needs and challenges, and the impact of Thrive on the child's education and socio-emotional development. Parents provided feedback on the school's services, resources, and communication, as well as their experiences with teachers. The interviews also explored suggestions for improving educational services, support for newcomer families, and additional resources needed to support their children's education and overall development.

2. Teachers at Thrive Elementary. Teachers at Thrive were invited to participate in a short open-ended survey and/or an hour-long semi-structured interview. The survey included questions on the effectiveness of support services, student improvements in academic and socio-emotional outcomes, and skill development. The survey questions gathered feedback on barriers students face, effective strategies for supporting diverse students, and desired PD opportunities. The survey was anonymous and completed online through the Qualtrics Platform. In addition, the interviews covered challenges in helping disadvantaged students, effectiveness of educational services, and inclusive teaching strategies. Teachers provided feedback on the successes and areas for improvement at Thrive, the impact of wraparound supports, and additional resources needed. The interviews also explored experiences with newcomer families, professional development opportunities, and the influence of training on teaching practices. Teachers shared insights on current supports, unmet needs, and recommendations for improving educational opportunities and services for underserved communities. Four (4) teachers completed the open-ended survey, and 3 teachers participated in in-depth interviews.

3. Newcomer parents in the LINC Program at NorQuest College. This survey gathered insights from newcomer parents at NorQuest College about their experiences and challenges related to accessing education and educational services in Canada and obtained feedback on the education module in the LINC program. The survey targeted participants in the “Education in Canada” module of the LINC curriculum in CLB 6 and above classes. It included demographic questions and assessed parents' agreement with statements about access to information, services, and support in Canada. Open-ended questions provided insights into parents' concerns, challenges, and suggestions for additional support. In total, 102 participants completed the survey (with 67% being parents).

All surveys were administered online via the Qualtrics platform. Cross-tabulations were performed to identify whether or not survey responses varied by socioeconomic status and newcomer status. Results from statistically significant ($P < .1$) correlations were noted.

Thrive parents' survey results

Participants

The majority of survey participants are relatively new to Thrive Elementary (with 62% indicating their child had attended Thrive for a year or less). A third of participating parents indicated that their child had attended Thrive for more than a year. Three quarters of participants (76%) indicated that their child was in K-3, whereas the rest had a child in grades 4 to 6. Three quarters of participants (74%) were newcomers (i.e., not born in Canada), half of participants (50%) reported that their child was a newcomer, and half (50%) of all respondents reported English as the primary language spoken at home. While half (53%) of the participants were employed, 16% reported their employment status as self-employed, while the rest (30%) were either unemployed, stay-at-home parent, or other.

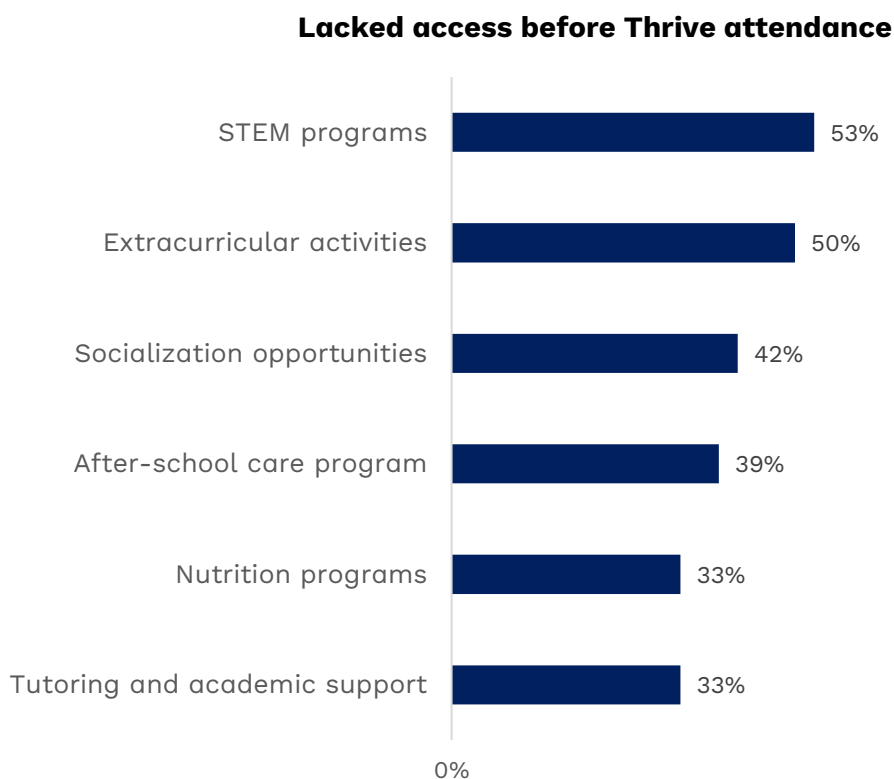
Select Characteristics of Survey Participants
Thrive Elementary parents' Survey

Respondent characteristics	Percent
How long child attended Thrive	
<i>A year or less</i>	62%
<i>More than a year</i>	34%
Child's gender	
<i>Male</i>	63%
<i>Female</i>	37%
Child's grade	
<i>K - 3</i>	76%
<i>4 to 6</i>	24%
Newcomer parent	74%
Newcomer child	50%
Parent's employment status	
<i>Employed</i>	53%
<i>Self-employed</i>	16%
<i>Unemployed, stay-at-home, or other</i>	30%

Impact on access

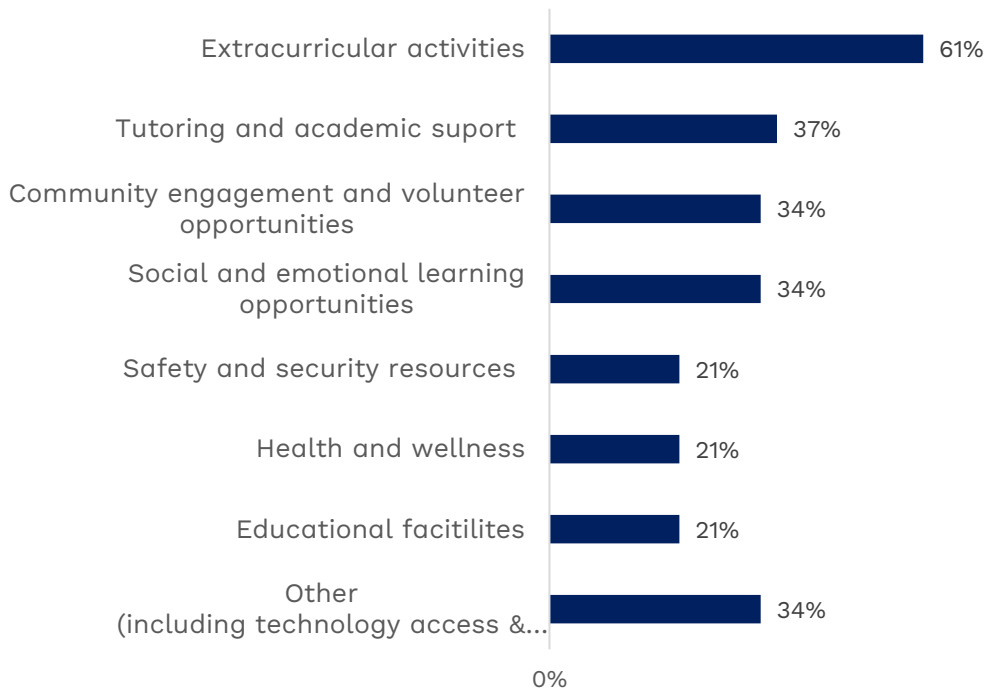
Participants were provided a list of educational services and resources and asked if they faced any barriers to accessing any of them before enrolling Thrive. Participants were more likely to indicate that they did not have access to STEM programs (53%), extracurricular activities (50%), socialization opportunities (42%), after-school care (39%), nutrition program (33%), and tutoring and academic

support (33%). Other resources selected as lacking before Thrive attendance (from higher frequency to lower) were school transportation services, language support for English Language Learners, technology and internet access, health, wellness and counseling services, public transportation services, educational resources, and special education support. Lower SES respondents were more likely to indicate that they did not have access to extracurricular activities and health, wellness, and counseling services, compared to the rest of respondents.



When asked about resources currently lacking in their community, respondents were more likely to select extracurricular activities (61%), tutoring and academic support (37%), community engagement and volunteering opportunities (34%), and social & emotional learning opportunities (34%). A third of respondents selected resources categorized as “Other,” which include technology and internet access, transportation services, and safety and security resources. Lower SES respondents were more likely to select lack of health and wellness services in their current community, compared to the rest of respondents.

