The New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) has made it a top priority to create strong partnerships with families. Working together with families is the most effective way to achieve our common goals of preparing students for college and careers and improving our 1,700 public schools. Our best principals recognize the value of these partnerships and engage parents in making important decisions about school communities. And because parents know best when schools are working well and when they aren’t, in New York City, we include their feedback in our school accountability system.

Nathan Favero and Kenneth J. Meier’s article, “Evaluating Urban Public Schools: Parents, Teachers, and State Assessments,” supports our approach: it finds that parent feedback corresponds with test scores, attendance rates, and other administrative measures of school quality that the NYCDOE uses for accountability. The authors also conclude that parents’ evaluations tap aspects of school performance beyond the information that we are able to capture through test scores, classroom observations, and other data streams.

These results confirm what educators have long known: parents offer a unique perspective on what works and what doesn’t work in schools. Without our parents’ feedback, New York City’s school evaluations would be incomplete. Indeed, the NYC School Survey’s “convergent validity” is the result of the NYCDOE’s efforts both to engage parents as critical partners and to make school performance data accessible and understandable. To that end, we have implemented practices to reduce the factors that Favero and Meier cite as creating a divergence between administrative records and parent opinions.

First, Favero and Meier suggest that some parents may not be familiar with administrative records of school performance and may not attach value to particular performance measures. One of our central accountability tools—the NYC Progress Report, which NYCDOE produces annually and publishes on our website—provides information to parents and school communities about schools’ strengths and weaknesses. Progress Reports evaluate schools based on student progress, student performance, school environment, and (for high schools) college and career readiness and assign a letter grade (A–F) to each area as well as an overall grade. A Progress Report Overview summarizes the report categories and overall results for families, answers frequently asked questions, and directs parents to additional resources.

The NYCDOE also conducts a Quality Review of our schools. Over a two- or three-day period, an experienced educator visits classrooms; talks with school leaders, teachers, students, and parents; and uses a rubric to evaluate how well the school is organized to support student learning. Parents are encouraged to review the Quality Review ratings, which are featured prominently on each school’s Progress Report, as well as the Quality Review Reports published on our website, which include comprehensive qualitative feedback on each school. Through these tools, the NYCDOE is educating parents about the value of our performance measures and how to use them to select a school that best meets their child’s individual needs. With school options that include screened schools, charter schools, and traditional large high schools, New York City families are highly motivated to compare schools based on the many data points available to them.

Second, Favero and Meier suggest that people may differ in how they interpret school performance records. Recognizing that parents may have difficulty understanding raw school performance data, we designed the Progress Report to provide context around each of its metrics by displaying a school’s performance relative to “peer” schools serving similar students and to all schools citywide. Category grades help parents understand the areas in which a school is performing well and those in which it needs improvement.

The NYCDOE also makes it a top priority to provide the context for parents as they make decisions about which school is best for their child. In 2013, the NYCDOE initiated the School Search Tool, which helps parents compare schools and select the one that best meets their child’s individual needs. The School Search Tool provides parents with comprehensive data about each school, including test scores, attendance rates, graduation rates, and other performance measures. Additionally, the School Search Tool includes qualitative feedback from parents and educators, which helps parents understand the school culture and compare the strengths and weaknesses of different schools.

Parents are encouraged to use the School Search Tool to make informed decisions about which school is best for their child. The NYCDOE also provides parents with additional resources, such as school tours, parent workshops, and one-on-one appointments with school staff, to help parents find the school that best meets their child’s individual needs.
School survey results play another important role: they help support a dialogue about how to make the school a better place to learn. Each school receives a comprehensive survey report that provides specific formative data points that channel parents' feedback into information that school communities can use to improve. For example, survey reports inform schools of parents' satisfaction with communication with their child's school, the quality of courses offered, and supports provided to their child to help him or her succeed.

Favero and Meier conclude that "ordinary school parents are capable of evaluating public schools based on actual school characteristics." We strongly agree with this statement but would take it a step further: parents are uniquely positioned to provide meaningful feedback on their child's school and education. The NYCDOE will continue to establish and strengthen partnerships with families by soliciting their feedback and involving them as we prepare our 1.1 million students for college and twenty-first century jobs.