



Lost in the Crowd

The Fragility of High Performance Among Low-Income Students

Meet DeAnthony, Amalia, David,
Kendra and Joy—five talented
students from low-income
communities who are getting
lost in the crowd.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Introduction
2	Profile DeAnthony
4	Profile Amalia
6	Profile David
8	Profile Kendra
10	Profile Joy
12	Observations and Reflections
14	Possible Solutions

STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

RACE

Four are African American, one is White.

GENDER

Three are girls, two are boys.

SCHOOLS

Three attend traditional public schools,
one attends a public charter school,
one attends a Catholic school.

FAMILY STRUCTURE

Three two-parent families,
two single-parent families.

PARENT EMPLOYMENT

All parents living at home with the stu-
dents are employed full-time.

PARENT EDUCATION

None of the parents has an associate's or
bachelor's degree.

ECONOMIC STATUS

Four of the five students are eligible for
free or reduced-price lunch.

ACHIEVEMENT

All five students have high grades
and/or test scores.

LOCATION

All five students attend schools in
and around New Orleans, LA.

Why don't more low-income and minority students succeed in school?

There is plenty of talk about bad schools, insufficient resources, turbulent neighborhoods, and the like. And, yes, lots of disadvantaged students start school behind their more advantaged peers and, because of these myriad challenges, stay behind.

But there are many others who demonstrate success in school, at least for stretches of their educational careers, but fall off along the way. So, instead of resigning ourselves to these outcomes, we must instead ask: Why, specifically, does this happen? And how do we fix it?

At EdNavigator, we have spent the last two years providing sustained educational support to hundreds of families in and around New Orleans, in all types of schools. Each of them has been afforded access to a Navigator—someone with deep roots in their community and professional experience in teaching, counseling, or school leadership—who serves as their personal education advisor.

Through this work, we have gained deep insight into the day-to-day interactions of families and schools and the obstacles parents and students face in navigating the education system. Our experience has brought the questions above and others to the forefront for us. It has also illuminated the many ways that promising, low-income students slip off track.

Here, we present profiles of five students we have been supporting: DeAnthony, Amalia, David, Kendra and Joy. Their names have been changed and school identities concealed. Each has demonstrated talent and promise, but each faces various hurdles to fully achieving their potential. While a Navigator is engaging with each family to address the issues described, we have intentionally put less emphasis on our role or support strategies so that we can focus on each student's experience as a case study.

Though they are anecdotal in nature, we believe these profiles mirror the experiences of many other families. Together, they paint a picture of an educational ecosystem in which talented students from low-income communities are all too easily lost in the crowd.

We see in these students' stories little evidence of malice on the part of the people and institutions responsible for supporting them, but plenty of dysfunction and neglect. The hard truth is that our educational system is disappointing them at both the macro and micro levels. Broadly, it does not provide enough avenues for high-potential disadvantaged students to maximize their potential through access to learning environments and opportunities that are appropriately matched to their skills. And, more locally, educators who have observed these students' ability—and who are best positioned to draw attention to it—are too often overlooking them.

We hope the details of these case studies illuminate the nuances and complexity of each family's experience, and help education leaders and policymakers explore ways to improve that experience. We find ourselves asking: What needs to change for more students to reach better outcomes? While we at EdNavigator are most focused on addressing the individual needs of individual families, we have tried to highlight the broader challenges we perceive as clearly as possible, and to propose common-sense solutions where we can.

How long will DeAnthony remain an academic star?

In many ways, DeAnthony is a remarkable success story. Currently a fourth grader in a traditional public school just outside Orleans Parish, he has strong grades and near-perfect attendance. Last year, the first time he attempted Louisiana's state tests, he scored in the highest possible category for both math and English language arts (ELA). These results placed him in the top 10 percent of students statewide for each subject. In a city where academic and social results for young African American men like DeAnthony are unacceptably poor, he has a foundation that positions him for an exceptional future.

DeAnthony is fortunate in other respects as well. He comes from a highly engaged family where both parents attend every important school meeting together, even though neither of them finished high school themselves. He lives in a safe neighborhood and plays several sports. DeAnthony's parents are proud of his performance and thrilled that school has come easily to him.

Unfortunately, it is already possible to see barriers that may limit DeAnthony's long-term potential. Teachers report that he can be bored or distracted. This year, for the first time, his parents began receiving calls about him talking back to adults. And he earned a C in English language arts for the fall quarter due to unfinished assignments and inconsistent attention in class.

