



D.C. Families and Education Policy Communication.

*A survey of 102
parents and guardians.*

Nasaiah Algarin

MAY 2026

DC PATHWAYS

FAMILY COMMUNICATION RESEARCH REPORT



— ABOUT THIS REPORT

Why This Study

Every product in the DC Pathways library rests on one working assumption: families cannot use information they cannot find, cannot understand, or do not trust. This report tests that assumption. A 14-question survey was fielded to 102 D.C. parents and guardians across all eight wards to measure awareness of the D.C. State Board of Education (SBOE), the ease with which families understand education policy information, and the trust they place in government communication.

About the Author

Nasaiah Algarin is an undergraduate at American University's School of Communication and the founder of DC Pathways, a family resource library serving D.C. parents and guardians in English and Spanish.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks the parents, guardians, and community partners who shared the survey, and the D.C. State Board of Education, whose public record of family-engagement work motivated this study. The views expressed are the author's alone and should not be attributed to American University, the D.C. State Board of Education, or any other organization.

A Note on Limits

This is a single, cross-sectional convenience-sample survey of 102 parents and guardians, conducted online. It is sufficient for identifying patterns that warrant action but is not a population-representative estimate of D.C. families. The full Limitations and Future Research sections beginning on page 12 detail these constraints.

Contents

Executive Summary	1
Background and Research Questions	2
Methodology	3
Findings: Awareness, Knowledge, and the Familiarity Gap	5
Findings: Language, Channels, and Barriers	7
Findings: Trust and Qualitative Themes	9
Recommendations for the SBOE	10
Limitations and Future Research	12
Conclusion	13
Appendix A · Data Notes and Survey Instrument	14
Notes	16
References	17

Figures

Figure 1 · Respondents by Ward of Residence	3
Figure 2 · Respondents by School Type	4
Figure 3 · Primary Household Language	4
Figure 4 · Awareness of the SBOE	5
Figure 5 · Self-Reported Familiarity vs. Actual Knowledge	6
Figure 6 · Ease of Understanding Policy, by Language Group	7
Figure 7 · Current Information Channels	8
Figure 8 · Barriers to Staying Informed	8
Figure 9 · Channels and Barriers by Household Language	8
Figure 10 · Trust in Government Education Information	9

Executive Summary

Washington, D.C. is home to one of the most fragmented education-governance structures in the country, with the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), D.C. Public Schools (DCPS), the Public Charter School Board (PCSB), and the D.C. State Board of Education (SBOE) each carrying distinct authority over the schools that District children attend (Council of the District of Columbia, 2007; D.C. State Board of Education, 2023). For families trying to follow the decisions that shape their children's education, that complexity is a communication problem before it is a policy problem.

This report presents findings from a 14-question survey administered in 2026 to 102 parents and guardians of school-age children across all eight wards of Washington, D.C. The study tested three hypotheses: (H1) that SBOE awareness would be lower in some wards than others; (H2) that non-English-speaking households would report greater difficulty understanding education policy information; and (H3) that a gap would exist between how familiar families *say* they are with the SBOE and what they actually know about it.

84.3% HAD HEARD OF THE SBOE	52.0% COULD IDENTIFY ITS ROLE	d = 0.67 LANGUAGE GAP (COHEN)	40.2% WROTE OPEN SUGGESTIONS
---	---	---	--

Three findings stand out. First, awareness of the SBOE is high (84.3%) and does not vary significantly by ward; H1 was not supported. Second, non-English-speaking households reported significantly lower ease of understanding policy than English-speaking households, Cohen's $d = 0.67$ (medium-to-large effect); H2 was strongly supported. Third, only 52.0% of respondents could correctly identify what the SBOE does; H3 was supported.

A fourth pattern, not hypothesized in advance, sharpens the rest. Non-English-speaking households were no less likely than English-speaking households to have heard of the SBOE (80.0% vs. 87.7%) or to identify its role correctly (51.1% vs. 52.6%); neither difference approaches significance. But they were three times as likely to report that they rarely receive policy information at all (42.2% vs. 14.0%, $p = .003$), and far less likely to hear about it from other parents (11.1% vs. 35.1%, $p = .010$). The gap is not in interest or awareness. It is in whether the information arrives.

The central recommendation: the SBOE should treat plain-language and multilingual communication as a structural responsibility, not a courtesy. The 41 open-ended responses converge on four themes: multilingual materials, trusted-messenger outreach, plain-language simplification, and proactive opt-in channels. The remainder of this report details the methodology, presents findings, sets out recommendations for the SBOE, and acknowledges the study's limits.

Background and Research Questions

■ A Fragmented Governance Landscape

The Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007 (PERAA) split the District's education governance among the Mayor, OSSE, DCPS, the Public Charter School Board, and the SBOE (Council of the District of Columbia, 2007). The SBOE is a body of nine elected members, one per ward plus one at-large, with statutory authority over state academic standards, graduation requirements, teacher qualifications, and the District's ESSA accountability plan. The SBOE's 2023 governance report described the arrangement as "confusing" to residents and called for "more communication, more opportunities to give feedback, and greater transparency" (D.C. State Board of Education, 2023, p. 4).

■ A Multilingual City, a Single Legal Duty

The Language Access Act of 2004 requires every D.C. agency with "major public contact" to provide interpretation and translation in the District's vital languages (Council of the District of Columbia, 2004). More than 117 languages are spoken in D.C. public schools, with Spanish and Amharic the most common non-English home languages (OSSE, 2022). A decade of evaluations has documented persistent gaps between the law and what families experience (Wilson & Svajlenka, 2014).

■ Engagement, Trust, and the Communication Problem

Family engagement research, from Epstein's (1995) "overlapping spheres" framework to Mapp and Bergman's (2019) dual-capacity model, treats clear two-way communication as a precondition for partnership. Trust adds a second layer: only 22% of Americans say they trust the federal government to do what is right most of the time, and trust in education has fallen alongside it (Pew Research Center, 2024). The SBOE's communication strategy operates inside that climate.

■ Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study asks three questions.

- **RQ1.** Does SBOE awareness vary by ward? *H1: yes; awareness will be lower in wards 7 and 8.*
- **RQ2.** Do non-English-speaking households report more difficulty understanding education policy information than English-speaking households? *H2: yes.*
- **RQ3.** Is there a gap between how familiar families *say* they are with the SBOE and what they actually know? *H3: yes; self-reported familiarity will exceed correct identification of the SBOE's role.*

Methodology

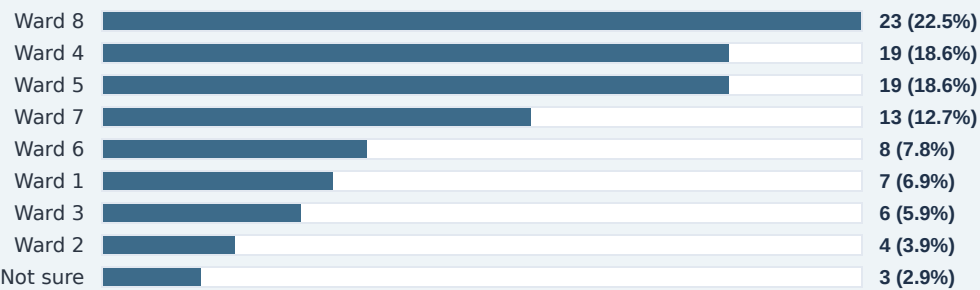
Instrument

The survey contained 14 questions across seven sections: consent, screening, demographics, SBOE awareness, communication channels, accessibility and barriers, and open-ended feedback. Question types included multiple choice, 5-point Likert scales, checkboxes, and one short-answer item. The screening question (Q1) restricted the sample to parents and guardians of a school-age child in D.C. The full instrument is in Appendix A.

Sample

The sample of 102 respondents covered all eight D.C. wards. The largest concentrations came from Ward 8 ($n = 23$, 22.5%), Ward 4 ($n = 19$, 18.6%), and Ward 5 ($n = 19$, 18.6%). Most respondents' children attended DCPS (52.0%) or a public charter (38.2%). For household language, 55.9% reported English, 22.5% Spanish, and 18.6% Amharic. The 18.6% Amharic share reflects this convenience sample and is not a population estimate (see Limitations, p. 12).

FIGURE 1
Respondents by Ward of Residence (N = 102)



Source: Author's survey, 2026. **Note:** Self-reported ward of residence (Q2). Three respondents did not name a ward and are kept as a separate category rather than dropped. Small cell sizes in Wards 2 and 3 limit power for ward-level inference (see p. 12).

Variables and Measures

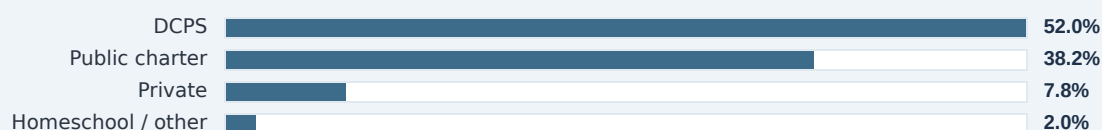
Nominal variables included ward (Q2), school type (Q3), household language (Q4), SBOE awareness (Q5), knowledge of role (Q7), expected channels (Q9), and trust in education information (Q12). Ordinal variables included self-reported familiarity (Q6, 1 to 5) and ease of understanding (Q10, 1 to 5). Two checkbox items (Q8, Q11) were recoded as binary variables for frequency analysis. A derived *language group* variable (English vs. non-English) from Q4 enabled the independent-samples *t*-test for H2.

Analytic Approach

H1 used a chi-squared test of independence with Cramér's V . H2 used an independent-samples t -test with Levene's test for equal variances; Cohen's (1992) thresholds interpret the effect. H3 was assessed descriptively by comparing Q6 with the share who correctly identified the SBOE's role (Q7). The 41 open-ended responses (Q13) were inductively coded.

FIGURE 2

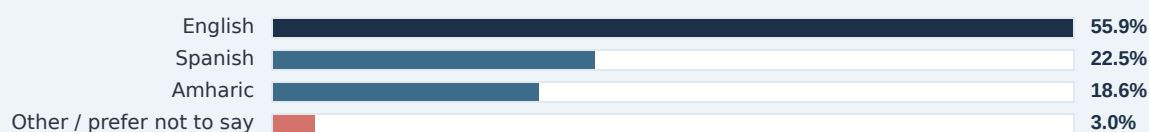
Respondents by School Type



Source: Author's survey, 2026 (Q3). **Note:** Percentages of $N = 102$. The DCPS / charter split approximates current District enrollment (Coffin & Cordes, 2024).

FIGURE 3

Primary Household Language



Source: Author's survey, 2026 (Q4). **Note:** The Amharic share reflects the convenience sample. OSSE confirms Spanish and Amharic are the District's two most common non-English home languages in K-12 enrollment (Office of the State Superintendent of Education, 2022), but no District- or federal-level tabulation reports an Amharic-speaker share at the magnitude observed here for D.C. parents specifically. Read as a survey finding, not a population estimate.

Ethics

Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The informed-consent page described the purpose, risks, benefits, and data-handling procedures of the study, and proceeding past it constituted consent. No personally identifying information was collected. The dataset will be retained by the author for the duration of the course and then destroyed.

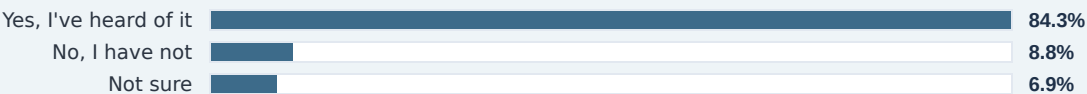
Findings: Awareness, Knowledge, and the Familiarity Gap

Most Families Have Heard of the SBOE

A large majority of respondents (84.3%) said they had heard of the D.C. State Board of Education before taking the survey. Only 8.8% said they had not, and 6.9% were unsure. On the 1–5 familiarity scale (Q6), the average score was 3.41, placing the typical respondent between "somewhat familiar" and "familiar."

