



Department of  
**Education**

# Parent-Teacher Engagement Pilot Program

## Year One Report

Tennessee Department of Education | July 2019



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# Introduction

T.C.A. § 49-6-308 calls for the Tennessee Department of Education to establish in no fewer than two public schools a three-year pilot program to improve parent-teacher engagement in any grade from kindergarten through grade two (K-2). In response to this directive, the department developed the Family Academic Support Team (FAST) pilot program. This report contains information and data from year one of the pilot program, including:

- The number and percentage of parents who participated in the program and how many steps of the program they completed;
- The number and percentage of students meeting any academic goals established by the student, parent, and teacher as part of an initial parent-teacher conference or meeting;
- The academic performance goals met by students whose parents participated in the program compared with the academic performance goals met by students whose parents did not participate in the program;
- Data collected from a parent survey designed to gauge parent satisfaction with the program and to obtain suggestions from parents for ways to improve the program or to improve parent-teacher engagement; and
- Data collected from a teacher and principal survey designed to gauge teacher and principal satisfaction with the program and to obtain suggestions from teachers and principals for ways to improve the program or to improve parent-teacher engagement.

## Research

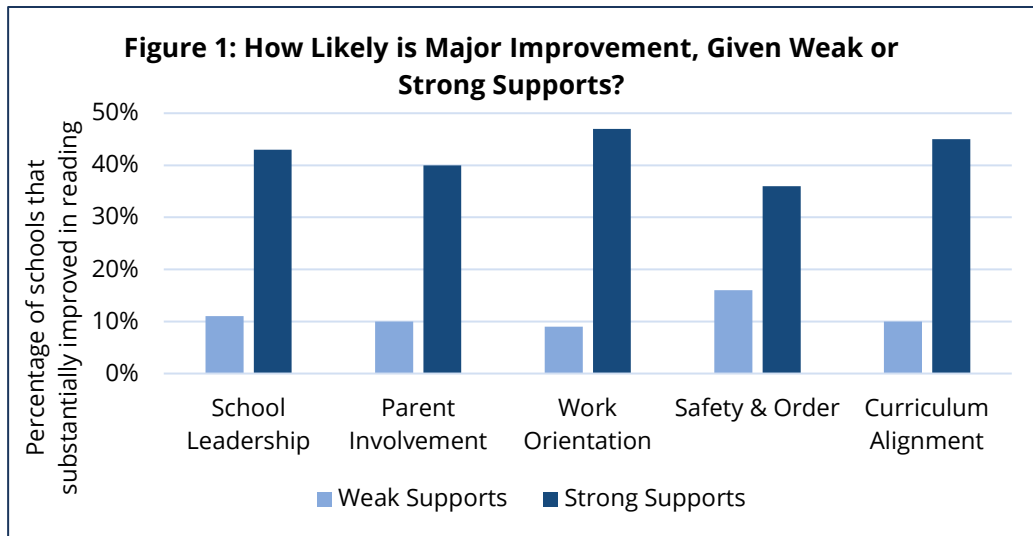
Ongoing research demonstrates the importance of family engagement in education. Multiple studies show that when families are engaged, students have fewer behavioral problems, stronger academic performance, and better social skills than students whose families are not engaged in their school. Students with involved families, no matter their income or background, are more likely to attend school regularly, enroll in higher-level programs, pass their classes, earn credits, graduate, and go on to postsecondary education.<sup>1</sup>

Additional research shows that engaging families is important to overall school improvement as well. One study found that schools made substantial improvement when they developed and maintained strong ties to families and the community.<sup>2</sup> Such ties increased four-fold the likelihood that the school would make significant gains in reading and math and included being knowledgeable about community issues and families' home cultures, inviting families to observe in the classroom, using community resources, working with families as partners to improve learning, and responding to families' concerns about their children (see Figure 1).

*Students with involved families, no matter their income or background, are more likely to attend school regularly, enroll in higher-level programs, pass their classes, earn credits, graduate, and go on to postsecondary education*

<sup>1</sup> Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

<sup>2</sup> Bryk, Anthony S. et al. (2010). Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.