Moreover, although DeAnthony's elementary school is

relatively strong, with a B rating from the state, the middle school and high school for which he's zoned are not. The middle school has a C grade, and student academic growth lags below state averages. EdNavigator has found that the school is poorly organized and has uneven relationships with families, and that its teachers often miss deadlines and don't communicate with each other about student needs. Similarly, his future high school has weak academic outcomes, and, if he continues on his current path, his performance there will make him an outlier.

Having fiercely supportive parents like DeAnthony's helps, but they often feel frustrated by their options. They've already, for example, considered several ways to maximize his potential.

One option would be to seek admission to one of his district's selective public schools, which require an admissions test. But they're reluctant to have DeAnthony take the exam because they prefer to keep him with his older brother, Derrick, who will remain in traditional schools. And even if DeAnthony did take the test, seats for his grade are very scarce because the school is full and new seats are made available only when a student leaves.

Charter schools are another option. DeAnthony and his brother have already attended one, however, and their parents were underwhelmed, especially with the quality of special education services for Derrick.

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“DeAnthony is happy at his school. But I know how much more he would benefit if he could be challenged. And he is not challenged.”

— DeAnthony’s mother

Questions for Consideration

1. **In practical terms, how powerful a lever is school choice for DeAnthony’s family?** After starting in a traditional district, they moved into Orleans Parish so DeAnthony and his brother could attend a charter school. But they moved back to a nearby parish after becoming dissatisfied by the quality of the charter school. They are happier now, but marginally so. They learned recently that their names were signed as “present” for a special education meeting that they never even knew about. They have had choices and acted upon them, but they feel that, wherever they have enrolled, the quality of school has been frustrating.
2. **Why doesn’t DeAnthony’s track record of high performance attract more notice?** He has never been recommended by teachers for any gifted or advanced programs. And yet, fewer than half of the students attending the local selective magnet school scored as well as DeAnthony on the most recent state ELA exam. In that school, just four percent of students are African American, like DeAnthony. Is it not in the interest of everyone involved – including the district – for students like DeAnthony to be given every opportunity for exposure to rigorous programming?
3. **Who, besides DeAnthony’s parents and EdNavigator, is thinking about his long-term pathway through schools?** It does not appear that anyone at DeAnthony’s school has taken note of his potential or is making any particular effort to steer him towards opportunities that might be beneficial to his long-term academic trajectory.

Why can't Amalia pass state tests?

One glance at seventh grader Amalia's report cards is enough to convince you that she is a special child. Quarter after quarter, year after year, her record is nearly spotless. She rarely, if ever, misses a day of school for any reason, and is consistently well-behaved. Teachers' comments about her are sunny and positive. And her grades have been almost all A's – in every subject.

The picture is clear and unambiguous: Amalia is a student who has mastered both the content of school and the day-to-day practices required to be successful in school. Her talents have not gone unnoticed; she has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for giftedness, which has been in place for six years. (Though IEPs for students identified as gifted are unusual in many states, they are common in Louisiana.)

There are problems, however. Each year for the past three years, Amalia has scored on grade level on just one of the state's four subject area tests: English language arts. On the other three (math, science, and social studies), her performance is one step below grade level. She is not struggling, exactly, and her results are typical of students in her school. But they contrast sharply with her report cards, which suggest that she is a top performer.

What about her status as a gifted student? In practice, it seems to have little impact. Amalia occasionally attends a small group session with other gifted students, but her

mother says she has not attended a meeting to review the plan or Amalia's progress toward its goals in at least two years.

What's going on here? Amalia has had a relatively stable school experience, attending two different Orleans Parish charter schools that are part of the same network since kindergarten. Her current school's performance is generally above average compared to peer schools, with robust student growth in some years.

However, like nearly all charter schools in New Orleans, it serves a student population that is almost universally low income and relatively low performing. Citywide, between 70 and 80 percent of students score below grade level on state tests. The fact that Amalia is slightly below grade level does not warrant alarm, from the school's perspective; she is not a student who they would consider to be struggling or a concern.

In fact, when EdNavigator contacted the school leader and asked for a conversation including Amalia's family about how to support her to pass state tests this year as a seventh grader, the principal was initially unresponsive, then quizzical about why a meeting would be necessary. Then she stopped responding to the requests entirely. Amalia's parents decided immediately to move her to a different school, and enter the school enrollment lottery for next year.

Amalia's test results are typical of students in her school. But they contrast sharply with her report cards, which suggest she is a top performer.

“If we don't hear back from school by Friday, let's start stage two and find another school.”