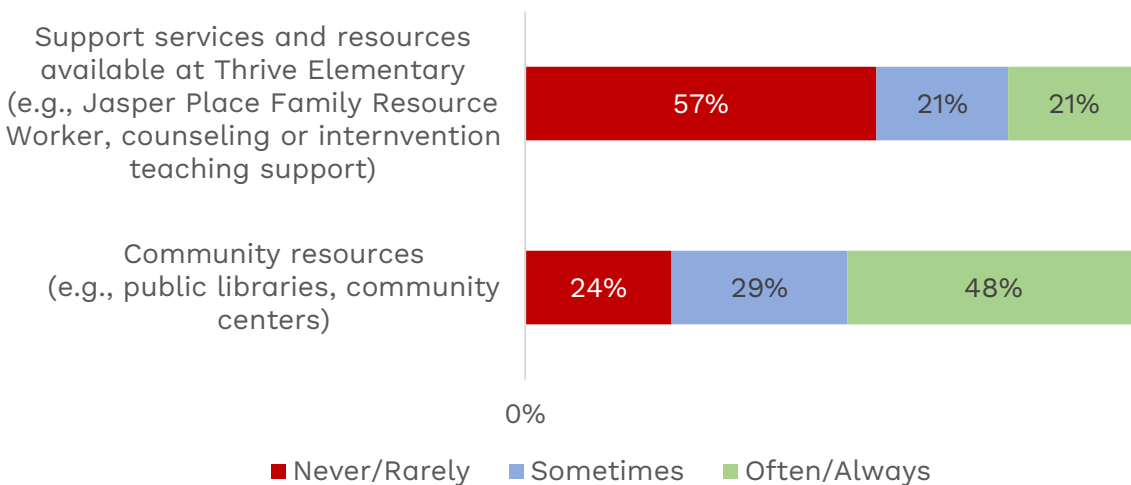
Resources lacking in current community



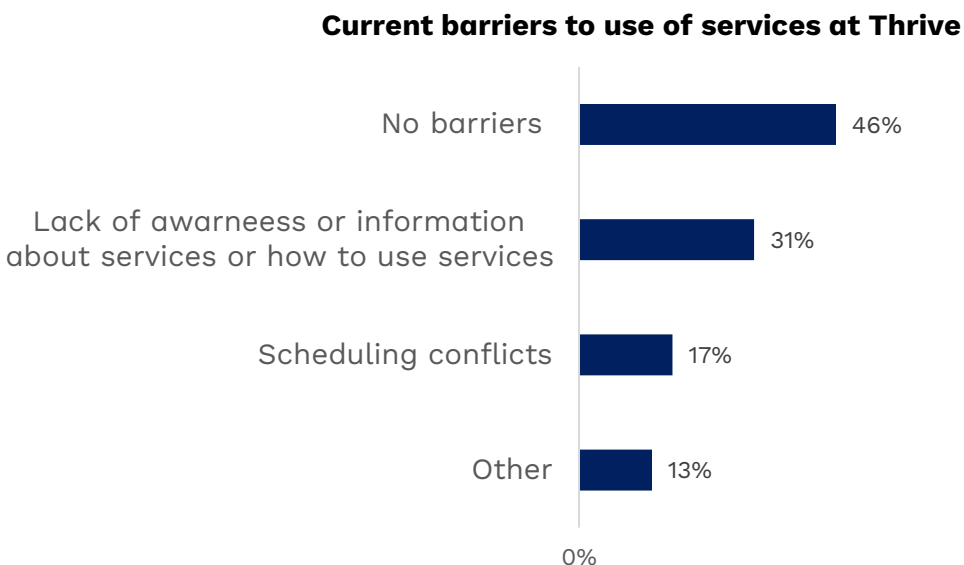
Barriers to access

Respondents were asked to indicate the frequency with which they used community resources (e.g., public libraries, community centers, etc.) as well as support services and resources available at Thrive Elementary (e.g., Jasper Place Family Resource Worker, counseling and intervention teaching support). A majority (57%) of survey respondents said they never or rarely use support services available at Thrive Elementary, while the rest said sometimes (21%) or often/always (21%).

Frequency of use of services at Thrive and in their community

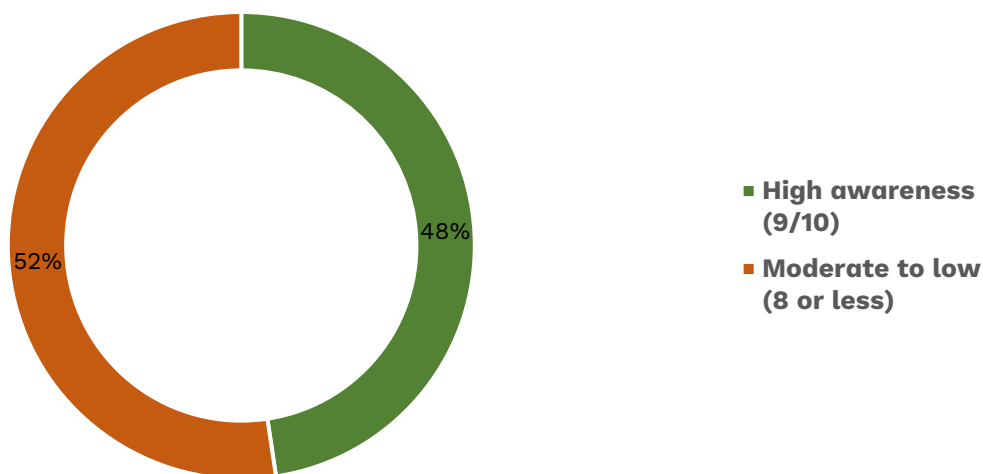


Respondents were asked which barriers, if any, prevent them from utilizing the support services at Thrive Elementary. Forty-six percent (46%) of respondents noted that they did not have any barriers. However, close to a third (31%) highlighted lack of awareness about services or lack of information about how to use or access services. Others cited scheduling conflicts (17%) or other (13%).



When asked to rate (on a scale of 0 to 10) their level of awareness of the different support services and resources available at Thrive Elementary, half (48%) of respondents self-reported high level of awareness (9 or 10). Another half (52%) self-reported a moderate to low level of awareness (8 or less).

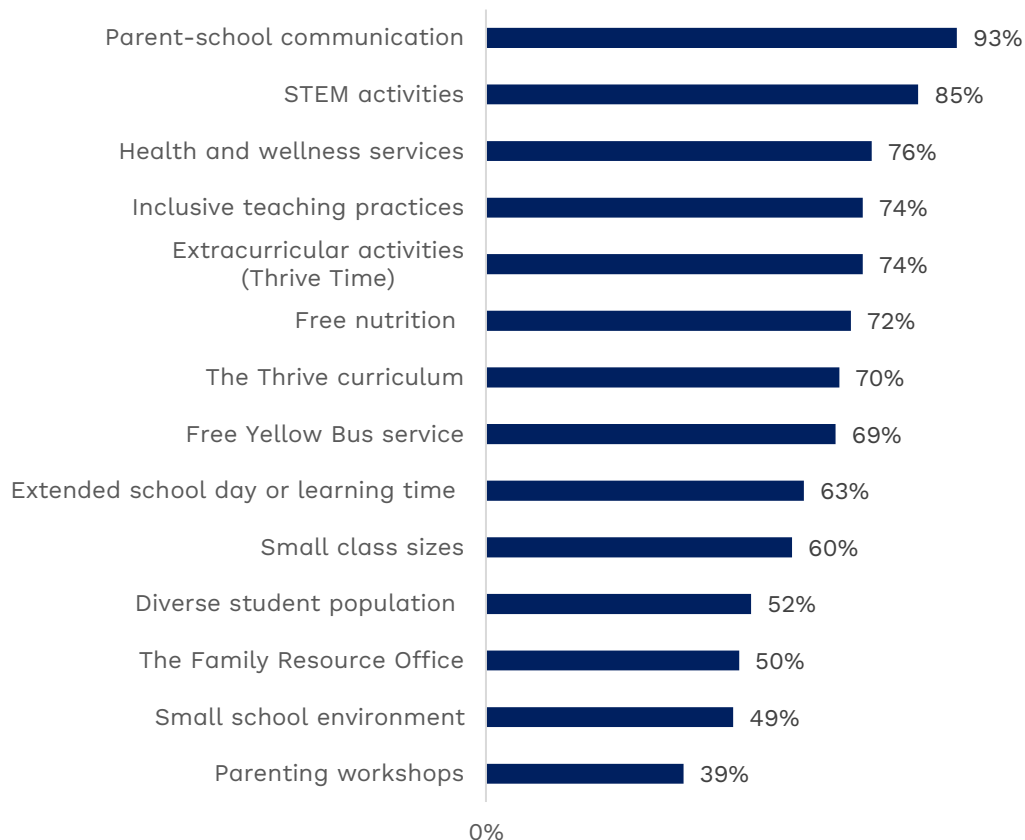
Parents' self-rated levels of awareness of services and resources at Thrive Elementary



Thrive's programing aspects

Respondents were given a list of various aspects of Thrive's programming or model and asked to rate the importance of each in their child's education and experience at the school. Participants were more likely to rate as very important parent-school communication (93%), STEM activities (85%), health and wellness services (76%), inclusive teaching practices (74%), extracurricular activities (74%), free nutrition (72%), the Thrive curriculum (70%), and free yellow bus service (69%). Compared to the above, fewer respondents selected extended school day or learning time (63%), small class sizes (60%), diverse student population (52%), The family resource center (50%), small school environment (49%), and parenting workshops (39%). It is important to note that a large majority of respondents rated the various aspects programming that The Thrive model emphasizes as important or very important (ranging from 98% for parent-school communication and STEM activities to 78% for parenting workshops). When disaggregating data by SES and newcomer status, the data showed that that both recent newcomers and lower SES respondents were less likely to select small class sizes as "very important," compared to the rest of respondents.

