

**Parentkind**

Bringing together home & school

# **Parent Voice Report 2021: In Summary**

**A snapshot of parent  
sentiment in education**



# Introduction

Parentkind's Parent Voice Report is the result of our Annual Parent Survey that researches parents' experiences and perceptions of their children's education and schooling on an annual basis.

This is the seventh wave of the survey since it began in September 2015.

The study continues to track perceptions of key aspects of schooling, education and parent voice from year to year and also asks parents their views on several new and rotating topics:

- Parents' attitudes to their child's school and schooling, including their views on: supporting their child's learning, how the school takes their views into account, and perceptions of the school environment.
- The extent to which parents want a say with – and believe their voice is heard by – education policymakers at all levels, local and national.
- Parents' levels of involvement in their child's school and education, including raising issues with staff and their participation within school life.
- Parental school fund donations, views on educational costs and how funding should be spent.
- How parents view the role of education and the ways it prepares children for the future.



In addition to tracking these core topics on a rotating basis, each wave explores some additional areas of topical importance. In 2021 these themes were:

Parental concern and experience of issues related to their child's mental health and well-being at school, and their priorities for support within school.

Parents' perceptions of diversity and inclusion efforts within schools and how far the education system supports social mobility.

# Methodology

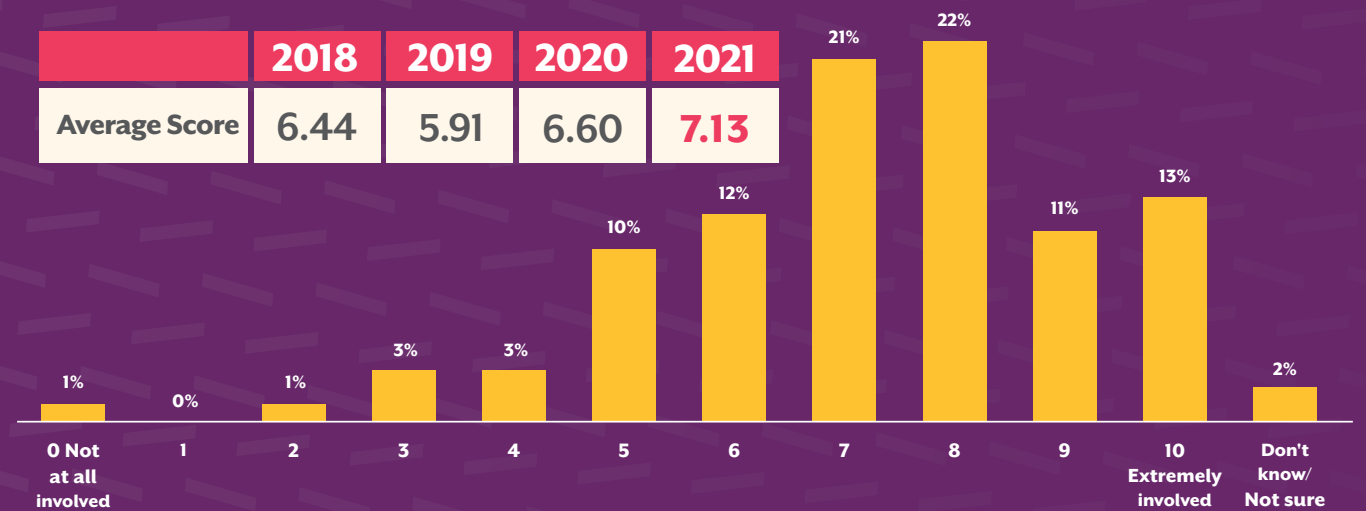
This Executive Summary highlights some of the key insights to emerge from this wave of research. Our Annual Parent Survey was carried out online with a nationally representative sample of 3,751 parents in England, Wales and Northern Ireland between 3rd June and 19th July 2021. A detailed analysis of data from this year's survey can be found in part three of the full report, including comparisons between demographics and previous years' results.

# Parental participation in 2021

Parents feel more involved than ever in their child's education

Parents report higher levels of overall involvement in their child's school and education than in any year previously. This year the mean score rose to 7.13, as shown below; up from 6.60 in 2020 and 5.91 in 2019. More than one in ten parents scored their involvement at the maximum level of 10.