— Amalia's mother

Questions for Consideration

1. **How does Amalia's school determine grades?** Are her grades and her state test scores measuring different things, or do the standards for performance just differ? Given the conflicting information, how would Amalia's parents – or Amalia herself – develop an understanding of her progress and the opportunities that may or may not open for her?
2. **What does Amalia's teacher make of the discrepancy between her grades and test scores?** Is she aware of it? How could her school help ensure such differences are noted and analyzed? And why wouldn't Amalia's school be more interested in helping her pass the state tests when they are held accountable for test performance?
3. **What type of school should Amalia's parents pursue for her when the enrollment process opens?** Her options will be limited. She will likely remain at the new school for just one year (eighth grade) before moving again for high school. Spots at high performing schools are not likely to open up for eighth grade.

Why won't David sit still?

School is easy for David. As a fourth grader, the reports from his teachers have been consistent ever since kindergarten. He has little trouble learning what he is supposed to know.

David has minimal interest in doing his work, however. He is easily distracted or prone to distracting others, though he also suffers from plunges in energy that can cause him to doze off right in the middle of class. When it comes time to take benchmark tests, he either scores at the top of the range (when he is engaged) or at the very bottom (when he is indifferent). On his first Louisiana state tests, he scored solidly on grade level. His teachers find him frustrating.

David's parents have an uneasy relationship with their local elementary school, which all three of their children attend. Each child exhibits, to one degree or another, the same disorganized and off-task tendencies as David. School personnel are convinced that this is a reflection of disorganization in the home.

David's mother cooks breakfast at a downtown hotel, waking for her commute each morning at 3:15 AM. Her husband also leaves for work early, which requires him to

drop the three kids at his mother's house at dawn, where they eat breakfast, dress in their school clothes, and leave for school. In the midst of all this transition, homework papers are lost, permission slips go unsigned, and so forth. The principal of David's school regards his family as relatively troubled, though she was unaware that David's grandmother brings him to school due to his parents' work schedule until EdNavigator explained it to her. She assumed he and his siblings were being passed back and forth between residences.

Does David have a disability that is affecting his progress? The answer is unclear. His mother decided to ask for a special education evaluation this past fall. School personnel steered her instead to a 504 plan, which includes various accommodations but not specific learning goals. She agreed to accept that option, but since the day she signed the 504 plan, she has not heard a word about supports for David. His patterns remain much the same.

Fed up with the lack of support from his current school, David's mother has signed up all three of her children to attempt the district's placement exam for selective magnet schools.

The principal of David's school regards his family as relatively troubled. She was unaware that David's grandmother brings him to school due to his parents' work schedule.

“I am so aggravated with my school. They have not done anything they said they were going to do. I am so sick of teachers pinpointing everything David does wrong instead of trying to help him.”

— David’s mother

Questions for Consideration

1. **Are educators treating David and his siblings differently because of assumptions about his parents? If so, what can be done about it?**
2. **Is there more that David’s teachers and school staff could do to understand his family’s situation or explore possible solutions to the problems they see?** Teachers and school staff seem to be at least superficially aware of the family’s challenges but show little interest in helping David’s parents address them.
3. **Who is exploring whether David’s challenges with energy and focus are linked to inadequate sleep and an inconsistent schedule?** David’s family doesn’t always see what’s happening in school; his teachers don’t understand what’s happening at home. Who’s connecting the dots? And whose responsibility is it to solve this problem?
4. **What should David’s family do differently?** His parents understand their morning routine is not ideal, but feel constrained by their demanding work schedules. What could they do at home to help address these issues?

How many schools will Kendra attend?

Kendra's mother is on a mission. Working as an assistant in a New Orleans law firm, Teresa is determined that Kendra will have every opportunity that eluded her. She will not accept mediocre schools; if a school falls short, she looks for another one. Yet she struggles to balance the high standards she holds for her daughter's education with the limited options available to her.

Teresa's high standards are the main reason that Kendra has now attended four different schools since kindergarten. The first three were Orleans Parish charter schools, each one relatively well-regarded, though none of them consistently excellent. Kendra switched for her third-grade year and again for fifth grade.

Now, Kendra is in sixth grade at a Catholic school, taking advantage of Louisiana's school voucher program. Kendra is pleased that the Catholic school provides order and discipline without requiring any tuition, though the school's poor performance with previous voucher students places it near the threshold where it could be placed on sanctions, which means it will not be allowed to admit new voucher students.

Kendra's academic performance is generally strong but not always consistent. Most of her grades are A's and B's. However, she will occasionally miss assignments or forget to study for a big test and end up with a C. She tends to score at grade level on state tests.