Research also strongly suggests that engaging families in the following ways can have a significant, sustained, and positive impact on student learning:

- Building personal relationships and mutual understanding with families via class meetings, informal one-on-one conversations, and home visits;
- Sharing data with families about student skill levels;
- Modeling high-impact teaching practices such as hands-on reading and math activities so families can use them at home; and
- Listening to families’ ideas about their children’s interests and challenges, and using this input to differentiate instruction.<sup>3</sup>

Further, integrating such family engagement practices into instructional programs has been found to accelerate and sustain positive student outcomes, especially when the practices are combined. One study found that when teachers added outreach to families to highly effective teaching strategies, student’s reading and math scores improved at a 50 percent faster rate in reading and a 40 percent faster rate in math.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Henderson, Mapp, Johnson and Davies (2007) *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family School Partnerships*. NY: The New Press.

<sup>4</sup> Westat and Policy Studies Associates (2001) *The Longitudinal Evaluation of School Change and Performance in Title I Schools, Volume I: Executive Summary*, Washington, DC: US Department of Education, Office of the Deputy Secretary, Planning and Evaluation Service

# Pilot Program Development and Implementation

Utilizing the strong research supporting families’ engagement in education as well as promising practices within the field, the department created the Family Academic Support Team (FAST) pilot program. Launched in the 2018-19 school year, the FAST pilot is currently being implemented in three districts across the state (see Figure 2).

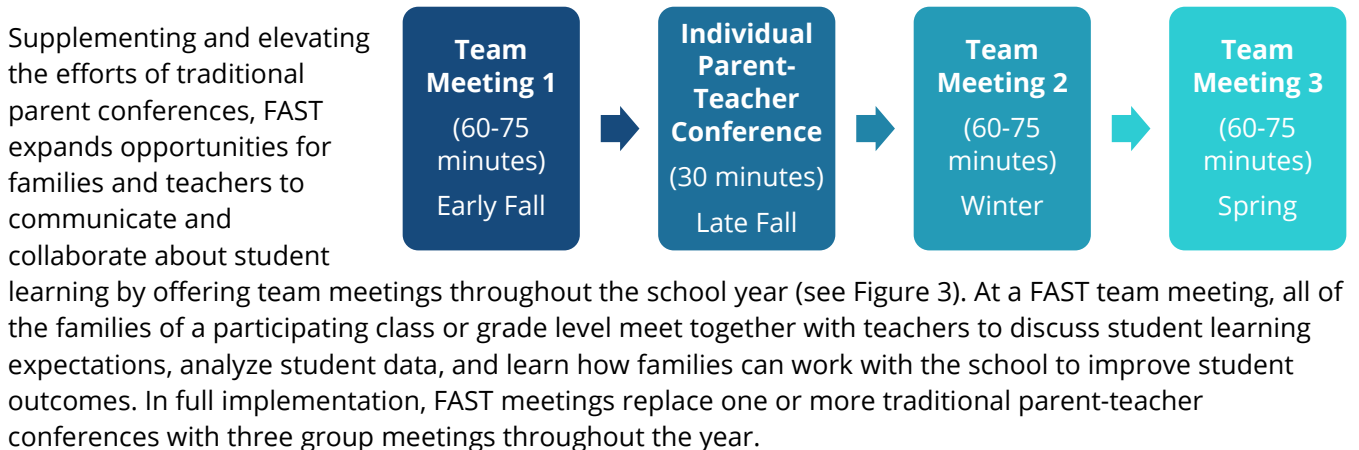
**Figure 2: Participating Districts and Schools**

District Name	Grand Division	Community Type	Participating School Name	2018 School Designation	% Students Eligible for Free/ Reduced-Price Lunch	Participating Grade Level(s)
Bedford	Middle	Rural	Eakin Elementary School	None	98.5%	Kindergarten
Bedford	Middle	Rural	South Side Elementary	Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (ATSI) School	83.9%	Kindergarten
Loudon	East	Suburban	Philadelphia Elementary School	Reward School	58.5%	Kindergarten
Madison	West	Urban	Lincoln Elementary School	Priority School	100%	Kindergarten

## The FAST Model

Based on the Academic Parent Teacher Team (APTT) engagement model developed by Dr. Maria Paredes, FAST is grounded in the idea that schools thrive when families and teachers work together to maximize student learning inside and outside of the classroom.