	2018	2019	2020	2021
Average Score	6.44	5.91	6.60	7.13



Parents' overall sense of involvement with their child's school and education continues to be significantly higher among younger parents, those in London, primary parents, parents from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds, those eligible for free school meals (FSM) and those with a child with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND). It was also significantly higher among those in England and Northern Ireland, rather than Wales and those at local authority-maintained schools rather than academies.

This shows that overall, there is much to be optimistic about regarding the state of parental participation, in terms of both longer-term trends and the degree to which the pandemic has intensified parents' involvement with their children's education and schooling. We continue to see a high level of general support for schools, alongside a desire for even greater engagement and consultation.

### Learning at home is generally well-supported by schools

70% of parents agree that their child's school provides the help they need to support their child's learning at home. While this figure could stand to improve in light of the importance of learning at home during the pandemic, it shows a strong foundation of approval for school's efforts to support parents in this role. Similarly, a slightly lower proportion of parents (65%) view school communications on suggestions about supporting home learning as effective.



### There is some improvement on parent voice and consultation

Support for schools and the desire to be active in their child's education come across clearly in 2021. It is equally clear that there is space to improve on parent voice and consultation. 54% of parents say their child's school takes action based on their views or feedback and 51% feel they are able to have a say on school decisions that affect their child's education. Whilst both of these parent consultation measures have improved since 2019, progress remains slow and indicates more needs to be done to ensure parents feel that they have a voice on the decisions that matter to them and that schools are listening.

Despite high levels of support for schools and willingness to engage, 50% of parents still say their child's school should be more accountable to parents than it currently is. While last year's research showed a slight improvement in this measure, amidst the first national lockdown and school closures, this year shows a return to business as usual as half of parents call for greater accountability.

## What schools are getting right – and where they need to do better

There is a consistently strong level of support for schools, with 80% of parents describing themselves as supportive of their child's school.

77% of respondents are happy with the quality of education their child receives, and 75% feel that respect and courtesy are in evidence throughout the school. This shows that even after eighteen months of disruption, parents continue to feel a high level of satisfaction with overall conditions in school life.

This foundation of belief in schools, which has held up throughout the pandemic, is most clearly evidenced in the fact that 82% of parents agree their child feels safe at school and 79% that their child is happy at school. While we have seen minor fluctuations, the trust that parents place in schools has proven stable and the 2021 data shows us that core aspects of school provision continue to instil parent confidence.

However there remain key areas of concern:

- Secondary/post-primary school parents continue to show less confidence than primary school parents in their child's happiness and safety at school, as well as in the quality of their education.
- Parent approval of the range of after school clubs and extra-curricular activities has dropped significantly (65% down from 71% in 2020) - unsurprising given social distancing requirements but important to watch.
- 51% of parents agree that the school offers good careers advice – though it has improved from 43% in 2019, the quality of careers advice continues to remain a comparative area of concern.

There are also findings which show a reasonable foundation but which schools must certainly seek to improve:

- While most parents feel schools are communicating effectively on core issues, they report that schools are better at communicating about news and events or their child's progress than in supporting learning at home/outside school.
- Almost two-thirds (65%) of parents agree that their child's school engages with, and is an integral part of, its local community – a strong baseline for a new involvement measure but one we hope to see improving in years to come.







## Parent voice and participation

Parents report a wish for greater consultation in education and school decision-making and parents feel more involved in their child's education in 2021 than in past research.

85% of parents want to play an active role in their child's education. This figure has remained high across all past research and suggests parents' interest in meaningful participation with their child's schooling is near universal.

However, there continues to be a gap between parents' desire to have a say in their child's education and the extent to which they feel parents are listened to.

	% of parents who want a say in their child's education at each level	% of parents who feel listened to at each level
School	72%	57%
Local Authority/ Education Authority or Multi-Academy Trust	58%	42%
Government	59%	35%

More than half (56%) of parents this year reported raising issues and/or contributing feedback on their child's school and education. Notably, London-based parents were overwhelmingly likelier to have raised issues, with just 28% reporting that they had not, compared with 40% or more in all other areas.

There is a clear need for improvement in parent consultation processes with parents polarised on the extent to which they feel schools are listening, acting and offering accountability:

- Only 54% of parents agree that their child's school acts on parent feedback.
- Only 51% feel able to have a say on decisions that affect their child's education.
- 50% feel their school should be more accountable to parents than it currently is.