Regardless of their public reputations, all of Kendra's schools share a common trait: Their students are generally struggling. At her most recent school, for example, fewer than 1 in 4 students in Kendra's grade met state test standards.

As a strong student who presents no behavioral challenges, Kendra receives relatively little attention. Just the same, it is not clear that Kendra would be an elite student if she were in a school surrounded by other students with strong academic foundations. She has sporadic study habits. Recently, she attempted a Learning Heroes readiness check for her grade level, which indicated that she needed additional support. She reported that she had never been taught the math material.

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Questions for Consideration

1. **Why can't Teresa find the school she wants for Kendra?** She is clearly engaged and willing to use the choice process. But transferring has not brought significant change to her school experience.
2. **Is Kendra moving up in schools, or just moving?** Are the frequent transitions from school to school beneficial to her, overall, or do they have any hidden costs for her academic success? How much is she gaining from these transitions?
3. **Is Kendra on track or not?** Her grades and performance on state tests suggest that she is a relatively good student, performing about average overall. Whether she thrives and eventually meets her mother's goal of attending and graduating from college likely depends on the opportunities she is afforded over the next few years. But her current trajectory is difficult to discern.

Why won't Joy's school help her get to college?

When EdNavigator first met Joy, almost two years ago, she was a ninth grader in a large comprehensive high school outside New Orleans. Though Joy has been placed into advanced courses due to high level ability, her uneven interest in her courses led to uneven grades.

Despite a couple of C's on her transcript, Joy had something going for her: she scored well on every standardized test she took, going back to elementary school. Her mother, Janice, initially reached out to EdNavigator because she believed Joy was not being effectively challenged in her school and might be better off elsewhere.

Joy's success has been a lifelong mission for Janice. After having Joy as a young single mother, Janice focused on giving Joy the best support she could offer. Today, Janice works long hours, including overnights, as a home health care worker.

Over the course of high school, Joy's performance has improved. Her hard work, buttressed by regular oversight of her grades by Janice and EdNavigator, have put an end to the C's she used to earn occasionally. She is taking the most advanced courses her school offers, including an AP class. She talks about going away to college somewhere far, like California.

So what are Joy's prospects? One factor is the college access support available through her high school. Unfortunately, the guidance program at her high school is almost non-existent. Virtually none of the students in her school consider, apply to, or enroll in out-of-state colleges. The average ACT score at her school is less than 17 (compared to a national average of 21 in 2017). About 1 in 20 students passes an AP test.

This winter, Joy had a particularly disheartening experience when she asked her counselor for assistance registering for the ACT. The counselor needed to sign a fee waiver form so Joy would not be required to pay for the exam. Though this would have taken minimal work on the part of the counselor, Joy was told that the counselor was too busy assisting seniors who were due to graduate this academic year to take time for her.

Only through intervention by the district superintendent's office did Joy get the fee waiver – just in advance of the deadline. Had the decision been left solely to her school, she would have had to wait for a later test administration. Instead, she'll test earlier, and if she does well (as a precursor test predicts she will) she will be more likely to make it onto the radar of competitive colleges.

This winter, Joy had a particularly disheartening experience when she asked her counselor for assistance registering for the ACT.

“How would I describe my experience with Joy’s school? Frustrating. That’s what I would say. Frustrating.”

— Joy’s mother

Questions for Consideration

1. **How different might Joy’s high school experience have been if she attended one of her parish’s competitive admissions schools, where over 70 percent of students earn AP credit?** And why did none of her elementary or middle school teachers advise her mother to seek admission?
2. **Why would a guidance counselor be too busy to help a high potential student on the path to college?** And what does it say about the lack of accountability in Joy’s school that her principal was unwilling to intervene, leaving her family to appeal to the district instead?
3. **How can the expansion of rigorous coursework be implemented more sensibly?** Joy was enrolled in AP English as a 10th grader, despite having minimal preparation for it. She passed the course easily but received a 1 on the AP test. Would it not have been wiser to have her wait until 12th grade to attempt AP English, when she would be better positioned to succeed?

Observations and Reflections

Almost everyone says it is a high priority to expand educational opportunity and improve academic outcomes for students from low-income families. It's a challenge with profound consequences for them, as well as for our nation's future.

Yet these case studies suggest that many schools are poorly prepared to support these students even when success is right in front of their eyes, and that there is no coherent strategy for identifying, engaging, and advancing high achievers. Instead, students who do demonstrate success are too often lost in the crowd. How many more children like them are we overlooking, misdirecting, or underestimating every day?