**Figure 3: The FAST Model**



FAST meetings can be conducted in about one hour and can take place as part of an event the school is already hosting, such as an open house or curriculum night. Each FAST meeting includes the following elements: 1) developing meaningful relationships with families, 2) focusing on grade-level learning skills, 3) modeling home learning activities, 4) practicing home learning activities, and 5) setting short-term learning goals.

### **FAST Element One: Develop Meaningful Relationships**

Relationships are at the core of everything a school does. The relationship between school leaders, teachers, students, and families can make or break the culture of a school. Bearing that in mind, each FAST meeting begins with an icebreaker or team-building activity. These opening activities encourage families and teachers to interact with each other and help facilitate the development of strong, trusting relationships that lead to collaboration and mutual support beyond the classroom.

### **FAST Element Two: Focus on Grade-Level Learning Skills**

The next step in the FAST meeting process involves sharing information and data with families on important student learning skills. Teachers provide families with information on grade-level learning expectations and explain the reading and math skills where students need the most help. Going in-depth with these important learning expectations helps families gain a better understanding of these skills and how they can be applied to support student learning. Teachers share how these skills are measured and provide data to show each family how their child is achieving in comparison to their peers.

To maintain confidentiality, student names are not used. Rather, each student is assigned a number which is represented on a data chart. Not only does sharing such data increase families' knowledge and understanding of grade level learning expectations, it also helps to cultivate a shared responsibility for student learning and growth.

### **FAST Element Three: Model Home Learning Activities**

Next, teachers select one or two learning strategies that families can easily implement at home to help their child achieve. For example, a kindergarten teacher focusing on letter name recognition may share with families a homemade alphabet memory game or BINGO type activity. The teacher demonstrates the activity and provides families with all of the materials and supplies they need to implement the activity at home.

### **FAST Element Four: Practice Home Learning Activities**

Adult learning theory establishes that adult learners must play an active role in the learning process.<sup>5</sup> In order to come away from a FAST meeting with the capacity and confidence to follow through, it is crucial that families are given the opportunity to practice the activities that teachers want them to implement at home. This involves pairing families up, allowing one person to play the role of the student as the other practices the approach just modeled by the teacher. Families then switch roles until everyone has had a chance to practice.

### **FAST Element Five: Set Short-Term Learning Goals**

In this step, families are coached to set realistic goals for their student. For example, a family whose Kindergarten student only knows half of the upper and lower case letters, may set a goal that the student

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<sup>5</sup> Knowles, M. et al. (1984). *Andragogy in Action. Applying Modern Principles of Adult Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

will know an additional 15 letters by the next FAST meeting. This allows families to take an active role in setting high expectations and also provides them with the support they need to monitor their student's growth and achievement. Each family creates a goal sheet to take home and teachers record each goal, enabling them to revisit goals with the family at the next FAST meeting. Following up with families on established goals is crucial. All growth should be celebrated, and families need to be able to see that the work they have been doing at home is having an impact in the classroom.

## ***Year One Project Timeline***

In July 2018, districts were invited to apply for the pilot program. The department selected participating districts based on a variety of factors, including community type, number of economically disadvantaged students, and district capacity to support the project. Once selected, the department worked closely with district and school staff over the summer to provide training and support for the beginning stages of planning. The department created a suite of tools and resources to help staff efficiently implement the program, and training was conducted in person and via webinar. District and school staff were given the opportunity to ask questions, brainstorm ideas, and explore applicable resources.

Once the 2018-19 school year was underway, school staff worked to select event dates, select focus student learning skills, collect relevant student data, create take-home activities, and develop other meeting materials. With the expectation that each school hold at least two meetings in year one, schools held their first FAST event in the fall and then worked to plan their second event over the winter. Schools held another round of FAST meetings in late winter/early spring and one school held a third culminating event before the end of the school year.

### **July–August 2018**

- Districts applied for the pilot program, and the department selected three districts to participate.
- The department held training meetings and provided resources to district staff, school leaders and teachers.
- Schools conducted initial planning tasks, including scheduling event dates.