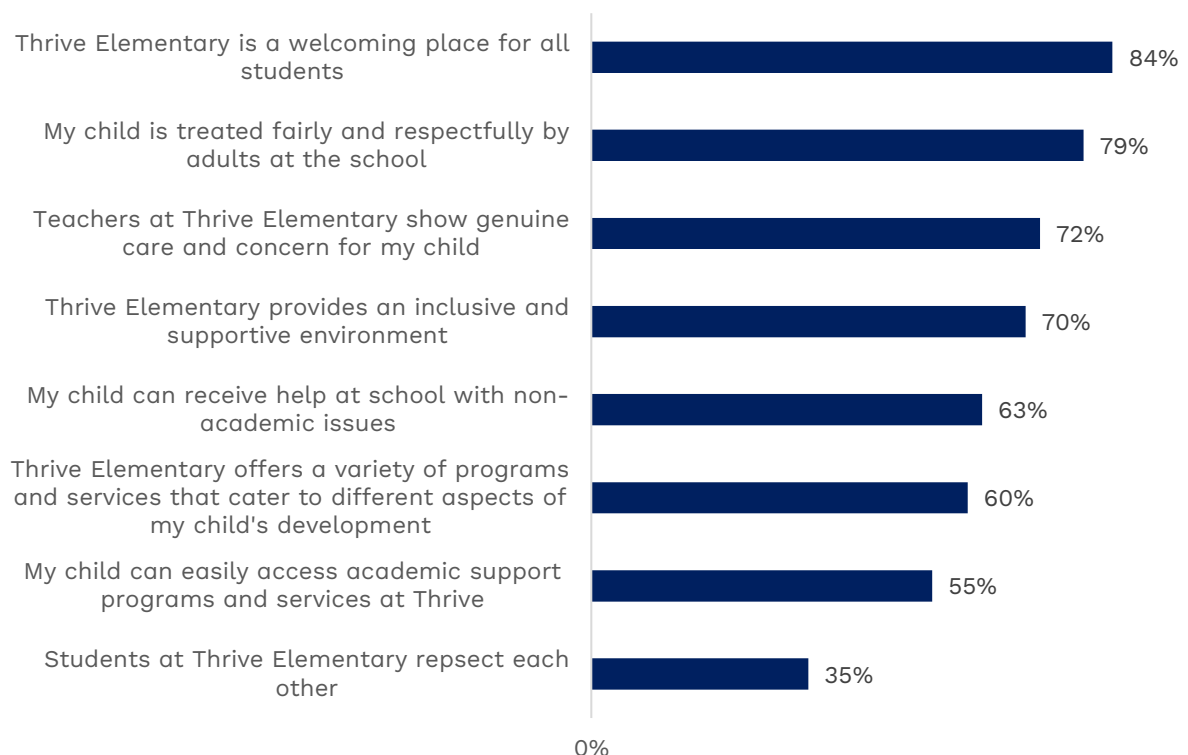
Rating importance of various aspects of Thrive's programming (% **very important)**



School perceptions

Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with a series of statements about Thrive Elementary in order to gauge their current perceptions of the school's environment and their child's experience so far. A large majority of respondents indicated that they strongly agree that Thrive elementary is a welcoming place for all students (84%), that their child is treated fairly and respectfully by adults at the school (79%), that teachers at the school show genuine care and concern for their child (72%), and that the school provides an inclusive and supportive environment (70%). A majority reported that they strongly agree that their child can receive help at school with non-academic issues (63%), that the school offers a variety of programs and services that cater to different aspects of development (60%), and that their child can easily access academic support programs and services at Thrive (55%). Relative to the rest of the statements, respondents were relatively less likely to strongly agree that students at the school respect each other (35%). However, it is important to note again here that net agreement rates were generally high across items, ranging from all respondents agreeing that Thrive Elementary is a welcoming school for all students to 88% agreeing that students at the school respect each other. When disaggregating data by SES and newcomer status, cross-tabulation showed that lower SES respondents were more likely to agree/strongly agree that students at Thrive Elementary respect each other.

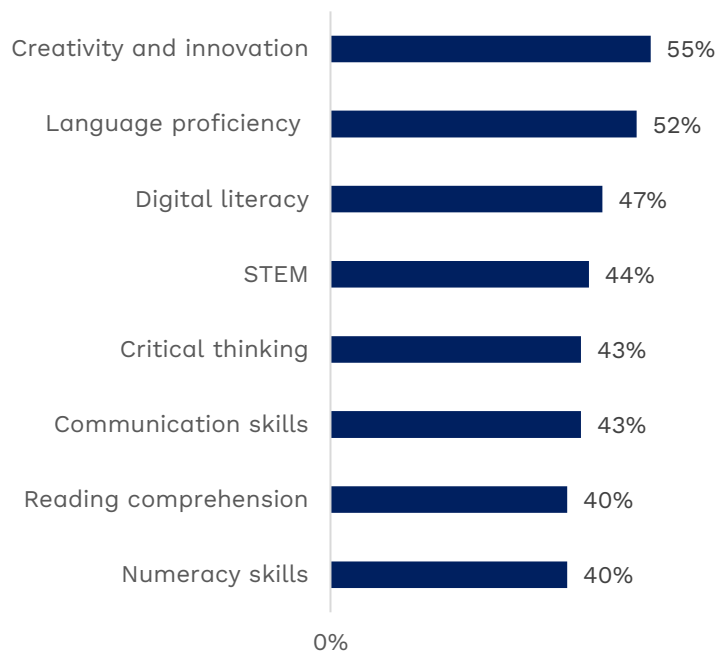
Agreement with statements about Thrive Elementary (% **strongly agree**)



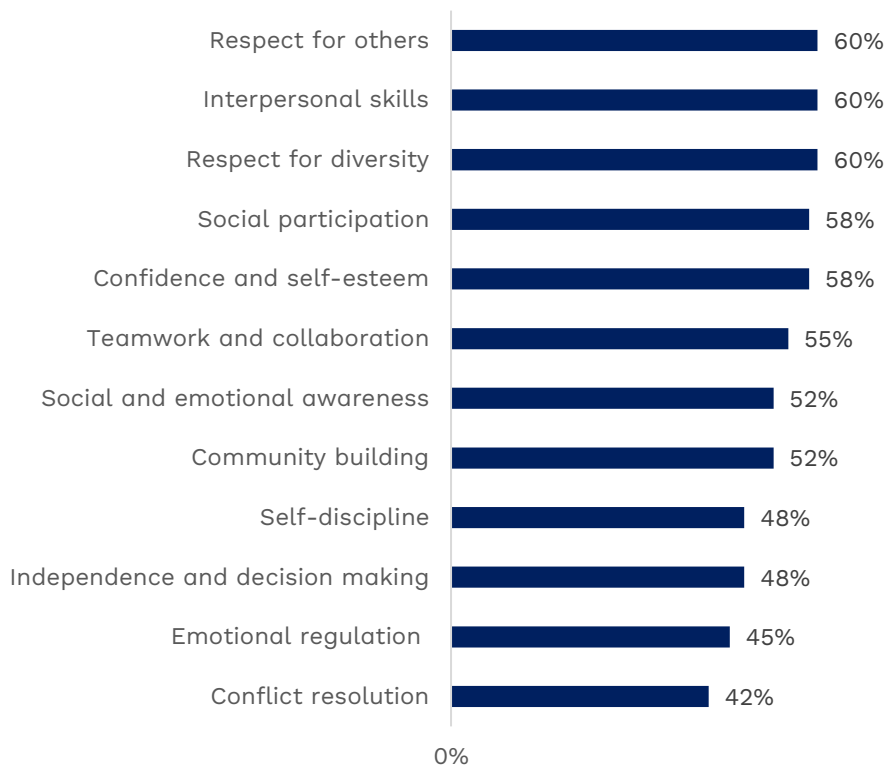
Parental satisfaction on student progress

Respondents were provided list of academic and social outcomes and asked to rate either their satisfaction with progress since enrolling at Thrive or their agreement on whether or not Thrive has effectively supported their child in developing or improving specific skills. The percent that reported strong satisfaction (i.e. “very satisfied”) with progress so far varied across academic outcomes: creativity and innovation (55%), language proficiency (52%), digital literacy (47%), critical thinking (43%), communication (43%), reading comprehension (40%) and numeracy skills (40%). The majority of respondents reported that they strongly agree that Thrive has effectively supported student development related to interpersonal skills (60%), respect for others (60%), respect for diversity (60%), social participation (58%), confidence and self-esteem (58%), teamwork/collaboration (55%), social and emotional awareness (52%), and community development (52%). Less than a majority said the same with respect to self-discipline (48%), independence and decision making (48%), emotional regulation (45%), and conflict resolution (42%).

% very satisfied with academic progress (since enrolling at Thrive) in the following areas



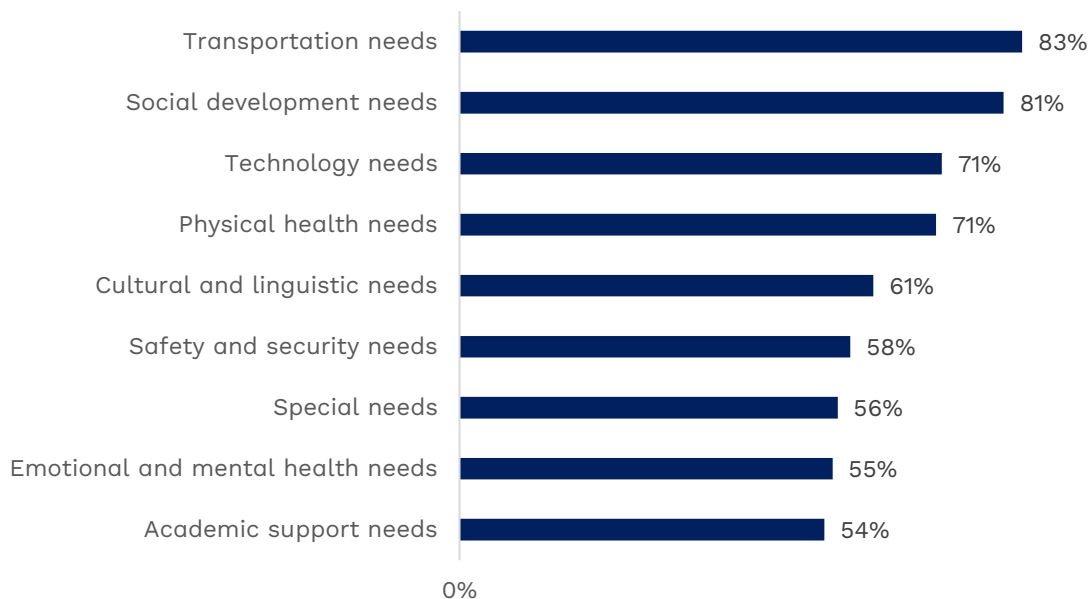
% strongly agree that Thrive has effectively supported development in these areas