FIGURE 4

Awareness of the D.C. State Board of Education



Source: Author's survey, 2026 (Q5). Note: N = 102.

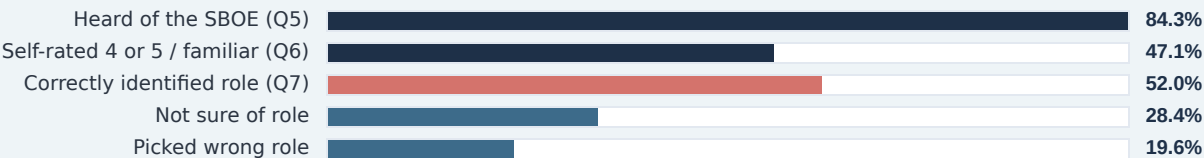
But Awareness Does Not Equal Knowledge

When asked to identify what the SBOE actually does (Q7), only 52.0% selected the correct answer, "sets education standards and advises on education policy." Another 28.4% said they were not sure, and 19.6% selected an incorrect option, split evenly between the belief that the SBOE runs individual schools and the belief that it manages DCPS budgets and hiring. The gap between the 84.3% who recognize the SBOE and the 52.0% who can describe what it does is, by itself, the clearest finding in this study. **H3 was supported.**

THE FAMILIARITY GAP. 84.3% of respondents had heard of the SBOE. Only 52.0% could correctly identify what it does. Nearly a third of D.C. parents recognize the name of the agency but cannot describe its role.

FIGURE 5

Self-Reported Familiarity vs. Actual Knowledge of the SBOE's Role



Source: Author's survey, 2026 (Q5–Q7). Note: The mean familiarity score on the 1–5 scale was 3.41 (between "somewhat familiar" and "familiar"). Coral bar marks correct identification of role.

FINDINGS, CONTINUED

Ward of Residence Is Not Significantly Associated With Awareness

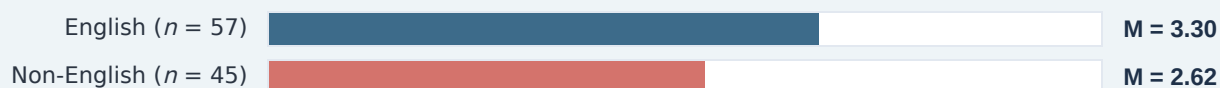
Awareness rates ranged from 75.0% in Ward 6 to 100% in Ward 1; Wards 7 and 8 showed 92.3% and 82.6%. The chi-squared test was not significant: $\chi^2(16, N = 102) = 8.26, p = .941$, Cramér's $V = .20$. The high overall awareness rate leaves little variance to detect, and small cell sizes in Wards 2 and 3 violate the conventional rule (Kim, 2017). **H1 was not supported in this sample.**

Non-English-Speaking Households Report Significantly More Difficulty

An independent-samples t -test compared ease of understanding (Q10, 1–5) across English-speaking ($n = 57$) and non-English-speaking ($n = 45$) households. English-speaking respondents reported significantly higher ease ($M = 3.30$) than non-English-speaking respondents ($M = 2.62$), $t(100) = 3.35, p = .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.67$ (medium-to-large effect). **H2 was strongly supported.**

FIGURE 6

Ease of Understanding Education Policy, by Household Language Group



Source: Author's survey, 2026 (Q10). **Note:** 1 = very difficult, 5 = very easy. $t(100) = 3.35, p = .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.67$ (medium-to-large effect). The gap is consistent with national evidence that schools' communication with English-learner families remains uneven a decade after the Language Access Act (D.C. Language Access Coalition & American University Washington College of Law Immigration Justice Clinic, 2012; Sugarman, 2021).

The pattern is consistent with prior evidence. The Language Access Coalition's 2012 audit of 258 LEP/NEP D.C. residents documented the same gap, and recent reviews identify the absence of multilingual family liaisons as a recurring failure mode (Sugarman, 2021).

Findings: Language, Channels, and Barriers

Where Families Get Information Today

Asked where they currently receive policy information (Q8), the top responses were "other" and "I rarely receive this information" (27 each), followed by word of mouth (25), social media (23), government websites (22), and school emails or community orgs (21 each). The prominence of "I rarely receive this information" is itself a finding.

FIGURE 7
Current Channels Through Which Families Receive Education Policy Information



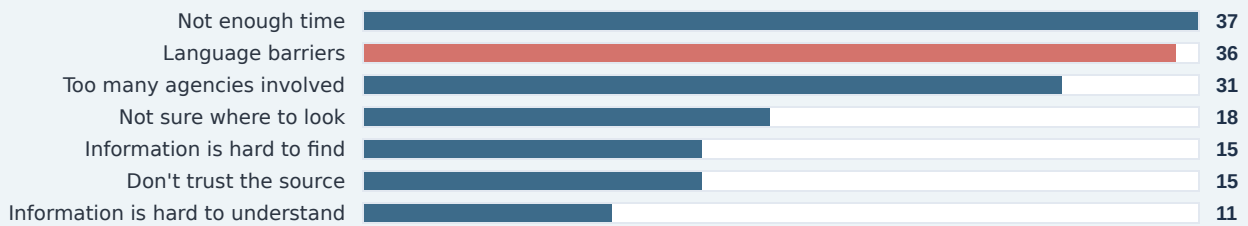
Source: Author's survey, 2026 (Q8). **Note:** Counts of $N = 102$. Multiple selections allowed. Coral bar flags the "I rarely receive this" response, a top-tier answer in its own right.