### Parent involvement rises across the board – but some barriers remain

When it comes to the different ways of getting involved with their child's school:

- 66% of parents have attended parent consultation/ parent teacher meetings.
- 42% of parents have taken part in parent surveys/ focus groups.
- 40% of parents have volunteered time and skills to their child's school.
- 30% of parents are active in the PTA or Friends of the School group.

Overall, reported parent participation in 2021 rose on the last three years. There are promising signs of interest in more active involvement with school life and consultation processes among those who are not currently involved. Over four in ten parents say they would consider Parent Action Groups or Parent Councils, and there is ample further interest in PTA engagement or volunteering. Young parents, primary school parents and those living with a disability are particularly likely to consider getting involved in the future.

The top barrier to parents getting more involved in school life remains time (36%), followed by simply not being asked (28%) and being unsure what they have to offer (25%). This suggests a largely receptive parent community (however time-poor), and a need for schools to ensure that participation asks are clear, inclusive and flexible.

## The role of education - above and beyond academic attainment

Overall, parents endorse the curriculum that schools are teaching - 77% of parents believe their child's school teaches a curriculum that meets their child's needs. They also believe that education is not just about attainment, with 88% of parents agreeing that a good education for their child goes beyond exam results.

In more detailed terms parents tell us, in keeping with previous data, almost nine in ten parents prioritise the following aspects of the curriculum:

- Developing skills that are useful outside of school
- Supporting pupils' personal development by teaching life skills
- Preparing pupils to become responsible citizens
- Introducing a broad range of subjects

It is also noteworthy to discover that developing good mental health and well-being scored higher on 'Very important' than any other area of the curriculum, with 60% of parents feeling this way. Parents were also likelier than in previous years to believe in the importance of lessons on relationships education and in supporting pupils' spiritual development and understanding.

Examining parent educational priorities from another angle, parents view it as most important for young people to leave school with foundational personal development skills and a good knowledge base. Parents also expressed a mix of similar and different priorities for the capabilities their children should have upon leaving primary and secondary/post-primary education:

### Important skills and capabilities to leave primary school with:

- Self-confidence 59%
- Empathy and awareness of others 42%
- Good knowledge of key subjects 39%
- Problem solving 38%
- Teamwork 35%

### Important skills and capabilities to leave secondary/post-primary school with:

- Self-confidence 53%
- Being prepared for further education/job market 41%
- Resilience and the ability to cope with setbacks 40%
- Problem solving 36%
- Good knowledge of key subjects 36%

These findings suggest parent priorities for education rest firmly with equipping pupils to become well-rounded individuals, prepared to adapt and adjust to their future via transferable and varied personal and practical life skills, rather than adopting a narrow academic focus.



# Mental health and well-being increasingly prioritised

The importance of child mental health has become more widely accepted than ever before, as the myriad impacts of the pandemic and public healthcare measures have continued to take a toll on children and young people. When it comes to their child's experience at school, many parents continue to be concerned about a range of mental health and wellbeing-related issues.

### The top five concerns for parents are:

- Exam stress (55%)
- Anxiety (54%)
- Homework related stress (49%)
- Bullying (49%)

The pressure to constantly engage with social media (48%)

Concerns about acute well-being issues such as self-harm, sexual harassment, substance abuse and eating disorders were also concerning for at least 30% of parents. Younger parents continue to report higher concern across the majority of issues, as do Londoners, parents who do not identify as heterosexual, those with a disability, those eligible for FSM and parents of a child with SEND.

There was a significant rise in the parent-reported incidence of mental health and well-being issues in 2021, compared with 2020, with results more closely resembling the 2018 results. This suggests that experience has largely returned to pre-pandemic levels, after a temporary reduction while schools were closed.

Mirroring parent concerns, with the exception of homework and exam stress, the top five issues parents report their child to have experienced are:

- Homework related stress (41%)
- Anxiety (38%)
- Exam stress (35%)
- Bullying (31%)
- The pressure to constantly engage with social media (20%)

In addition to greater experience of homework and exam stress, parents of children at secondary/post-primary and post-16 phases are significantly likelier to report experience of anxiety, pressure to engage with social media, depression, and online abuse. This is consistent with last year's research and highlights the additional weight of responsibility on schools at secondary/post-primary level and beyond to support young people's mental health at the stage they become most vulnerable to social, emotional and academic pressures.