Overall parental satisfaction with Thrive

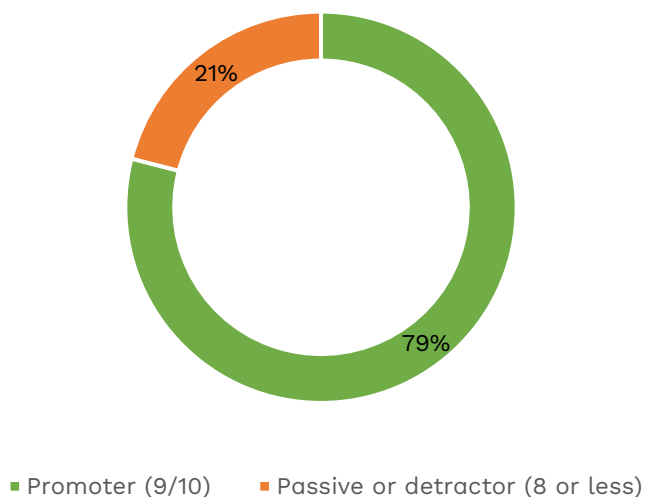
Parents were overall very satisfied with their and their child's experience with Thrive Elementary. The vast majority (90%) of survey respondents reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the facilities and resources at the school. Eighty-six percent (86%) reported that their child is very well or extremely well socially integrated at Thrive. When asked about whether or not specific needs are being met (if applicable), they were more likely to strongly agree that Thrive has effectively addressed transportation needs (83%), social development needs (81%), technology needs (71%), and physical health needs (61%). A majority strongly agreed that Thrive has effectively addressed cultural and linguistic needs (61%), safety and security needs (58%), special needs (56%), emotional and mental health needs (55%), and academic support needs (54%).

% strongly agree that Thrive has effectively addressed the following needs



Parents were also asked to rate (on a scale of 0 – 10) how likely they were to recommend Thrive Elementary to other parents. More than three quarters (79%) indicated that they were highly likely to recommend Thrive to other parents (i.e. promoters).

Parents' self-rating of the likelihood of recommending Thrive to other parents



Feedback from parents

Consistent with the quantitative data, parents were overall very positive in their open-ended feedback about the impact they see of their child's attendance at Thrive Elementary. Respondents highlighted improvements on social and academic skills, problem solving skills, communication skills, independence, conflict resolution, and collaboration. They indicated the positive roles of the STEM program, the nutrition program, Thrive time, parenting classes, and the class sizes:

"My child's attendance at Thrive has had a positive impact on both their social and academic growth. Academically, I have noticed improvements in their problem-solving skills and ability to work more independently on tasks."

"Parenting classes, addressed learning needs, extra help with reading and writing; child has been improving compared to old school, [T]hrive time has improved child's social skills and teamwork and is now interested in team sports, support in navigat[ing] the system [. . .]."

"My favorite is [the] STEM Program – that was reason #1 I applied [to] the school, also the flexibility on time and offer of yellow bus helped me a lot to focus on my work more, also the fact that I know my kids are having breakfast lunch and snacks that includes fruits, yogurt, some veggies that gives me a relief to not stress about balancing a healthy lunchbox."

"Socially, they have developed stronger communication skills and seem more confident in expressing their thoughts and ideas. They have also learned better strategies for resolving conflicts and collaborating with peers."

"The school provides kids breakfast and lunch which helps us so much. Since both of us are working, it is very hard for us to prepare food for our kids every day, especially my second son is so picky. Of course school food also save us a lot of money."

"My child's writing and reading skills improved, he's happy to be there and loves all the staff. It's a special school and I'm happy my son's apart of it."

"My child always talks about how happy she is to wake up and go to school. She loves the art and time and also looks forward to breakfast. We had trouble feeding her here at home so when she sees other kids eating with her, it encourages her to eat."

"My daughter has thrived at this school since she started mostly because of the size of school (class). The school feels like a family to her."

Respondents also had the opportunity to highlight their challenges and provide specific suggestions for improvement. A common theme was the need for additional academic support, with a couple of respondents highlighting support in math and more homework.

“One of my biggest concerns is ensuring that my child receives the necessary academic support to thrive, especially in subjects where they may need extra help. Additionally, I would like to see more resources dedicated to fostering social-emotional well-being, including conflict resolution strategies and peer mediation programs.”

“It would also be helpful if the school could provide more structured opportunities for parental engagement, such as workshops or regular feedback sessions, to better understand and support our children’s learning experiences.”

“I also believe that expanding opportunities in STEM would be highly beneficial. More hands-on activities, coding workshops, robotics, or science fairs would help engage students and develop critical thinking skills.”

“Give weekend homeworks, more writings on notebooks.”

“Earlier drop off time, I start work at the same time school starts, which means I need to pay for daycare and transportation for my child.”

“[My child] struggles with math. Would be nice if she had one on one support every so often rather than just moving on and her not having the building blocks to understand the next level”

“I would say more homework. I would like him to have the chance to better himself in his education if he can't do it all at school. He should be able to improve by extra work at home.”

“My concern is more exposure in Math subject and help improve my child’s handwriting.”

“[...] access to psychoeducational evaluations, schedules for after school communication [...]”

Feedback from teachers

Teachers were asked to draw on their experience so far and to shed light on current barriers and challenges for students in accessing resources and support they need to achieve academic success, as well as challenges they have encountered as a teacher and how they have managed to address or overcome them. They mainly highlighted the lack of “proper support outside of the classroom” or “consistent support from home” and the need for a “strong and active partnership with families” and “academic one-on-one support” for some students.

“In a typical school there are many contributing factors that we at Thrive attempt to remove, so specific to Thrive I would say having a strong and active partnership with families is a major factor and with that reliable transportation to be able respond quickly to needs and to attend important events.”

“Some students do not receive proper support outside of the classroom, so there is a gap between what parents see at home vs. what we deal with in the classroom. In a lot of cases, students are experiencing life within a lower socio-economic status and there are associated challenges that come with that which are sometimes hard to address and fix within the classroom. There are also large gaps between “high” and “low” students academically which poses challenges with supporting all students.”

“Some students need more academic one-on-one support. Students need more support from at home, like being read to, practicing letter writing and vocabulary, basic math... I understand this is not always realistic. Some students are picked on/bullied by others, even in quiet ways, which make it hard for teachers to notice and hard for the student to feel safe and happy at school to learn.”

Respondents noted that as teachers they experience challenges related to the diverse experiences of students and those related to emotional regulation or conflict resolution among students.

“Having students coming [from] very diverse and often trauma induced backgrounds that require unique approach to working with those student and families. This is a continued effort as each case is unique, but we have excellent resources on staff to help navigate these cases.”

“One big challenge I face is when students are picking on each other, trying to figure out how to address the problem/help the students involved. Our on-site behavioural specialist has been a good support and is there to offer specific suggestions.”

“Helping students manage their emotional regulation was a huge challenge at the beginning of the year. [...] Having students build positive relationships with each other and other adults in the school benefited the students greatly, as well as giving them an alternative safe space to go when they were feeling dysregulated.”

Teachers highlight important factors that continue to contribute to the academic and educational progress of students at Thrive, including the resources the school provides, the teaching approach or the Thrive model/mission, and making students feel valued.

“It is not one factor but a combination of many factors, we have a nice building to work out of with the resources we need, the right personnel, the right mission, vision, and value statements to ensure success, and clear and direct expectations for everyone to follow.”

“Having all teachers/staff approach education with a similar mindset and be on the same page in regards to delivering education to students, consistent expectations and rules regardless of grade/age, diversity profiles [...], having an intervention and behavioral specialist on staff to build relationships and help students both academically as well as emotionally.”

Teachers were also asked about Professional Development activities they have found helpful and that they would like to see that would enhance their effectiveness in their role. Participants noted that they have completed prior PD related to Mathology, Schoology, Fountas and Pinnell, emotional and behavioral support, STEM, differentiation, de-escalation strategies, PD related to identifying and responding to students' various behavioral needs, and team building exercises with other behavioral support staff. Respondents highlighted that PD related to trauma-informed practice, writing support and the writing process, and more team building exercises would be beneficial in enhancing their effectiveness as teachers at Thrive.

Qualitative results from interviews

Parents' feedback

Impacts

"[Thrive staff] are very friendly and they are very good with the kids too; that's why I really like it."

- Thrive Elementary Parent

Thrive Elementary parents noticed significant improvements in their children's educational attainments and social skills. Not only did Thrive Elementary educational assistance and supports help students, but they also provided opportunities for parents to socialize, learn Canadian culture and essential resources from the school. Such a comprehensive system created a unique inclusive community with a strong feeling of belonging.