Where Families Expect to Find Policy Information

Asked where they would *expect* to find policy information (Q9), the most common answer was school communication (40.2%), followed by government websites (19.6%) and social media (16.7%). Families expect schools to be the primary conduit even when the policy originates elsewhere. That has direct operational implications for the SBOE, which does not run schools.

Barriers

Top barriers (Q11): not enough time (37), language barriers (36), too many agencies involved (31). Among non-English-speaking households, language barriers were cited at a substantially higher rate.

FIGURE 8**Top Reported Barriers to Staying Informed**

Source: Author's survey, 2026 (Q11). **Note:** Multiple selections allowed. Coral bar marks the language barrier, which is over-represented among non-English-speaking households.

I The Same City, Two Different Information Environments

Splitting the channel and barrier items by household language turns the language finding into something more specific than a gap in comprehension. These comparisons were not among the three hypotheses set before analysis, so they are reported as exploratory; each is a chi-squared test of the same kind used for H1.

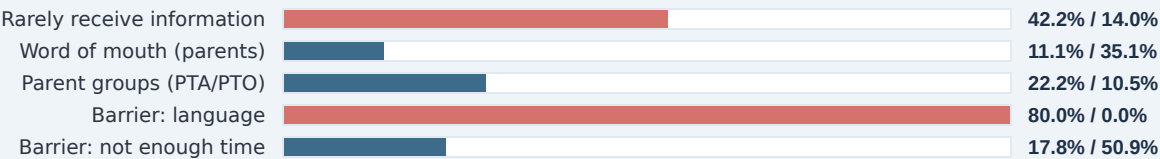
Start with what does *not* differ. Non-English-speaking households were as likely as English-speaking households to have heard of the SBOE (80.0% vs. 87.7%, $p = .43$) and just as likely to identify its role correctly (51.1% vs. 52.6%, $p = 1.00$). On the two measures that would indicate disengagement, the groups are indistinguishable.

What differs is delivery. Non-English-speaking respondents were three times as likely to say they rarely receive education policy information at all: 42.2% against 14.0%, $\chi^2(1, N = 102) = 8.87$, $p = .003$. Two-thirds of the respondents who chose that option chose nothing else, so it reads as a description of their situation rather than one box among several.

The channel that carries the difference is the informal one. Word of mouth from other parents was the most-used channel among English-speaking households (35.1%) and among the least-used in non-English-speaking households (11.1%), $\chi^2(1, N = 102) = 6.57, p = .010$. The network that distributes information for free, once an agency has reached anyone at all, is the network these families are least likely to sit inside. Formal school channels showed no such gap, and non-English-speaking respondents were somewhat *more* likely to name parent groups such as the PTA or PTO (22.2% vs. 10.5%), though that difference did not reach significance ($p = .18$).

The barriers diverge in the same direction. Among English-speaking respondents the leading obstacle was time, chosen by 50.9%; among non-English-speaking respondents only 17.8% named it, $\chi^2(1, N = 102) = 10.53, p = .001$. In their place stands language, named by 80.0% of non-English-speaking respondents and by none of the English-speaking ones. These are not two versions of the same problem at different intensities. They are different problems.

FIGURE 9
Selected Information Channels and Barriers, by Household Language



Source: Author's survey, 2026 (Q8, Q11). **Note:** Values are non-English-speaking / English-speaking, as a percentage of each group ($n = 45$ and $n = 57$). Bars are scaled to the non-English-speaking share. Coral marks the two items where the gap is both large and statistically significant. Exploratory comparisons, not pre-specified hypotheses.

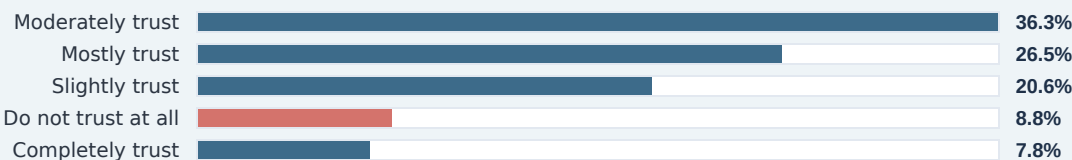
Findings: Trust and Qualitative Themes

Trust Is Moderate, Not Low, but There Is Room to Build

Trust (Q12, 1–5) was moderate overall: 36.3% moderately trust, 26.5% mostly trust, 20.6% slightly trust, 8.8% do not trust at all, 7.8% completely trust. The pattern matches Pew Research Center (2024): trust has eroded but not collapsed, and confidence is rebuildable when communication is clearer.

FIGURE 10

Trust in Government Education Information



Source: Author's survey, 2026 (Q12). Note: 1 = do not trust at all, 5 = completely trust. N = 102.

What Families Wrote, in Their Own Words

Of 102 respondents, 41 (40.2%) answered the optional open-ended item (Q13). Four themes emerged.

- **Multilingual communication.** Three respondents asked directly for another language: translated annual reports, information sessions in Spanish and Amharic, and robocalls in both languages before big decisions.
- **Meeting families where they are.** Respondents pointed to the social platforms and online forums they already check, plus community spaces like barbershops, salons, and churches, as the places they actually pay attention.
- **Plain language.** Respondents asked agencies to drop the jargon, write at a sixth-to-eighth-grade reading level, produce one-page summaries, and skip the acronyms.
- **Proactive, opt-in tools.** Text alerts, opt-in email updates by topic (graduation, special education, school choice), and short video explainers were the most common requests.

One respondent's comment summarized the broader sentiment: *"Explain what SBOE even is because most parents don't know."*

Recommendations for the SBOE

The findings translate into five practical recommendations for the D.C. State Board of Education and, through it, for OSSE, the Office of the Student Advocate, and partner community-based organizations. Each is anchored to an existing evidence base and, where possible, to an existing District statute or institutional vehicle.