### **September–October 2018**

- Schools held individual conferences (per district calendar).
- Teachers selected foundational skill focus on during the first meeting and began to gather applicable data.
- Schools provided time for staff to plan, gather materials, and create needed documents and presentations.
- Schools marketed the program to families and the community.
- The department provided training and support to district and school staff.

### **November 2018**

- Schools held their first FAST meeting and provided time for staff to debrief.
- The department provided training and support to district and school staff.

### **December 2018–January 2019**

- Schools provided time for staff to plan their second FAST meeting.
- The department provided training and support to district and school staff.

### **February–March 2019**

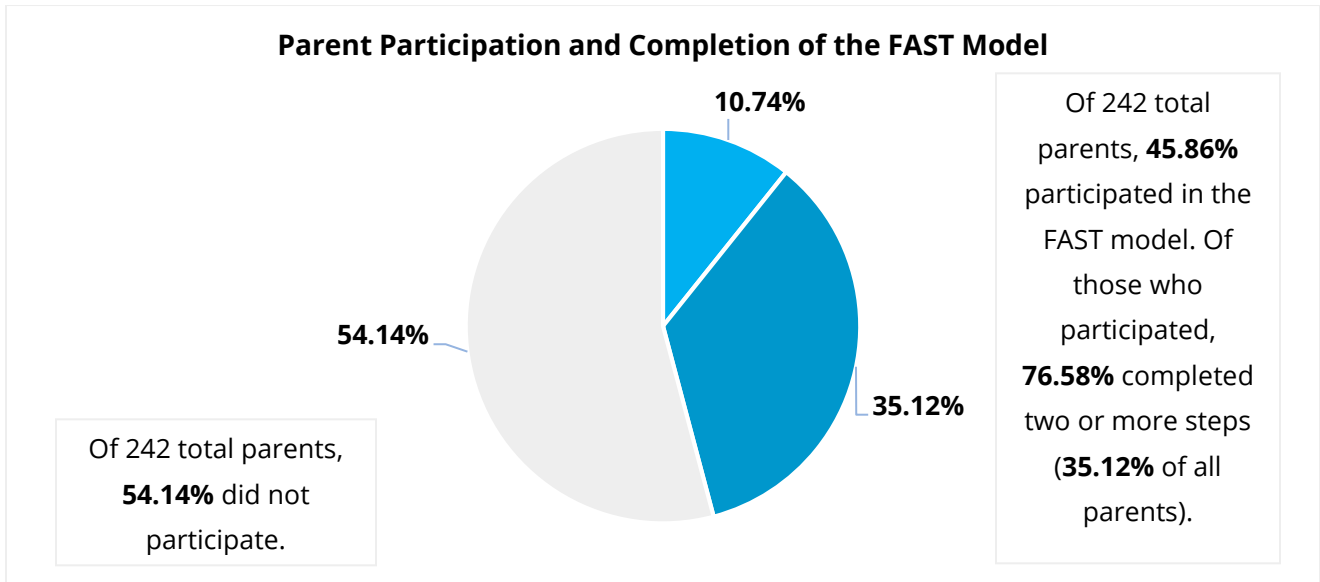
- Schools held their second FAST meeting.
- Schools provided time for staff to debrief.
- The department provided training and support to district and school staff.

# Overview of Year One Data

Throughout year one of the pilot, the department collected and tracked data as specified under the law<sup>6</sup>.