Quality of education

All participating parents held a high opinion about the quality of education that their children received at the school. Many parents noticed significant improvements in educational and emotional and behavior development of their children as a result of studying at Thrive Elementary. Reading progress was one of the strongest indicators of that. One parent explained: "[my child] *reads very well, [my child] is a great reader and can read almost as well as me.*" Another parent impressed by the educational results of their child noted:

[My child] can spell and write [their] name from memory. I was very impressed by that. I'm pretty sure that he could tell me the whole alphabet.

Additionally, all participating parents who came recently to Canada expressed their deep satisfaction with the quality and speed of their children's English language acquisition. One parent noted: "[Child] *improves as [child] is speaking, especially for English as their second language; [child] is fluent and is learning*

everything in school and method is very helpful.” A newcomer parent who noticed significant improvements in their child’s English language skills also shared: “[child] was a little struggling [with English as a second language] but now I can feel that [child] can talk very fluently; [child] still has to learn, but I can feel the difference.”

Students also enjoyed STEM programming: “[My child] likes the STEM program, the extra activities after school, 3D printing; [my child] just likes spending time with other kids; instead of having to do the regular schoolwork they get to play and interact with other kids.” The parent was convinced that STEM is particularly important because it helps students learn social skills and socialize with other children.

Available supports

For many Thrive families, family dinners provided an opportunity to learn more about the school and achievements of their children. Dinners created opportunities for socializing, networking and relationship building with the wider community. It is particularly important since many newcomers face difficulties and even isolation when they move to Canada. One parent said that because of the family dinners, they forged connections with other families. Now after they built mutual trust, their children spend time at each other’s houses without any concern.

Another parent noted how supportive the staff was: “*They [Thrive Elementary employees] are listening very well to all families.*” Two participants were particularly impressed by the social worker on site. One parent expressed their gratitude for the social worker who is really helpful as she “*sends out some things about [different available opportunities] that might be a benefit to my family, and she said that we could schedule a meeting and then she can go over what she can do for me.*” The parent also added that they would like to see similar approach from their teacher because the parent is “*not too sure how familiar [the teacher] is with [their child].*” Another participant had similarly positive experience with a social worker and other supports workers:

I get in contact with the social worker who is connected with the Jasper Place. I say I wanted help with [child] for myself and she emailed me back in less than 24 hours with available resources.

However, the impact goes beyond strictly educational sphere as many families with lower social and economic status benefitted from its programs as well. One participant explained:

The supports have been great; they let us go grocery shopping there for free before my [child] even started, they’d filled up the whole gymnasium full of groceries and gave us a soft basket, and we got to get groceries. It was fabulous.

Another newcomer parent noted that their child *“is opening up and raising his voice and his opinion.”* Another parent emphasized how individual approach was crucial for the success:

There's more time for every student, for one on one, as compared to other schools with many students. It's really hard for the students to get help there that they really need because there's so many students.

It is worth to note that this feedback is consistent with the survey results where 84% of respondents strongly agreed that ‘Thrive Elementary is a welcoming place for all students.’

Belonging and Inclusion

Thrive School also fosters a profound sense of belonging. One participant explained that *“[child] loves going to school, likes the school, it's like a family community and once a month, they have the family supper where we can go and spend time with other families.”* Another parent felt that *“It's like family there. The teachers know [my child], [my child] knows all the teachers. Everybody's friendly. It's like a big sense of family. Big sense of community. It's really good school.”* The child feels the sense of community and with the other students because *“the teachers go and do a lot of things for them.”* The social aspect of Thrive Elementary was very important factor for another parent because it was missing in other educational contexts the child was involved in.

The sense of belonging is nurtured by the teachers who pay attention to all children: *“[child's teacher] is really good with them and [teacher] is very fair and I think every child in [this teacher's] class loves [the teacher].”* A participating parent emphasized that *“[Thrive Elementary] employees show concern and that they actually care”* because the school always follows up in case of child's absence. Another parent added: *“I can definitely send [an email to the secretary] in the office and she'll pass the email to the teacher if I need it. If I don't already have [teacher's email]. It's pretty good like that.”* One of the participants was very impressed how culturally sensitive Thrive Elementary is: *“I know their respect for other cultures because I saw different people for different culture and the family dinner.”* Because of that, students *“feel like they belong in this community, so it's really they feel that sense of belonging, and they made friends with other children.”*

The diverse backgrounds of students attending the school creates a welcoming atmosphere to connect with different cultures because *“it's easier for children to really connect when it comes to all these tribal and ethnicity [differences], they don't really care about it.”* A parent noted that their child is always *“looking forward to the school.”* Children *“are happier [at school] than home, they are playing, they're*

learning.” Another parent echoed this opinion: “[child] looks forward to going to school early in the morning.”

One parent summarized their thoughts by saying *“I really like the school, and I really like the teachers and the environment.”* Another parent noted that *“The school has very good environment, a lot of equipment and the teacher is very kind and friendly with their student.”* Newcomer parents hold very positive view about Thrive Elementary as one of the parents said: *“we didn't face any barrier because. Everything is perfect”.* A parent added: *“I do feel they provide accurate, adequate resources.”* Another parent held similar opinion: *“We have them [supports – K.T.] if needed definitely; I love the after-school program.”* Another parent added: *“I am very happy about all of the resource.”* A parent who is very involved in their child's education noted that they *“wish to continue [after grade 6] with the Thrive [Elementary] because otherwise [they] are not able to help their children.”* One parent summarized by saying that the *“school is very helpful for my children's homework, for their teaching methods, for their environment, for their equipment, for their snacks, food, transportation because we don't know about the method of Canada, how to help with [child with their] homework.”*

Overall, Thrive Elementary has had a profound impact on students' educational success with noticeable improvements in their literacy and English language, including ESL students. Moreover, the existing supports services impacted parents as well. Services offered by the school created new opportunities for newcomers, removed barriers for families from low social and economic backgrounds leading to inclusive and welcoming atmosphere.

Challenges and needs

“I'm not too sure how engaged I'm supposed to be. Am I supposed to email people every week with every small concern?”

- Thrive Elementary Parent

Despite the fact that parents were happy with Thrive Elementary overall, there were several concerns that were raised during the interviews. They mainly revolved around relationship building between the school and parents and adjacent lack of easy and accessible channels of communication.

Parents-school relations

Several parents faced challenges in trying to build a better relationship with the school as they acknowledged the lack of strong relationship between teachers and parents. Some participants struggled to find ways to connect with their teachers on a more personal basis and build meaningful connections. One of the parents tried to book a meeting with their teacher but was not sure how it could be done. Another interviewee said that *“there isn't really a whole heck of a lot of communication unless*

you reach out to them; they will message you via email every once in a while, if they need to.” Another parent had a similar experience as they faced obstacles in getting their child’s information. Lastly, one participant clarified: *“Overall it is really hard for us to get the feedback.”*

Because of lack of meaningful connections and efficient communication, tensions and conflicts are more likely to arise due to misunderstanding and miscommunication. For example, a parent was concerned that their child did not receive sufficient attention from a teacher when the child needed help with an assignment. As a result, child felt excluded *“when [child and their peers were] asking [a question] the teacher ignored them and didn't want to respond to [this child's] question.”* That is, *“[teachers] didn't want to solve their [kids'] problem, they didn't pay attention to the families or their students' problem.”* When a parent asked about this, the teacher explained that they were not always able to respond to all questions. Such misunderstandings can be traced back to the disconnect between parents and the school.

Channels of communication

At the same time, parents acknowledged that existing channels of communication and socialization were useful and valuable even if they did not meet all parents’ expectations. Family dinners overall have positive impact, but for some parents thought that they are not set up for in-depth conversations. During family dinners, *“they're [teachers – K.T] not really discussing anything personally about your child with you.”* Another parent elaborated: *“It is really hard for us to get the feedback [during family dinners] because other parents are waiting to know about their kids, there is no privacy.”* One parent succinctly summarized their experience: *“I just thought there would be more opportunities for inclusion for parents.”*

There is a sentiment that the way how school is structured and how great the building and supports are might pose obstacles for low-income families who might feel overwhelmed by it:

“It seems like they have a protocol and a way to do everything set up there. That's just the way the school comes across. It's very crisp, clean lines and organized classrooms. They got tape on the floor to show your kid which direction to walk. [...] It just seems very structured there and it comes across to me as being so brilliantly structured.”

As one participant said, *“I don't really want to bother them or anything like that and be some overbearing parent.”* Another parent was frustrated that in order to access full information about their child, they would have to buy a premium version of a mobile app used by the school. While these two situations are directly connected, both of them point out to the situation where school’s expensive and well-supported programming and need for additional cost to access student’s information can create additional barriers for family from low socio-economic

backgrounds. Moreover, they can function as a reminder to the families of their background making parent feeling stigmatized and vulnerable.

Several parents came up with suggestions on how to foster stronger and more meaningful relationships between the school and parents. One of the participants suggested *“a program where parents are encouraged to just come and observe their children for a couple hours in a day.”* They offered details as to how it can be implemented:

My suggestion is rather than a family dinner, they can book an appointment, and they can make one on one with parents once in three months. We can meet for at least 15-20 minutes. We [can] know how the kid is doing at the school, if there is anything we can support [with] or is there anything we can do additionally

Another interviewee proposed the improvement of email distribution through which parents can learn more about upcoming events, opportunities and available services and supports.