Yet even at primary school level almost a third of parents say their child has experienced anxiety issues (32%), homework stress (30%), while well over a quarter (29%) say their child has been bullied. More than one in ten primary parents, respectively, report that their child has experienced social media pressure (14%), depression (13%) and online abuse (13%).

Separately, we find that 60% of parents agree that bullying is dealt with fairly at their child's school. This suggests the majority of parents support schools' response to the problem but bullying remains a widespread area of concern.

Mental health support and knowledge within schools are therefore of clear importance – and we find that parents' priorities for this are to see mental health support workers embedded to provide timely support and professional, age-appropriate counselling services.

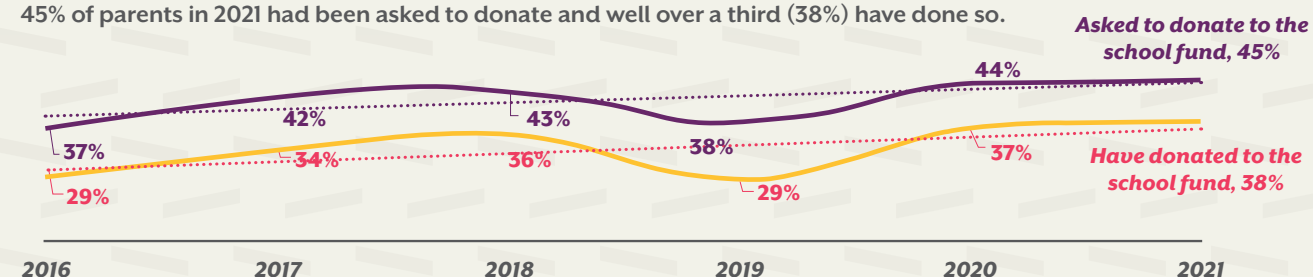
88% of parents deem mental health development as an important focus within the curriculum. Similarly, only one in ten parents reported not wanting to see any mental health options prioritised for in-school support - and when it comes to where parents would want to see any additional funding directed, child mental health services rose to second place priority in 2021, only sitting behind learning resources. This year's research therefore shows that mental health and wellbeing have successfully gone mainstream in parent priorities for their child's education and schooling.

# The cost of schooling

Parents tell us that financial pressures on both schools and on households themselves continue.

## Over a third of parents have donated to the school fund

Parents being asked to donate to the school fund continues to be common practice among schools and this year the proportion of parents held firm. As shown below, 45% of parents in 2021 had been asked to donate and well over a third (38%) have done so.



## The mean donation given to the school fund rose this year to its highest level yet at £11.62 per month.

This has increased from £10.00 in 2020 and £8.15 in 2019. Trends observed in previous years have continued, with younger parents likelier to report being asked to donate, as were those in Northern Ireland, those in London and parents from BAME backgrounds. Those with a disability, those eligible for FSM and those with a child with SEND were also likelier to have been asked to give.

## The cost of technology is a rising concern for parents

Whilst uniforms (38%) and school trips (34%) still top the list of costs that parents are most concerned about, technology is the third most concerning cost in 2021, having risen significantly from 14% to 20%.

## Top parent priority for extra funding is learning resources – but mental health close behind

If more funding was made available to their child's school, parents continue to prioritise learning resources, such as text books and science equipment, in first place at 47%. However, this was closely followed by child mental health at 41%, which rose from fourth place in 2020 to second place this year.



Further down the list of priorities there were also rises in support for additional spending in:

- Pastoral services for pupils from disadvantaged families (25% up from 21%)
- Additional non-teaching staff (18% up from 15%)
- Teacher salaries (17% up from 12%)
- Teacher pensions (6% up from 3%)

## Most parents think the cost of schooling is increasing

Almost three quarters of parents (73%) agree that the cost of sending children to school is increasing.

Whilst almost half of parents (49%) believe this is acceptable, the same percentage (49%) are concerned about this cost. There has, however, been a significant rise in the proportion of parents who think the cost of schooling is acceptable, which has risen from just 37% in 2019.

In 2021 over half of parents (55%) felt that the increasing pressure on school budgets in recent years has negatively impacted their child's education.

The perception of negative impact is higher among men, younger parents, parents from BAME backgrounds, and those based in London. This perception of negative impact has also significantly increased over time, suggesting a more intense environment of increasing costs and budgetary pressures which are viewed by many as detrimental to their child's education.



# Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

In 2021, we added new questions around the theme of diversity and inclusion, focusing on the representation of different groups in school resources, topics and materials, and parents' confidence in equality of outcomes for all children regardless of background. We also looked closely into our data by demographic to continue growing our understanding of differences in the experiences of different parent communities.

## Wide uncertainty for parents around how represented LGBT+ and non-binary identities are in school resources

While at least 50% of parents agree that different genders, ethnicities and people with SEND are represented in school resources, fewer see differing levels of advantage represented. The least recognised identities in school topics and materials are LGBT+ and non-binary identities, which also show high levels of parent uncertainty.

## Most parents believe the state education system better enables children from more privileged backgrounds to succeed

Encouraging parents to think about social mobility and equality of outcomes within the education system, we find that 58% of parents believe that the current state education system enables children from more privileged backgrounds to succeed more than others and that half (50%) feel that their child's personal background is reflected in what is taught in schools today.

Looking into parents' expectations for their child's future beyond school, 60% of parents in 2021 agree that the quality of education their child is receiving is better than the one they experienced at school and that their child's career prospects will be better than their own and 57% agree their child will have a better standard of living than them.



## Towards a better understanding of different parent communities

Our research tracks opinions and experiences across many demographics, allowing us to explore findings across characteristics from region, age and social grade to ethnicity, eligibility for free school meals (FSM), and experience of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). This year we also began tracking sexual orientation and experience of disability, to continue widening our understanding of different parent communities.

Most strikingly, we continue to find that parents with FSM eligibility, parents living with disability and those whose child has SEND tend to reply differently on the vast majority of questions posed in our research. They tend to rate their overall involvement with their child's school and education more highly than parents without these experiences and are also likelier to report:

 A cluster of seven colorful speech bubbles (yellow, blue, red, purple, teal, orange, and dark purple) containing key findings from the research.
 

- Higher levels of existing consultation and communication with schools
- More current involvement and openness to future involvement in school
- A greater desire to have a say on their child's education at all levels of governance and to believe parents are listened to
- More optimism and support regarding the school's efforts at social mobility
- Stronger belief in their child's future prospects, compared with their own
- Stronger satisfaction with existing school provision, such as careers advice or extra-curricular activities, and to believe communications are effective
- Donating to the school fund - and in larger average amounts

**To select just a few specific examples among many, we find that:**

**Parents with a child eligible for FSM** are significantly likelier than ineligible parents to **strongly agree:**

- Their child feels safe at school (46% vs 40%)
- Their child is happy at school (44% vs 38%)
- The curriculum meets their child's needs (39% vs 31%)
- They feel happy with the quality of education (41% vs 31%)
- To describe themselves as supportive of their child's school (42% vs 37%)

**Parents whose child has SEND** are significantly likelier than those whose child has no SEND to **strongly agree:**

- Their child's school provides help with home learning (35% vs 26%)
- The school takes action based on their feedback (31% vs 16%)
- They feel able to have a say on school decisions (29% vs 16%)
- The school engages with the local community (32% vs 24%)
- Bullying is dealt with fairly by their child's school (31% vs 22%)

**Parents living with a disability** are significantly likelier to:

- Have raised issues or feedback on their child's education, across all channels
- View it as 'very important' for the curriculum to develop good mental health and wellbeing (68% vs 59%)
- Strongly agree the school does enough to provide all pupils with the chance to succeed (27% vs 20%)

Yet alongside the many positive findings, we find many experiences and perspectives which raise cause for concern regarding the school experience for children affected by these experiences:

**Parents whose child has SEND** report they are less likely to say:

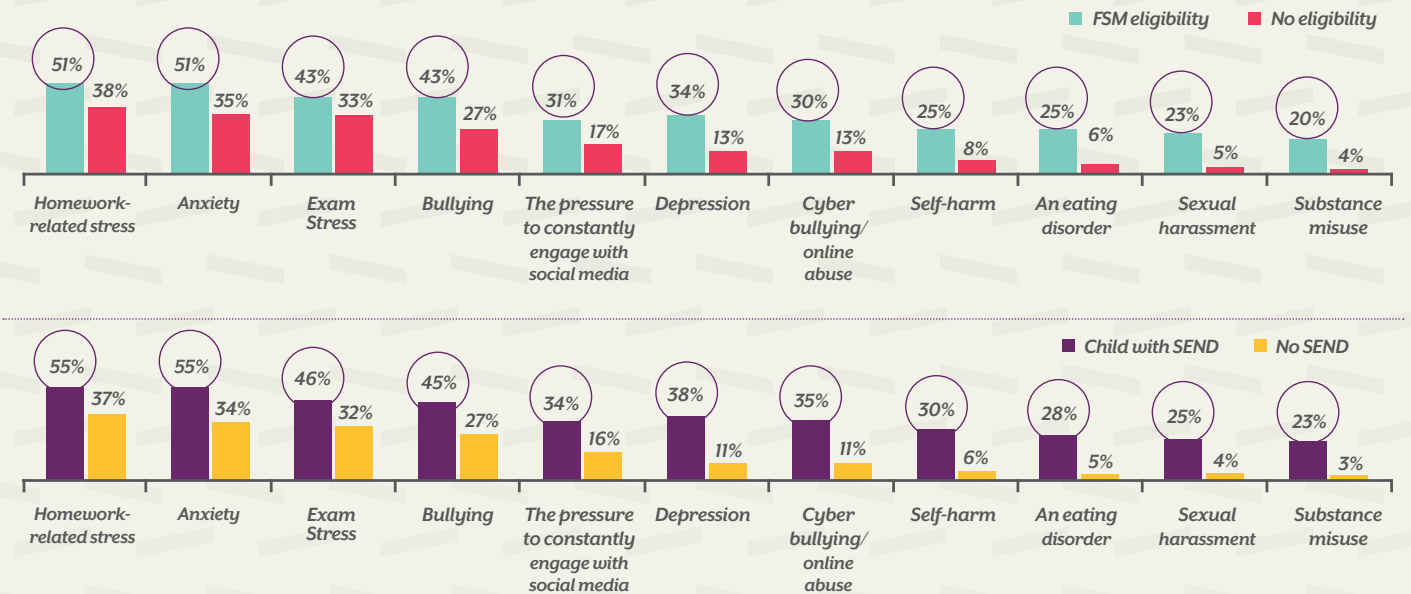
- Their child feels happy at school (74% vs 82%)
- Their child feels safe at school (77% vs 83%)
- Or that the curriculum meets their child's needs (73% vs 80%)

**Parents with a disability, with a child eligible for FSM or a child with SEND** are all likelier to:

- Strongly agree their child's school should be more accountable to parents
- View budget pressures as negatively impacting their child's education
- Report a much higher incidence of mental health and wellbeing issues among their children

More than half of parents eligible for FSM or with a child who has SEND report that their child has experienced homework stress or anxiety and more than two out of five have been bullied. Meanwhile across the range of less common (but often most serious) well-being issues, these parents report two to three times higher levels of incidence than other parents.

**Reported incidence of mental health and well-being issues by FSM eligibility and SEND**



Differences are also evident across all key parent engagement and consultation measures, as shown, while on parent voice, those living with a disability, those with a child eligible for FSM and those with a child with SEND are all much likelier than other parents to both want a say and to feel that parents are listened to across different levels of governance.

On a practical level these parent groups are communicating more often – and across a wider range of channels – on their child's schooling. Meanwhile at the broadest level, they feel a higher level of general involvement with their child's education.

# Conclusion

*There is much to be optimistic about regarding the state of parental participation. Parents tell us that their interest in being involved in their child's education is high and that the level to which they feel that they are involved by schools has been rising over time. Parents have also demonstrated a consistently strong level of support for schools and a high level of satisfaction with most aspects of their children's education.*

**There are also promising signs of interest amongst parents in playing a more active role in school life, decision-making and consultation processes, including from those who are not currently involved with their school in any formal capacity. Young parents, primary school parents and those living with a disability are particularly likely to consider getting involved in the future.**

However, despite parents wanting this more active role in their child's education, there is a gap between their level of interest in wanting a say and the extent to which they feel that what they say is being listened to. While there have been some improvements over the past few years amongst schools, multi academy trusts and from government in demonstrating that they are listening to parents, progress remains slow and there is still more to be done to ensure parents feel that they have a voice on the decisions that matter to them. Parental engagement is a key ingredient for good school governance and for ensuring that parents' views and priorities are adequately taken into account and their views are taken into consideration in decisions that directly impact on their children's education.