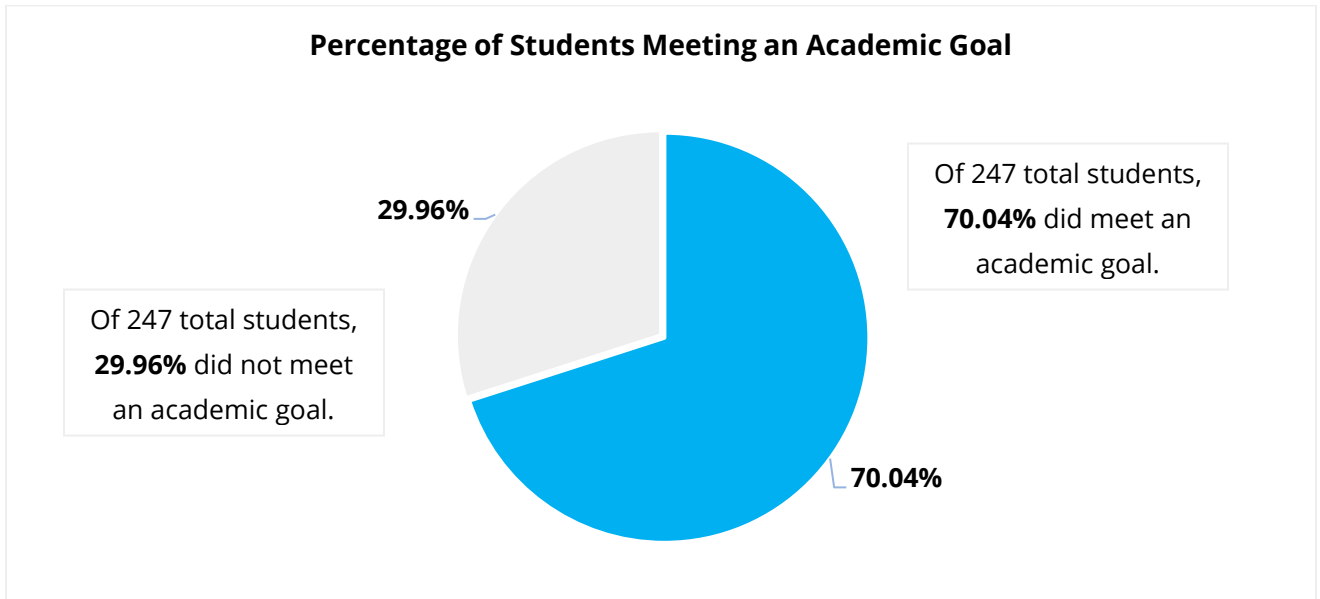
## 1. The number and percentage of parents who participated in the program and how many steps of the best practices model criteria they completed<sup>7</sup>:

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## 2. The number and percentage of students meeting any academic goals established by the student, parent, and teacher as part of an initial parent-teacher conference or meeting:

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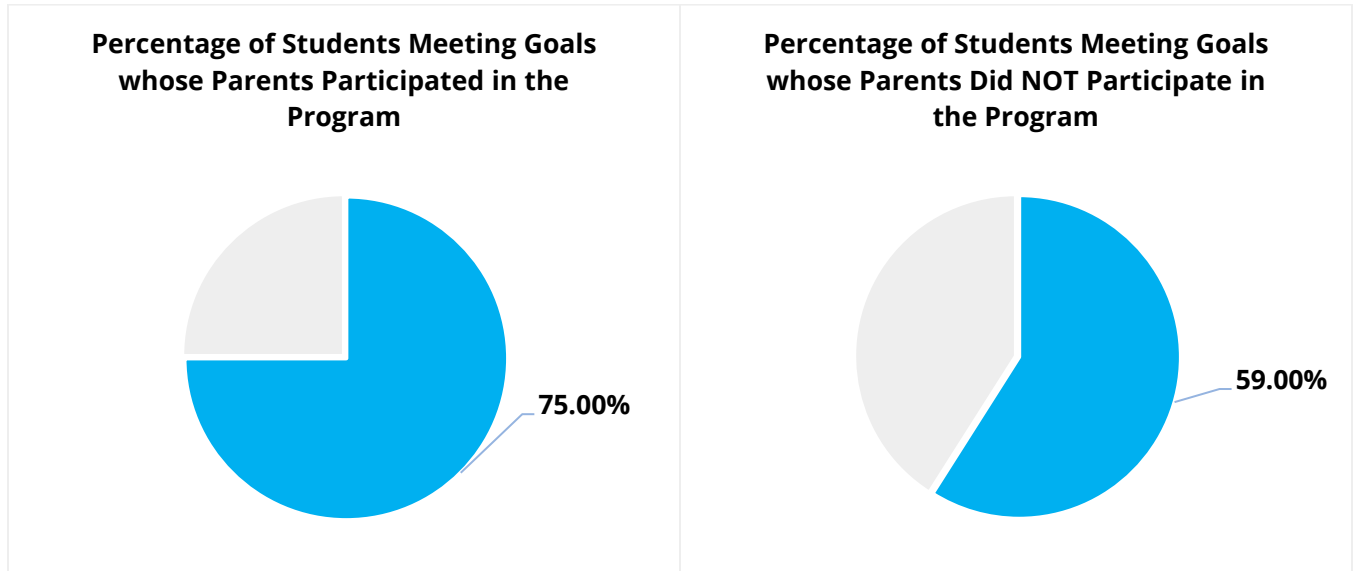


<sup>6</sup> All data provided is an average of the three participating districts.