1 • Treat Spanish and Amharic Communication as a Baseline, Not an Add-On

The SBOE should publish key communications, agendas, meeting summaries, annual reports, the family-engagement brief, and the ESSA accountability plan, in Spanish and Amharic, the two most common non-English home languages in D.C. public schools (Office of the State Superintendent of Education, 2022). This goes further than what the Language Access Act of 2004 already requires for "major public contact" agencies (Council of the District of Columbia, 2004), but the law sets a floor, not a ceiling, and the Coalition's audit makes clear that the floor is not consistently met (D.C. Language Access Coalition & American University Washington College of Law Immigration Justice Clinic, 2012). The dual-capacity framework (Mapp & Bergman, 2019) treats linguistically appropriate materials as a precondition for partnership.

2 • Meet Families Through the Channels They Already Use

The data show that word of mouth, social media, and community organizations are how many D.C. families currently receive information. The peer-reviewed literature on community-based outreach, from the foundational health-promotion-in-barbershops work (Releford et al., 2010) to recent reviews (Magnani, 2024; Mbazor et al., 2024), is unambiguous: trusted-messenger channels reach audiences that broadcast channels do not. The SBOE should partner with churches, barbershops and salons, afterschool programs, libraries, and parent groups, particularly east of the Anacostia River, where the District's broadband subscription rates remain lowest (Mironova & Spievack, 2019).

The channel data on page 8 carry a caution for how this recommendation is executed. Word of mouth is the most common channel among English-speaking families and one of the least common among non-English-speaking families, so an agency that reaches a handful of parents and trusts the news to spread will systematically miss the households with the largest comprehension gap. Peer diffusion cannot be the delivery plan for the group it reaches least. The partnerships above have to be resourced to deliver in Spanish and Amharic directly, rather than to seed a network and let it carry. The one channel where non-English-speaking respondents were *better* represented, formal parent groups such as the PTA and PTO, is the most concrete place to start.

3 • Write Everything in Plain Language

Even among English-speaking respondents, the average ease-of-understanding score was 3.30 of 5. Policy language is not particularly accessible to anyone. The Plain Writing Act of 2010 requires federal agencies to "use plain writing in every covered document" (U.S. Congress, 2010); the Plain Language Action and Information Network (n.d.) maintains the operational standards. The SBOE should adopt those standards explicitly, target a 6th–8th-grade reading level for family-facing materials, and produce one-page summaries of every major decision. Recent state-level work (National Governors Association, 2024) shows that this is achievable inside government, not just outside it.

4 • Build Opt-In, Proactive Channels

Open-ended responses repeatedly called for text alerts, topic-specific email subscriptions, and short video explainers. These are inexpensive to build and well-aligned with the trust-rebuilding strategies Pew Research Center (2024) identifies for younger and lower-trust populations. The SBOE already publishes annual reports and outreach updates through the Office of the Student Advocate (D.C. Office of the Student Advocate, n.d.); converting that one-way information into opt-in, topic-tailored push notifications is the next step.

5 · Run a Basic Civic-Education Campaign About the SBOE Itself

Nearly half of respondents either incorrectly identified the SBOE's role or could not identify it at all. Even families who recognize the name of the agency cannot, in many cases, describe why its work matters to them. The SBOE's own 2023 governance report acknowledged the same concern from the public-input side (D.C. State Board of Education, 2023). A short, sustained public-education campaign, built into school-enrollment season, the Pathways Guide, and the SBOE election cycle, would close the knowledge half of the familiarity gap directly.

RECOMMENDATIONS, CONTINUED

How These Recommendations Connect to the DC Pathways Library

The DC Pathways family resource library (22 documents in English and Spanish) is one operational answer to these recommendations. Each product is written at a 6th–8th grade reading level, published in Spanish in parallel, and distributed through the channels the survey identifies as the channels families actually use. The library is free, requires no login, and is built to be reproduced by the SBOE, OSSE, and partner organizations.

This study is the empirical case for an intervention that is already partly built. The remaining work is institutional adoption by the SBOE, OSSE, and the D.C. Council.

Equity Considerations

The findings underline an equity concern. The two groups least well-served by current SBOE communication, non-English-speaking households and families east of the Anacostia River, are also the groups facing the largest gaps in school outcomes, broadband access, and post-secondary opportunity (Coffin & Cordes, 2024; Mironova & Spievack, 2019). A strategy that does not prioritize those groups will widen the gaps.

A Note on Cost

None of the five recommendations requires new authority. Translation, plain-language editing, community-messenger partnerships, and opt-in distribution lists already exist in District agencies. The marginal cost is staff time and a coordinated standard. The marginal benefit is closing the gap between 84% recognizing the SBOE and 52% correctly identifying its role.

Limitations and Future Research

■ Sample and Design Constraints

The 102-respondent sample was sufficient to detect H2's language effect but underpowered for H1's ward-level chi-squared test (Wards 2 and 3 violated the cell-size rule). Convenience sampling further restricts generalizability; respondents who chose this online survey may be more engaged than the broader population (Andrade, 2020).

■ Mode Effects

Online distribution likely under-samples families without reliable broadband, disproportionately Wards 5, 7, and 8 (Mironova & Spievack, 2019). A future round should pair the online instrument with paper-and-pencil distribution and in-language phone interviewing.

■ Population-Representativeness of the Language Breakdown

The 18.6% Amharic share exceeds any District- or federal-level tabulation of Amharic-speaking D.C. parents. Estimates of D.C. metro's Ethiopian community range from ~40,000 (ACS) to 200,000+ (community estimates). The Amharic share here is a feature of the sample, not a population estimate.

■ Cross-Sectional Design

This is a single-time-point study. It cannot speak to how awareness, understanding, or communication preferences shift over time, in response to specific events, or across enrollment seasons. A longitudinal panel would be the appropriate follow-up.