When it comes to what is taught at school, parents broadly endorse the curriculum that schools are teaching, but indicate a clear preference for an education system which equips pupils to become well-rounded individuals, prepared to adapt and adjust to their future via transferable and varied personal and practical life skills, not just a narrow academic focus. There are clear indications a significant number of parents are not convinced that the current curriculum works equally well for all children, with a feeling that those from more privileged backgrounds are more likely to succeed.

Many parents expressed concerns about their children's mental health and well-being in a broad sense from exam stress to more serious, but thankfully less frequent issues, such as bullying and sexual harassment. This is seen by parents as an increasingly important area for schools and the curriculum to focus on. Notably, parents with a disability, or with children eligible for free school meals or with special educational needs were more likely to report challenges with mental health issues.

Parents continue to report being asked to make financial contributions to support schools with their core budgets, typically through donations to the school funds. Parents with a disability, a child eligible for free school meals or special educational needs also contribute more, on average, than other parents. These groups also expressed greater levels of concern about the overall cost of sending their child to school.

Over half of parents feel that the increasing pressure on school budgets in recent years has negatively impacted their child's education. Recognising the need for prioritising areas of expenditure in school budgets, it is clear that parents welcome schools focusing on what is needed for children to be able to engage in learning (e.g. learning resources, science and IT equipment). However, many parents also asked schools to increase or improve mental health services available to children.

With growing appetite for increased engagement among parent communities facing disadvantage, potential marginalisation or other additional challenges, Parentkind recognises it is important for all stakeholders in education to improve their understanding of the needs of diverse parent groups and to recognise that while at times parents will often agree with one another, there is no such thing as a homogenous parent community.

This is also crucial at the school level, where there is much untapped potential for parental participation in education beyond routine parent-teacher interactions. If parents are to become true participants in education, it is vital to ensure the barriers to their involvement with schools are mitigated wherever possible. Parentkind has published its Blueprint for Parent-Friendly Schools which can help schools to understand what can be done to make improvements in this area and we will continue to follow up on this an important area over the coming years.

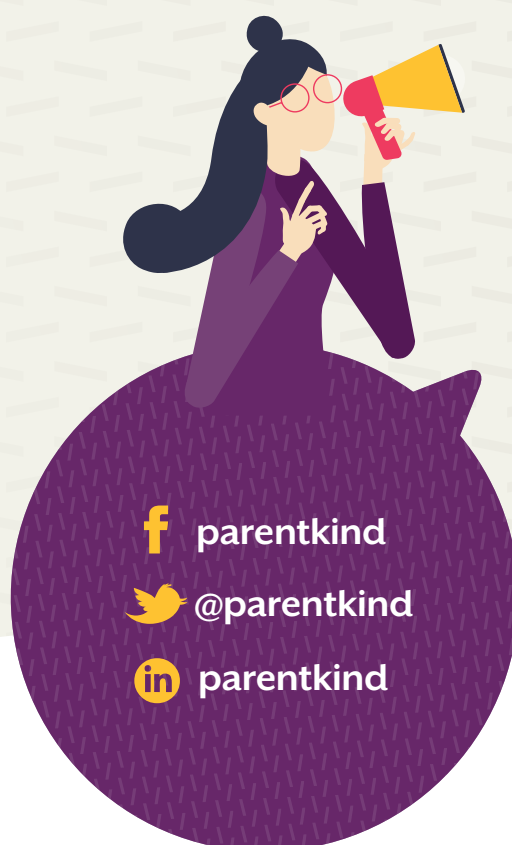
We feel this research has uncovered a lot of useful and valuable data regarding parents' views and their experiences and hopes for the education system in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. However, we recognise that there is still much that we could benefit from understanding in greater detail both around the different experiences of parent groups, and topics of emerging importance such as children's mental health and ways that the school curriculum could be improved. Parentkind intends to explore topics in greater detail throughout 2022. In the meantime, we invite those involved in education both inside and outside of schools to review and reflect upon what parents are telling us, and to recognise the value and importance of encouraging and promoting parental participation in their children's education.





# About Parentkind

*As a national charity, Parentkind give those with a parenting role a voice in education. We invest substantial resources in representing parent views on their child's learning to local, regional and national governments and agencies because evidence tells parental participation in education benefits all children in all schools and society as a whole. Parentkind is the network of PTA fundraisers in the UK. We bring specialist fundraising support and advice to parent volunteers so that every school can benefit from a successful PTA. Our 13,000 PTA members raise over £120+ million per year, placing us alongside some of the largest charities in the UK.*



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## Parentkind

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