<sup>7</sup> For these purposes, "participation in the program" indicates that families attended at least one FAST event.

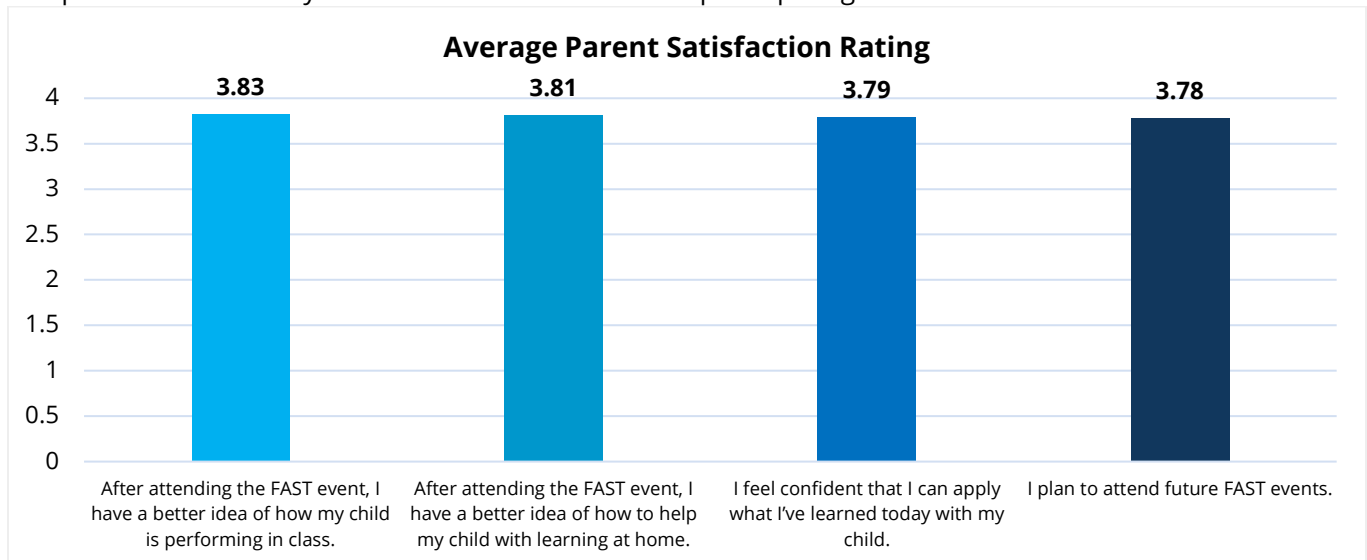


**3. The academic performance goals met by students in any grade from kindergarten through grade two (K-2) whose parents participated in the program compared with the academic performance goals met by students in any grade from kindergarten through grade two (K-2) whose parents did not participate in the program:**



**4. Data collected from a parent survey designed to gauge parent satisfaction with the program and to obtain suggestions from parents for ways to improve the program or to improve parent-teacher engagement in any grade from kindergarten through grade two (K-2):**

At each FAST event, participating families were given an evaluation survey. The data presented below is a compilation of the family evaluation data from all three participating districts.<sup>8</sup>



<sup>8</sup> Ratings on the FAST evaluation survey include: 4 – Strongly Agree; 3 – Agree; 2 – Disagree; 1 - Strongly Disagree; and 0 – Not Sure.