■ Future Research

- **Stratified follow-up.** A larger survey with proportional sampling across all eight wards, with oversampling in Wards 7 and 8, would provide the power needed to rigorously test geographic disparities.
- **Qualitative depth.** Focus groups and interviews with Spanish- and Amharic-speaking families would surface the specific reasons behind the language effect that this survey can only register.
- **Pre/post evaluation.** A natural experiment comparing communication outcomes before and after the SBOE adopts the five recommendations above would quantify the effect of the intervention.
- **Cross-agency comparison.** Replicating the instrument for OSSE, DCPS, and the PCSB would isolate which parts of the awareness and knowledge gap belong to the SBOE specifically versus the governance structure as a whole.

Conclusion

The question that drove this study was whether the SBOE's communication actually reaches the families it serves, and whether, when it does reach them, those families can understand it. The 102-respondent answer is mixed but specific.

Awareness is not the problem. 84.3% of D.C. parents and guardians in this sample have heard of the SBOE. Awareness does not vary significantly by ward. The agency's name is recognized.

Knowledge is the problem. Only 52.0% of respondents could identify what the SBOE does. A quarter were unsure; another quarter were wrong. The agency's name is recognized; its role is not.

And language is the equity problem, though not in the way a deficit story would predict. Non-English-speaking families in this sample were just as likely to have heard of the SBOE and just as likely to know what it does. What separated them was delivery: three times as likely to say policy information rarely reaches them, a third as likely to hear about it from other parents, and significantly more likely to report difficulty understanding it, with a medium-to-large effect size. A decade of District- and national-level evidence finds the same pattern. The Language Access Act of 2004 set a legal floor that is, by the testimony of families themselves, not consistently met.

The 41 open-ended responses tell the SBOE what to do: write in Spanish and Amharic, write in plain language, meet families in the channels they already trust, and push information out rather than waiting for it to be pulled. None of this is novel. All of it is overdue.

The deeper point is that "communication" is not a soft-skill add-on to the governance work the SBOE already does. In a District where four agencies share authority over public schools, communication *is* governance. When 32 percentage points separate the share of parents who recognize the SBOE from the share who can describe its role, that gap is itself a governance failure, one with a known set of fixes.

The DC Pathways library is one operational answer to those fixes. The broader answer belongs to the SBOE, OSSE, and the D.C. Council. The families whose responses populate this report have already named the work.

Appendix A · Data Notes and Survey Instrument

■ Data Notes

The survey was administered online via Google Forms between February and April 2026. It was shared across the social media accounts, online forums, and community-partner platforms where D.C. families already gather. The instrument was available in English and Spanish; an Amharic translation was offered on request but was not produced as a standalone form for this round (a limit; see p. 12). The data were exported to a spreadsheet, cleaned for screening failures and duplicates, and analyzed using descriptive statistics, a chi-squared test of independence, and an independent-samples *t*-test, with Cramér's *V*, Levene's test, and Cohen's *d* reported as appropriate (Cohen, 1988, 1992; Funder & Ozer, 2019; Kim, 2017; McHugh, 2013).

■ Survey Instrument (Summary of 14 Questions)

Section 1 · Informed Consent

Respondents reviewed a description of the study, including its purpose, eligibility requirements, risks, benefits, and data-handling procedures. Proceeding past the consent page indicated voluntary, informed consent.

Section 2 · Screening

Q1. "Are you a parent or guardian of a school-age child living in Washington, D.C.?" (yes / no). Respondents who answered "no" were routed to a thank-you page and excluded.

Section 3 · Demographics

Q2. "Which ward do you live in?" (Wards 1–8 or not sure). **Q3.** "What type of school does your child primarily attend?" (DCPS, public charter, private, homeschool, other). **Q4.** "What is the primary language spoken in your household?" (English, Spanish, Amharic, another language, prefer not to say).

Section 4 · SBOE Awareness

Q5. "Before today, had you heard of the D.C. State Board of Education?" (yes, no, not sure). **Q6.** "How familiar are you with the D.C. State Board of Education?" (1 = not familiar at all to 5 = very familiar). **Q7.** "Which of the following best describes what the D.C. State Board of Education does?" (four options: sets education standards and advises on education policy [correct]; runs individual schools; sets the DCPS operating budget and hires staff; not sure).

Section 5 · Communication Channels

Q8. "Where do you currently receive information about education policy in D.C.? (Select all that apply)", nine options including word of mouth, social media, school emails or newsletters, government websites, community organizations, public meetings or events, news media, "other," and "I rarely receive this information." **Q9.** "Where would you *expect* to find information about a policy change?" (single-select: school communication, local government website, social media, news media, community organization, other).

Section 6 · Accessibility and Barriers

Q10. "How easy or difficult is it to understand the education policy information you do receive?" (1 = very difficult to 5 = very easy). **Q11.** "What are the biggest barriers to staying informed about D.C. education policy? (Select all that apply)", nine options including not enough time, language barriers, too many agencies involved, hard to find, don't trust the source, not sure where to look, and "other." **Q12.** "How much do you trust government education information in D.C.?" (1 = do not trust at all to 5 = completely trust).

Section 7 · Final Questions

Q13 (optional, open-ended). "What is one thing the D.C. State Board of Education could do to make education policy information easier for your family to access and understand?" **Q14** (optional). "Where did you find this survey?"

■ Coding of Qualitative Responses

The 41 responses to Q13 were inductively coded by the author across two passes. The first pass produced an open-coded list of distinct suggestions; the second pass collapsed those into the four themes presented on page 8 (multilingual communication, meeting families where they are, plain language, and proactive opt-in channels). Direct quotations in the body of the report were drawn verbatim and minimally edited for typos only.

■ Statistical Software and Assumptions

Analyses were conducted in Google Sheets with confirmation in JASP 0.18. The chi-squared test for H1 was run with nine ward categories, the eight wards plus the three respondents who did not name one, crossed with the three awareness categories of Q5; the small-cell rule (Kim, 2017) was checked and is reported as a violated assumption in the Limitations section. The independent-samples *t*-test for H2 was run after confirming approximate normality in each language group (skewness and kurtosis within ± 1) and equal variances via Levene's test. The Cohen's *d* effect size is reported alongside the conventional *p*-value because effect sizes, not significance levels, should drive the interpretation of a sample this size (Cohen, 1992; Funder & Ozer, 2019).