Unmet needs

As mentioned above, all participating parents were very satisfied with their children’s learning progress. However, one parent was not sure if children had enough appropriate STEM education, as the parent was worried that it was more of extracurricular activities than proper STEM education. Another participant advocated for more hands-on experiences to complement STEM curriculum. They explained that *“getting kids moving and getting their brain thinking about [variety of things] is still a benefit to a lot of other families.”* Another parent would like to see the school offering sports gear to encourage students to be more active. Another newcomer parent expressed the need for more culturally and religiously sensitive food to accommodate students’ diverse backgrounds. In addition, the same parent thought that the school was the best positioned to teach children how to self-regulate because children *“tend to listen to the teachers more they respect them more.”* A newcomer parent was very passionate about extracurricular activities offered at Thrive Elementary and proposed to have more sport equipment and gear available for students during afternoon programming. Overall, several parents stated that they hoped that the school will have grades beyond Grade 6 so that their children could continue education there.

Teachers’ feedback

Impacts

“I had [a student] who was not showing up on a regular basis last year and couldn’t read, could hardly write. [The student] was not an independent worker at all, but now [the student]

is reading at A level and is able to make friends, start conversations, engage with adults, those are all really important life skills.”

- Thrive Educator

After two years since the opening of Thrive Elementary, participating teachers noticed significant improvements in their students’ learning including literacy and English language proficiency, emotional regulation, and social skills. The responsiveness of all Thrive staff were and are essential for this success.

Impact on students’ behavior

Participating educators all agreed essential to this success was the availability of necessary supports provided by Thrive Elementary. One of the educators emphasized how important it was to have the support of educational assistants, behavior specialist and speech pathologist on site to help students in need. Another teacher elaborated:

Our emotional behavior specialist wants to see everyone succeed, and she’s always there to help. We have an intervention teacher who pulls out and does intervention and she’s always looking for any way that she can help to. Yeah, the support staff and services at the school are awesome

Another teacher shared an example of a student with unique needs that normally are not supported at a public school but Thrive Elementary had required infrastructure and after a year of receiving this support, the child showed substantial and tangible improvements.

After several months of working together, students already “*learn some strategies to manage their emotions.*” One teacher was impressed with the progress their students made:

This is year two and I have seen an incredible improvement in the students. Whereas at the beginning of the year many of them were dysregulated, [after several months of working with them], they are [more] regulated. They are learning, they are happy. You can just feel the sense of community in the school.

Inclusion

Such all-round supports and care created an institution that thrives on inclusion as one of the participants explained: “*inclusion is huge here and I think one of the greatest things that we have here at thrive is that we are small and every single teacher knows every kid here, whether they’re in their class or not.*” This inclusivity is also reflected in teachers’ approach to teaching and grading. One of the educators

explained that by adjusting assignments requirements depending on individual students' need creates an inclusive place for growth for all children. Another teacher said that another way of fostering inclusivity is to include educational materials that contain diverse cultures and representations of different walks of life.

Challenges and needs

"I think that the area for growth would be that home-school connection and building more personal relationships with families."

-Thrive Educator

Thrive Elementary educators agreed that the biggest challenge they face is parent-school relations because of miscommunication and misunderstanding between Thrive Elementary staff and parents.

Parental engagement

Low level of engagement makes it difficult to connect with parents. Teachers spend a lot of time trying to get in touch with them, but they often don't get any response at all. One interviewee emphasized: *"I think the teachers expect more from parents because even if everything's free doesn't mean that this is the right place for you to be if you're not willing to be involved in your child's education."* Interviewed teacher indicated that they personally met less than half of the parents during family dinners or other events. Whereas some parents are *"incredibly grateful for all of the additional supports and they see how special our school is and everything that we're doing for their kids"* while others *"are indifferent to [what the school has to offer], they don't necessarily show appreciation or willingness to participate."* Another educator clarified that *"it's [parents'] job to at least seek opportunities available to them, fill out that paperwork; they should be able to feel good about the fact that they've had to do something to get that."* In other educator's words: *"I still want them to be accountable."*

An educator thought that, to some extent, the low levels of parents' engagement is predicated on the very way Thrive Elementary is structured. As opposed to public schools, Thrive Elementary offers a wide range of services (busing, extra-curricular activities, catering) that limit face-to-face interactions between teachers and parent. One of the teachers said: *"I don't think some parents understand their role as a parent and their requirement to have a functional partnership with the school; there are still some parents that think that it is not their problem while their kids are at school."* Another participant agreed that Thrive Elementary *"takes the pressure off of [parents] so much so that they don't have as much responsibility for their children."* That is, *"I do feel because the parents put their kids on the bus, the kids get bussed to us, we get them, we teach them, we put them back in the bus, they go back to their*

families. There's not a lot of interaction between parents and staff outside of the family dinner opportunities." Notably, parents expressed similar opinion that school structure might play a role in difficulties in building meaningful relations.

Different cultural expectations and assumptions can put additional strains on relationship between Thrive Elementary and parents thus increasing likelihood of tensions or even conflict. One educator explained that not all parents know how to communicate with teachers and school administration appropriately. The interviewee explained: *"A lot of the time when we introduce the fact that we would like to provide a child with more support, [child's parents] may get defensive because they don't think that there's a problem with their child or that they need this extra support."*

Recommendations

The issue of relationship is a common overlapping theme in parents' and teachers' interviews thus indicating that relationship building is not a question of personalities but rather of a systemic gap in the ways that the school functions. This situation is exacerbated by the lack of clearly established expectations and framework of parental involvement. Parents don't sign any formal agreements, and no conversations are structurally embedded in the educational process. When parents enroll their children, they sign a consent form to be collaborators with Thrive Elementary, but this does not seem to communicate the idea of balanced partnership that educators advocated for. There are no other expectations laid out anywhere else creating a situation where parents and Thrive Elementary educators have implicit expectations about educational process without any negotiations or even discussions about the framework of school-parent relations and parents' involvement.

Interviewed teachers while recognizing the role of parents in the relationship building, also pointed out that teachers don't *"take the time to actually reach out individually"* and *"could do a little bit better job of those personal one-on-one interactions."* One educator proposed a model that could foster more meaningful connections, namely, monthly one-on-one in-depth meetings about a particular student's learning path with several families a month. This would create more space for stronger and more meaningful connections between teachers and parents. Interestingly, one of the educators thought that students can help in engaging parents: *"I think as the kids become more comfortable and [they] get more excited about learning and education that hopefully they'll also bring their parents along with them."* They were confident that the school staff will address efficiently current issues in the future by *"maintaining expectations and just continuing to push a little bit through the kids to get there."* Since Thrive Elementary was opened only two years ago, there is still a learning curve for both teachers and parents.

Additional supports needed

Whereas participating educators effectively and successfully utilized available resources and supports, there are still needs to be met. They mentioned educational assistants and occupational therapy.

One interviewee who benefitted from EA support opined that the “*support staff [is needed] to be able to make those opportunities for individualized planning and learning for groups of either ESL low academic kids.*” Moreover, since learning becomes progressively difficult and assignments become more challenging, e.g. reading longer texts and books, writing essays, struggling students need more help and support to acquire grade level skills and competences. One teacher said that in their opinion older students require more assistance because “*in kindergarten they're not reading or writing yet, they're learning their letters and the sounds that they make and they're learning phonemic awareness, but they're not actually reading books and writing paragraphs.*” The teacher thought that EA support is needed not only in kinder garden or 1st grade but also later in students' educational journey.

The teacher proposed to increase support of interventionist teacher as the allocated time may not be sufficient for students with English as the second language. Many students have “*a lot of big feelings*” and they need to “*learn how to regulate [their] emotions*”, because “*there is a lot of dysregulation [that can lead to] physical altercations between students.*” In addition to interventionist teacher to help with socialization, one of the participants proposed to hire an occupational therapist on site who could help students learn to regulate themselves and learn essential life skills:

It would be really beneficial to [have occupational therapy] because if [students] start in kindergarten and grade 1, they can have [those skills] for the rest of their life. It's really hard when they're not learning how to put on their own shoes at home. And then they're not learning it at school because that's not really the school's role to teach them how to put on their shoes.

Overall, teachers outlined that they, like parents with teachers, struggle to build meaningful and personal relationship with Thrive parents. On the one hand, school structure limits teacher-parent interactions and parents are not informed what is expected from them. On the other hand, teachers acknowledged that they could be more intentional in their efforts to reach parents through one-on-one meetings and through the students. In addition, educators would like to have enhanced EA support and an occupational therapist on site.

Professional development for teachers

Participating educators have taken up a number of professional development opportunities during their tenures at Thrive Elementary. One of the educators recalled taking part in teacher conference that happen annually at the beginning of a school year. They also attended other schools for observation and learning. Another teacher also mentioned that occasionally speakers are invited to talk about different topics, e.g. math education. Another teacher recalled professional development opportunities on teaching resources Fountas & Pinnell Classroom, numeracy courses, resilience and understanding the impact of trauma on children events.

Overall, participants had mixed reactions on the adequacy of current PD resources and offerings. One sentiment was that despite the fact that there are some opportunities, there is not enough targeted professional development, personalized opportunities, and infrastructure to encourage teachers' professional development. At the same time, another sentiment was one of appreciation of the support from the school and principal in sharing information and opportunities.

When it comes to specific topics for professional development, interviewees explicitly mentioned the following:

- Formal mentoring system at school to support new teachers without teaching experience
- Professional growth plan at the beginning of the year
- Professional development in literacy and writing especially for ESL students and low-level learners. In particular, teachers needed help with the organization of the class when low-level learners require a lot of attention and yet teachers need to work on grade level curricula.

Newcomer parents' survey (NorQuest College)

In March 2025, NorQuest conducted a survey of newcomers attending the LINC program in higher level language classes to obtain feedback on an "Education in Canada" module introduced in CLB 6+ classes and to assess the current challenges and needs of newcomers and newcomer parents with respect to accessing education and education services in Canada. The survey was intended to inform understanding of key challenges and the support needs of the newcomers and newcomer parents in the Edmonton region.