When asked what they **enjoyed most** about the FAST event, families' responses included:

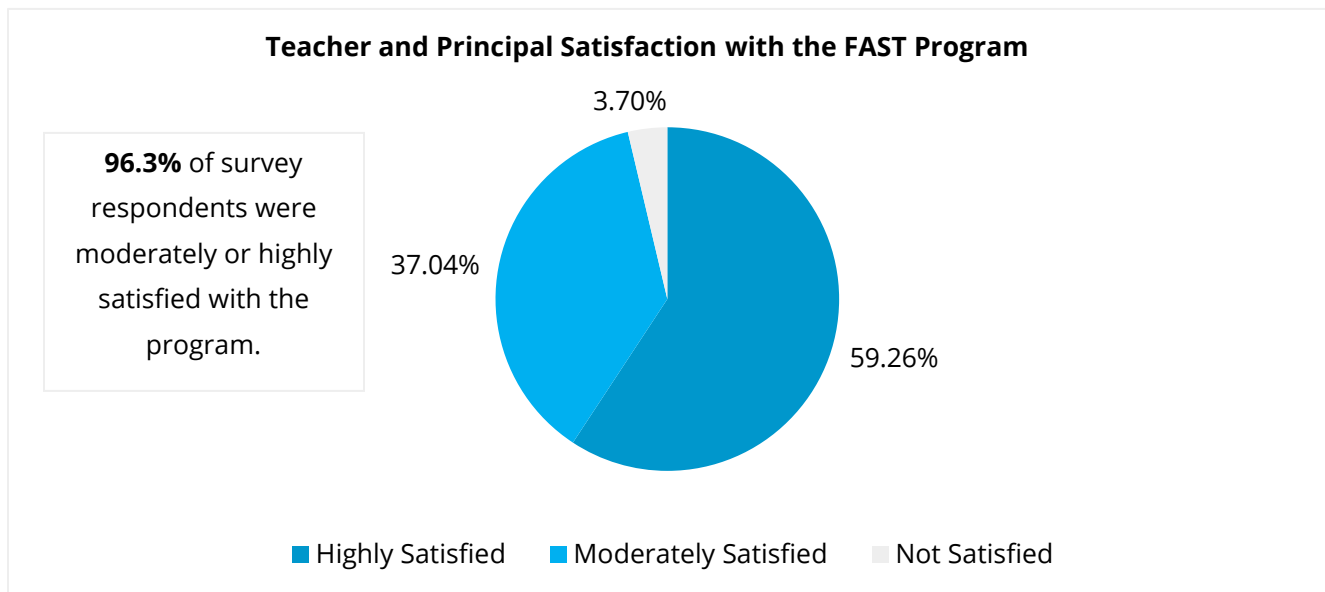
- "I have a better understanding of the screener for letter naming and sounds."
- "Take-home activities and games"
- "What I liked the most was learning how to help my son and getting a better understanding of what he is learning."
- "Seeing how my child's performance compares to their peers"
- "Everything! All information will be used for my child to improve."
- "Having a better idea of how my child is performing"
- "Learning how the curriculum is working and being applied; learning how to apply what I've learned to helping my student advance."
- "All of the information! I also loved that I could bring my children and they could play in the gym."
- "Meeting other parents and teachers makes me more comfortable."

When asked what could be done to **improve** the FAST program, families' responses included:

- "A little more time for the event."
- "I wish more grade levels offered these meetings."
- "All parents should participate so we can better help our children."
- "More one-on-one time to speak with the teacher."
- "Starting time may be hard for some working parents. Maybe start later next time."
- "Nothing. Everything was great!"

**5. Data collected from a teacher and principal survey designed to gauge teacher and principal satisfaction with the program and to obtain suggestions from teachers and principals for ways to improve the program in any grade from kindergarten through grade two (K-2):<sup>9</sup>**

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<sup>9</sup> In May 2019, an online survey was shared with participating school staff; 27 individuals responded, resulting in an 82% overall response rate. The data presented is a compilation of staff surveys from all three participating districts.