■ Replication

The full anonymized response file and the analysis script will be made available on request to the course instructor for the duration of the academic term. The instrument is reproducible in any survey platform without modification.

Notes

- ¹ The District's post-PERAA governance structure is documented at sboe.dc.gov/page/roles and in the SBOE's 2023 governance report, which describes the arrangement as one that District residents experience as confusing and recommends structural reforms (D.C. State Board of Education, 2023).
- ² The Language Access Act of 2004 requires every D.C. agency with "major public contact" to provide interpretation and translation in the District's vital languages (Council of the District of Columbia, 2004). The Office of Human Rights operates the Language Access Program; 2014 amendments extended coverage to D.C. Public Charter Schools.
- ³ The 18.6% Amharic share in this sample exceeds any published population tabulation for D.C. parents. The widely repeated "largest Ethiopian community outside Ethiopia" claim is sourced primarily to community organizations and journalism; published estimates range from ~40,000 (American Community Survey) to 200,000+ (community estimates) (District of Columbia Public Library, 2024; Schwartz, 2016). The figure is reported here as a finding of this survey only.
- ⁴ Effect-size interpretation follows Cohen (1992), with Funder and Ozer's (2019) more conservative thresholds reported as a contemporary check.
- ⁵ The "barbershop paradigm" for trusted-messenger outreach is well-documented in the public-health literature (Magnani, 2024; Mbazor et al., 2024; Releford et al., 2010) and is directly translatable to education-policy outreach in D.C.'s Black wards.
- ⁶ Where this report invokes the DC Pathways library, the products referenced (DC Education Pathways Guide, At-a-Glance handout, FAQ documents, interactive checklists, schools directory, sample letters and templates, comparison charts, quick reference cards, timelines) are all published in English and Spanish at the project repository and are licensed for reuse and adaptation by the SBOE and partner agencies.
- ⁷ All web sources cited in this report were verified between April and May 2026. Government and think-tank URLs occasionally change; updated locations are usually findable through the publishing organization's archive.

References

GOVERNANCE, STATUTE, AND DISTRICT CONTEXT

- Coffin, C., & Cordes, S. A. (2024). *State of D.C. schools, 2022–23: Challenges to pandemic recovery in a new normal*. D.C. Policy Center. <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/state-of-dc-schools-2022-23/>
- Council of the District of Columbia. (2004). *Language Access Act of 2004*, D.C. Law 15-167. D.C. Law Library. <https://code.dccouncil.gov/us/dc/council/laws/15-167>
- Council of the District of Columbia. (2007). *Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007*, D.C. Law 17-9. D.C. Law Library. <https://code.dccouncil.gov/us/dc/council/laws/17-9>
- D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute. (n.d.). *How DC funds its public schools*. <https://dcfpi.org/all/how-dc-funds-its-public-schools/>
- D.C. Office of Human Rights. (n.d.). *About the Language Access Program*. Government of the District of Columbia. <https://ohr.dc.gov/page/about-language-access-program-OHR>
- D.C. Office of the Student Advocate. (n.d.). *Annual & quarterly reports*. D.C. State Board of Education. <https://sboe.dc.gov/page/annual-quarterly-reports>
- D.C. State Board of Education. (n.d.). *About SBOE*. Government of the District of Columbia. <https://sboe.dc.gov/page/about-sboe>
- D.C. State Board of Education. (n.d.). *Outreach and advocacy*. <https://sboe.dc.gov/page/outreach-and-advocacy>
- D.C. State Board of Education. (n.d.). *Roles and responsibilities*. Government of the District of Columbia. <https://sboe.dc.gov/page/roles>
- D.C. State Board of Education. (2023). *Education governance report: Recommendations and considerations*. Government of the District of Columbia. https://sboe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/sboe/page_content/attachments/2023-03-10-Embargoed-Education-Governance-Report-noltr.pdf
- National Research Council. (2015). *An evaluation of the public schools of the District of Columbia: Reform in a changing landscape*. National Academies Press. <https://www.nationalacademies.org/read/21743/chapter/4>

LANGUAGE ACCESS AND MULTILINGUAL FAMILIES

- D.C. Language Access Coalition & American University Washington College of Law Immigration Justice Clinic. (2012). *Access denied: The unfulfilled promise of the D.C. Language Access Act*. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/language_portal/Access%20Denied-%20The%20Unfulfilled%20Promise%20of%20the%20D.C.%20Language%20Access%20Act.pdf
- District of Columbia Public Library. (2024). *Documenting the Ethiopian communities of DC*. <https://www.dclibrary.org/documenting-ethiopian-communities-dc>
- Migration Policy Institute. (2025). *State immigration data profile: District of Columbia, language*. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/data/state-profiles/state/language/DC>
- Office of the State Superintendent of Education. (n.d.). *English learner policy and programs*. Government of the District of Columbia. <https://osse.dc.gov/page/english-learner-policy-and-programs>
- Office of the State Superintendent of Education. (2022). *English learners in DC: 2021–22 school year data*. Government of the District of Columbia. [https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/English%20Learners%20in%20DC%2021-22%20School%20Year%20Data%20\(1\).pdf](https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/English%20Learners%20in%20DC%2021-22%20School%20Year%20Data%20(1).pdf)

REFERENCES, CONTINUED

- Schwartz, M. S. (2016, April 21). *Why is there such a large Ethiopian population in the Washington region?* WAMU. https://wamu.org/story/16/04/21/how_did_the_dc_region_become_home_to_the_largest_population_of_ethiopians_in_the_us/
- Sugarman, J. (2021). *Educating English learners during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Migration Policy Institute. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-english-learners-covid-19-final.pdf>
- Sugarman, J., & Geary, C. (2018). *English learners and the Every Student Succeeds Act*. Migration Policy Institute. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/EL-Insight_Legal-Framwork_Final.pdf
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *Language use in the United States: 2019* (American Community Survey Reports, ACS-50). <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2022/acs/acs-50.pdf>
- Wilson, J. H., & Svajlenka, N. P. (2014). *Ten years of language access in Washington, DC*. Urban Institute. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/22536/413097-ten-years-of-language-access-in-washington-dc_0.pdf