Participants

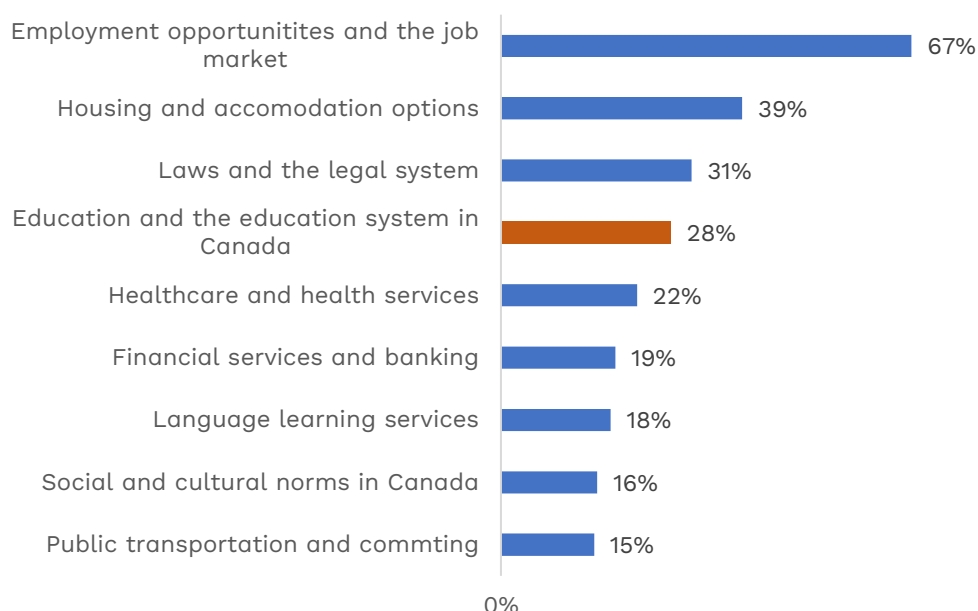
The majority of survey participants were women (79%) and two-thirds (67%) were parents. The median age of all participants was 35 (median age 38 for parents). Participants had different levels of education; while two-thirds (65%) had high school or less as highest level of educational attainment, more than a third (35%)

had bachelor's or higher (including 10% with a master's PhD, or professional degree). With regard to socioeconomic status, a large majority (72%) reported monthly household income less than \$3,000 (before tax).

Accessing information

All participants were asked how easy or difficult it was for them to find information related to a list of topics. Participants were more likely to cite employment opportunities and the job market (67%), housing and accommodation options (39%), laws and the legal system (31%), education and the education system in Canada (28%) as difficult or extremely difficult to find information on, compared to healthcare and health services (22%), financial services and banking (19%), social and cultural norms (16%), and public transportation and commuting options (15%).

Respondents cited as difficult or extremely difficult to find information on

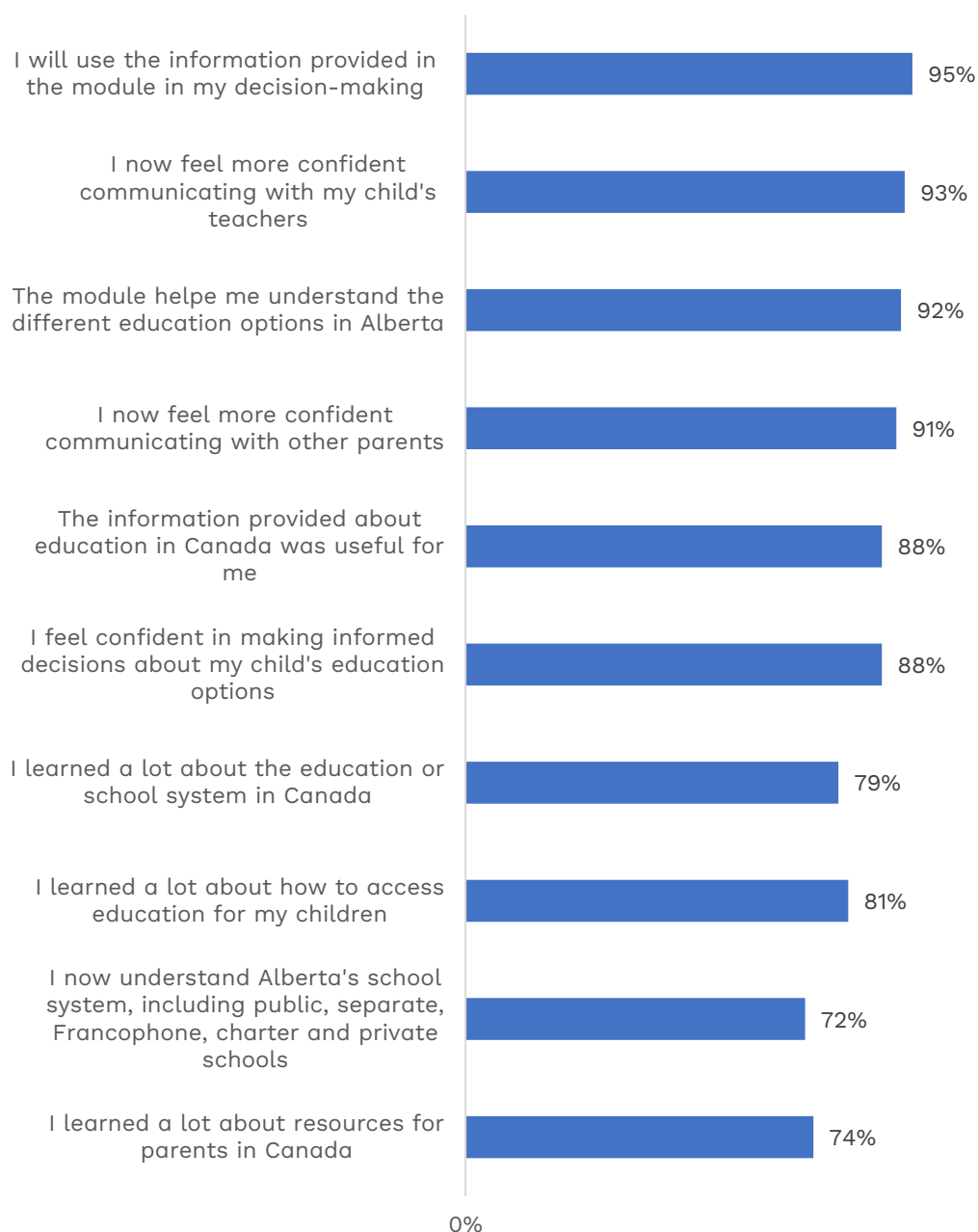


Feedback on the “Education in Canada” module

The vast majority of respondents agreed that they will use information provided in the module in their decision making (95%), now feel confident communicating with their child's teachers (93%), the module helped them understand the different education options in Alberta (92%), now feel more confident communicating with other parents (91%), the information provided about education in Canada was useful for them (88%). However, by comparison, respondents were relatively less likely to agree that they learned a lot about how to access education for their children (81%), learned a lot about the education or school system in Canada (79%), learned a lot about resources for parents in Canada, and that they now understand Alberta's school system, including public, separate, Francophone, charter and private schools

(72%). These results highlight potential information or awareness gaps for newcomer parents and the need for further targeted education aimed at enhancing their knowledge with respect how to access education and resources for their children, and to improve their knowledge of the broader education system in Canada and Alberta.

Net agreement among parents about statements related to the "Education in Canada" module in LINC

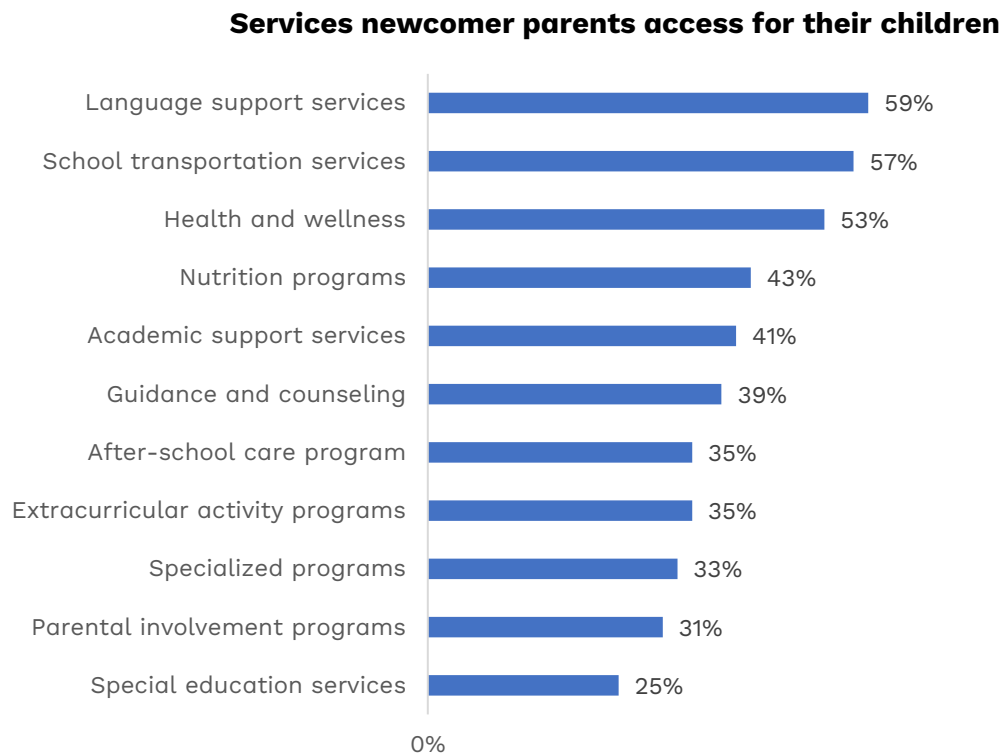


Among survey respondents, lower-SES parents were more likely to agree or strongly agree that they now feel more confident communicating with their child's teachers

(100% vs. 83%) and that they will use the information provided in the module in their decision-making (100% vs. 87%), compared to the rest of respondents. They were, however, less likely to agree to strongly agree that module helped them understand the different education options in Alberta (82% vs. 100%).