When asked what the **greatest strength** of the FAST program was, staff responses included:

- "The goals set by the families at each meeting were instrumental to the success of the student. Families were increasingly able to set high but realistic goals as the year went on."
- "The successful student outcomes were the result of teaching the families how to work with their child, what the grade level expectations are, and what the peer data shows. This provides confidence, builds teacher/family relationships, and helps promote consistency between home and school."
- "FAST conferences are essential for fostering a learning partnership with teachers, parents, and students."
- "It provides an opportunity for parents and students to be active members in the learning process."
- "The teaching team, principal, and data coach were committed to FAST after really figuring out how to collect data, what needed to be done, and by going through this experience."
- "As a special area teacher, this program provides excellent support for families in our community. I am now open to new strategies for meeting student and family needs."

When asked what the **greatest challenges** associated with the FAST program were, staff responses included:

- "Helping the parents understand the change to this particular style of parent conference compared to the traditional style."
- "The biggest challenge that we have at our school is just getting parents to attend. Even with the free childcare and supper provided there were still less than 50% parent participation for our kindergarten teachers."
- "For us it was giving our benchmarks at the right time to make sure that data was current. Those kinks will be easily fixed next year."
- "The money it costs to support it. This year we had funds and were able to purchase materials for games, food, etc. But when we no longer have the funding, it will be difficult to manage."
- "Presenting to data to parents in a way that they could grasp and understand."

When asked what could be done to **improve** the FAST program in the future, staff responses included:

- "I would like to be able to provide more incentives for parents to come and attend FAST conferences."
- "Provide the funding for us to continue to have the free childcare and supper. Without the funds to pay for those things, our participation will drop."
- "Get MORE parents to come."
- "Provide transportation to and from each meeting. Have the teachers call and text to provide personal invitations. Decide on the time and day and possibly pair it with something else taking place at school."
- "As the year went on we found ways to increase our parent involvement such as the students wearing labels home to remind their parents and the teachers calling the day before to make sure they knew about the meetings."
- "Include more grades. We are going to include our 1<sup>st</sup> grade teachers and parents next year."
- "FAST can be improved by making conferences more accessible to parents. Our school has made progress towards this by taping all conferences and making them available online."

# Challenges and Lessons Learned

## ***Family Participation***

Year one of the FAST program was not without its challenges. While the vast majority of participating staff and families found great value in the program, the average family participation rate among the three districts still remained under 50%.

This is not a new challenge when it comes to parent and family engagement. Many families have competing priorities that can make it difficult for them to always attend school events. In addition, families living in poverty may have an even harder time coming to school events due to past negative experiences with the educational system, hectic work schedules, lack of transportation, and/or inadequate childcare. In order to address this issue, all of the participating schools provided childcare and the majority also provided a free meal to families as an incentive to participate. One school offered transportation to families, a practice at least one other school also plans to implement in the future.

Strategies to help combat this challenge include:

- Surveying families at the beginning of the year to determine the most convenient day and time for FAST events to take place.
- Holding FAST events as part of a popular event that the school is already holding, such as an open house or math/reading night.
- Providing families with *personal* invitations to FAST events from classroom teachers, school leaders, or other school staff. Personal invitations to each family should be made by phone call and text message.
- Continuing to provide free meals, childcare, and transportation for FAST events.
- Coming up with innovative ways to share FAST information with families who are unable to attend in person, such as videotaping meetings and posting them online.
- Offering a make-up session for families who were not able to attend the FAST event.

## ***Teacher Time and Effort***

As is the case with any new program or initiative, year one of the FAST program required teachers to spend a lot of time being trained and planning events. Tasks such as gathering student data, preparing meeting materials, and creating take-home activities initially took several hours. However, as the year progressed and teachers became more familiar and comfortable with the FAST process, the time spent on such tasks greatly decreased. Moving forward, it is expected that teachers will become more and more skilled at carrying out the program. In addition, the department will continue to provide support and develop tools and resources to help make the process more efficient and manageable for school staff.

## **Conclusion**

The 2018-19 school year was the first full year of the FAST pilot program. In year two, participating districts and schools will be expanding the FAST program to include at least one more grade level and will hold a total of three FAST events. Time for additional training will be scheduled with each district over the summer, and the department will continue to develop resources and provide support to help school staff implement the program effectively. As participating districts and schools continue to refine the FAST process, family participation in the program is expected to rise and outcomes for students will continue to improve. The department looks forward to working closely with district staff, teachers, and school leaders as we continue to develop this exciting program.