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT, TRUST, AND PLAIN-LANGUAGE COMMUNICATION

- Cuevas, S. (2024). Cultural meaning of education and parents' involvement in education: Perspectives of immigrant Latinos. *Family Relations*, 73(3). <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/fare.12940>
- Edelman. (2024). *2024 Edelman Trust Barometer: Global report*. https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2024-02/2024%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Global%20Report_FINAL.pdf
- Epstein, J. L. (1995). School/family/community partnerships: Caring for the children we share. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(9), 701–712.
- Epstein, J. L. (2024). Theory of overlapping spheres of influence on school, family, and community partnerships: Reflections and extensions. In *Handbook on families and education* (Ch. 2). Edward Elgar. <https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollchap/book/9781035300686/chapter2.xml>
- Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. <https://sedl.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf>
- Latinos for Education. (2024). *Embracing the power of Latino parents and educator engagement: New survey sheds light on barriers for Latino families*. <https://www.latinosforeducation.org/2024/02/01/embracing-the-power-of-latino-parents-and-educator-engagement-new-survey-sheds-light-on-barriers-for-latino-families/>
- Mapp, K. L., & Bergman, E. (2019). *Dual capacity-building framework for family-school partnerships (Version 2)*. <https://www.dualcapacity.org/>
- Mapp, K. L., & Kuttner, P. J. (2013). *Partners in education: A dual capacity-building framework for family-school partnerships*. SEDL & U.S. Department of Education. <https://sedl.org/pubs/framework/DualCapacityFramework.pdf>
- National Governors Association. (2024). *Using plain language for effective health communication*. <https://www.nga.org/news/commentary/using-plain-language-for-effective-health-communication/>
- Partnership for Public Service. (2025). *The state of public trust in government 2025*. <https://ourpublicservice.org/publications/the-state-of-public-trust-in-government-2025/>
- Pew Research Center. (2024, June 24). *Americans' trust in federal government and attitudes toward it*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/06/24/americans-trust-in-federal-government-and-attitudes-toward-it/>
- Pew Research Center. (2024, October 17). *5 ways to rebuild trust in government*. <https://www.pew.org/en/trend/archive/fall-2024/5-ways-to-rebuild-trust-in-government>

REFERENCES, CONTINUED

- Plain Language Action and Information Network. (n.d.). *Federal plain language guidelines*. <https://www.plainlanguage.gov/>
- Public Health Communications Collaborative. (2023). *Plain language for public health: A guide for communicators*. https://publichealthcollaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/PHCC_Plain-Language-for-Public-Health.pdf
- U.S. Congress. (2010). *Plain Writing Act of 2010*, Pub. L. No. 111-274, 124 Stat. 2861. <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/PLAW-111publ274>
- U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2022). *Family engagement to support immigrant and multilingual families*. <https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/documents/family-community/support-immigrant-multilingual-families.pdf>

DIGITAL DIVIDE

- Mironova, Y., & Spievack, N. (2019). *New data reveal digital divides across DC neighborhoods*. Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/new-data-reveal-digital-divides-across-dc-neighborhoods>
- Office of the Chief Technology Officer. (n.d.). *DC-CAN FAQs*. Government of the District of Columbia. <https://dcnet.dc.gov/page/dc-can-faqs>
- Pew Research Center. (2024, January 31). *Americans' use of mobile technology and home broadband*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2024/01/31/americans-use-of-mobile-technology-and-home-broadband/>

TRUSTED-MESSENGER COMMUNITY COMMUNICATION

- Magnani, J. W. (2024). The barbershop paradigm: Community engagement for cardiovascular prevention. *American Heart Journal Plus*. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11252612/>
- Mbazor, K. C., et al. (2024). ShopTalk, Barbers as partners in health promotion. *American Heart Journal Plus: Cardiology Research and Practice*. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11245761/>
- Releford, B. J., Frencher, S. K., & Yancey, A. K. (2010). Health promotion in barbershops: Balancing outreach and research in African American communities. *Journal of the National Medical Association*, 102(4). <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4244298/>

METHODOLOGY

- Andrade, C. (2020). The inconvenient truth about convenience and purposive samples. *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 43(1), 86–88. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0253717620977000>
- Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Cohen, J. (1992). A power primer. *Psychological Bulletin*, 112(1), 155–159. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.112.1.155>
- Funder, D. C., & Ozer, D. J. (2019). Evaluating effect size in psychological research: Sense and nonsense. *Advances in Methods and Practices in Psychological Science*, 2(2), 156–168. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2515245919847202>
- Kim, H.-Y. (2017). Statistical notes for clinical researchers: Chi-squared test and Fisher's exact test. *Restorative Dentistry & Endodontics*, 42(2), 152–155. <https://doi.org/10.5395/rde.2017.42.2.152>
- McHugh, M. L. (2013). The chi-square test of independence. *Biochemia Medica*, 23(2), 143–149. <https://doi.org/10.11613/BM.2013.018>
- Stratton, S. J. (2021). Population research: Convenience sampling strategies. *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine*, 36(4), 373–374. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049023X21000649>

DC Pathways

Family Communication Research Report.

Every student. Every pathway. Every opportunity.

Thank you for reading. This report was built to make the case, in data, that the families this system is for can find, understand, and trust the information that shapes their children's school years. The findings here are a starting point, not a destination.

CITATION

Algarin, N. (2026). *D.C. families and education policy communication: A survey research report* [Unpublished undergraduate research report]. School of Communication, American University.