Accessing services

When asked about education and support services they currently access for their children, survey respondents who were parents were more likely to cite language support services (59%), school transportation services (57%), health and wellness (53%) services, with a majority indicating they accessed these services.



Lower-SES respondent parents were less likely to indicate they access language support services for their children (48% vs. 73%) compared to their (relatively) higher income counterparts.

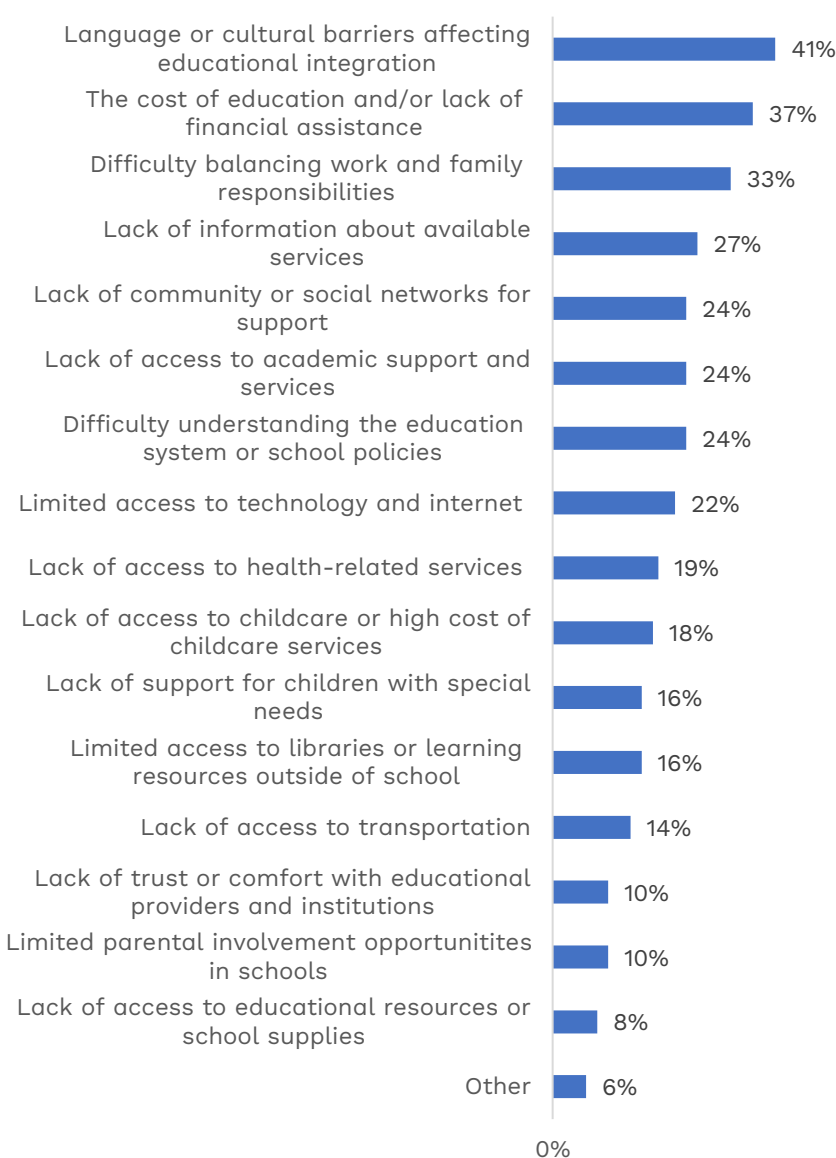
Challenges and concerns

The newcomer parents were given a list of main challenges and to select all that they currently face in accessing educational services and resources for their children. Top-cited challenges were language or cultural barriers affecting educational integration (41%), cost of education and/or lack of financial assistance (37%), difficulty balancing work and family responsibilities (33%), lack of information about available services (27%). Other significant challenges include lack of

community or social networks for support (24%), lack of access to academic support (24%), and difficulty understanding the education system or school policies (24%).

In open-ended feedback, respondents raised various issues, including the impact of language barriers for their children and the lack of integration, the impact of unemployment or lack of finance on their ability to support as they would like to, concerns related to disability, getting individualized attention and support from teachers (e.g., to support with vocabulary), lack of free transportation, school environments and their influence, differences in values, and possible lack of communication with their children.

Survey respondents' main challenges related to accessing educational services and resources for their children



Summary and conclusions

This study examined the early impacts of Thrive Elementary School, a charter school in Edmonton serving K-6 students from low-income backgrounds, and a targeted educational module for newcomer parents in the LINC program at NorQuest College. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research assessed Thrive's holistic model – which includes wraparound supports like free meals, transportation, after-school programs (“Thrive Time”), and family resource workers. In addition, it also assessed impacts on student outcomes and parental satisfaction. Drawing on surveys and interviews with Thrive parents and teachers, the research examined barriers faced by low-income and newcomer families in accessing education services and the role of targeted programming in bridging the gap. Notably, 74% of Thrive parent respondents were newcomers, and most had children in early grades. The study also gathered insights from LINC learners on their confidence and challenges in navigating the Canadian education system. Overall, the findings offered a nuanced understanding of education gaps and the potential of targeted programming to support underserved communities in Edmonton.

The survey results highlighted high levels of satisfaction among Thrive parents and that many parents were accessing services and resources that they lacked before, such as extracurriculars, STEM programming, socialization opportunities, and after-school care. In particular, parents value parent-school communication, STEM education, health and wellness services, inclusive teaching, Thrive Time, free nutrition, and generally the Thrive curriculum. They are overall satisfied with the progress they see on both academic and non-academic skills so far. However, despite the high level of satisfaction with their experience with Thrive, many parents (57%) do say they never or rarely use support services available at the school, mainly due to lack of information and awareness and/or scheduling conflicts, which is an important gap to address in order to ensure all families benefit and make the most of the support, resources, and programming offered to them.

In-depth interviews revealed that Thrive Elementary parents saw significant improvements in their children's learning, emotional regulations, and acquisition of social skills. Teachers' attention to students and availability of supports that helped reduced barriers to education contributed to this success. However, the impact of the school went beyond students, parents benefitted from school's assistance as well. Family dinners became an opportunity for newcomer parents to socialize and meet new people whereas food, clothing, and other supportive services made a difference for families from low social and economic status. Such success was made partially possible because Thrive Elementary fosters belonging and inclusion in the school for students and for parents. At the same time, some parents indicated that it was difficult for them to reach out to teachers or build more meaningful and stronger relationships with the school which in turn could lead to heightened tensions or even conflicts. Some parents did not know the best ways of contacting their teachers and they did not find family dinners suitable for more personal

conversations. Interestingly, the very way the school is organized may be a contributing factor for the disjunction as parents might feel intimidated by Thrive Elementary due to its high-end presentation and modern outlook. In addition, usage of paid mobile applications to access students' data also posed a barrier and served as a gate keeper for parents with low social and economic status.

When it comes to teachers, they also observed significant improvements in their students, particularly in literacy, English language proficiency, emotional regulation and social skills. This was made possible by the extensive supports offered by Thrive Elementary. Participants mentioned educational assistants, behavior specialist and speech pathologist whose availability on site facilitated easy access and prompt help to students. Echoing parents, teachers pointed out the importance of inclusion that underpins all the educational successes. Not only do educators intentionally work on creating inclusive environment, but they also make inclusive assignment by adjusting the level of difficulty for students at different levels to ensure all have the opportunity to grow. At the same time, teachers, like parents, pointed to parent-school relationships as their biggest challenge that is manifested in low parental engagement in their children's education and school activities, such as family dinners. In addition, different cultural expectations exacerbated this situation. To improve parent-school relations, teachers proposed to focus more on personal interactions with parents and/or create a more formal system of one-on-one meetings with parents every certain period of time (e.g. monthly, quarterly etc.). To improve learning outcomes, one of the educators proposed to have an occupational therapist at the school and more teaching assistants, especially for older students who work on more complex assignments and have higher expectations. Notably, teachers were interested in professional development and mentioned that they did take part in certain PD opportunities, but it was not enough as courses on literacy and writing, working with ESL students are needed.

In sum, the results have a few implications for programming and further growth. The findings suggest that Thrive's programming could benefit from expanding areas of support for families (e.g., in specific academic areas), creating opportunities for individualized support, further developing STEM resources and support, exploring opportunities for one-on-one parent-teacher meetings, and establishing clear communication channels with families. Communication of expectations with parents and families appears to be an important step in enhancing parent-engagement and ensuring the strong parent-teaching partnership that Thrive educators have highlight as critically important. Related to communication, increasing awareness of resources through workshops, orientations, and relevant materials could also bridge the current information gap or divide among families, along with offering flexibility with services (e.g., hours, virtual availability) to increase accessibility. Finally, expanding learning opportunities for teachers, particularly related to trauma-informed practices, ESL strategies, and inclusive pedagogy, may address exiting PD-gaps that could further improve the school's programming.

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