These case studies are illustrations, but they align with other research showing that talented students from low-income families are substantially underachieving their peers¹ and are less likely to be identified for gifted programs,² have access to challenging coursework,³ or enroll in selective colleges.⁴ We draw from them a number of other observations as well.

1. School choice isn't working as well as it should for lower-income families of high-achieving students.

For low- and moderate-income families, school choice opens some doors, but on a practical level it consists mostly of options among very similar schools. Parents of high-performing students face numerous barriers in placing their children in schools with similar-performing peers. Moreover, schools serving predominantly low-income, low-performing students tend to specialize in raising the achievement floor, not the ceiling, leaving high-performing students adrift while "average" students get lost in the crowd. School choice challenges are even greater for families with multiple children, who typically prioritize keeping all of their children in the same schools or geographic area as much as possible.

2. Low-income parents are not getting the information they need to know how to access high-quality schools.

Many lower-income parents are unaware of the processes for accessing rigorous, selective schools, so they're unable to take advantage of them when children begin to show signs of high potential, which often occurs as early as preschool or kindergarten. When this potential becomes more obvious in later grades, seats in those

1 Wyner, Joshua; Bridgeland, John; and Dilulio, John, Jr. (2007). Achievementtrap: How America is Failing Millions of High-Achieving Students from Low-Income Families. Jack Kent Cooke Foundation & Civic Enterprises.

2 Card, David, and Giuliano, Laura (2015). Can Universal Screening Increase the Representation of Low Income and Minority Students in Gifted Education? National Bureau of Economic Research.

3 Plucker, Giancola, Healey, Arndt, and Wang (2015). Equal Talents, Unequal Opportunities: A Report Card on State Support for Academically Talented Low-Income Students. Jack Kent Cooke Foundation.

4 Bastedo, Michael and Jaquette, Ozan (2017). Running in Place: Low-Income Students and the Dynamics of Higher Education Stratification. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, American Educational Research Association.

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schools are no longer available, having been claimed by early-bird students from higher-income, better-networked families. For example, DeAnthony's school is more than 80 percent low-income, whereas the selective magnet school for which he's zoned is just 20 percent low-income. The well documented problem of "under-matching" in higher education exists in K-12 too.⁵

3. Families are not receiving clear and complete information on their students' performance.

Here, testing may play an important role. There are valid concerns about the frequency with which we test our students and the way we use tests to hold schools and teachers accountable. But because messages about student progress from schools and teachers can be so confusing (if not false), tests play an important role for parents in providing objective information. Sometimes, as in Amalia's case, test results indicate that students may not be doing as well as their grades suggest. In other cases, like in Joy's, test results signal exceptional potential in students who would otherwise be overlooked. Yet school personnel do not consistently use test data for these purposes or counsel families toward opportunities, even when they probably should.

4. The path for high-performing, low-income students is treacherous.

Despite their strengths, many high-performing students also have challenges. Each of the students profiled here could end up graduating from a selective college – or falling far short of graduating college at all. The differ-

ence between success or failure may come down to any number of seemingly minor practical and environmental factors, such as their family's ability to track down the right paperwork at the right time, having reliable transportation to school, or whether anyone notices a sign of potential in their grades or test results in the first place. In general, there are strikingly few guardrails to prevent students from sliding into a downward trajectory in school. In public health terms, the system is all about treatment rather than prevention, and treatment often kicks in only when challenges reach the crisis stage.

5. When they are aware of these issues, parents engage quickly and forcefully.

When parents are made aware of issues that threaten their children's long-term educational success (e.g., an ineffective or unresponsive school, unrealized potential as demonstrated through high test scores but low grades or vice versa), they tend to act with urgency and decisiveness.

⁵ Hechinger Report (2017). Podcast: Why Low-Income Students are 'Under-Matching' with Colleges. www.hechingerreport.org/podcast-low-income-students-matching-colleges

Possible Solutions

What steps might we take to change the storyline for students like those profiled here? Many of the challenges we have identified are complex and interconnected; at the highest level, solving these challenges requires schools and school systems to find ways to prioritize the interests of *individual* students and families as well as students in the aggregate.

However, we believe there are also practical solutions that would help more high-performing students from lower-income families find and stay on the path to success in school. Moreover, it seems likely that such strategies would improve educational outcomes for *all* students and families if implemented well.

1. Help more parents map out their children's educational pathway early.

Affluent families tend to have clear educational goals that they begin working toward from the day their children are born, if not sooner. They set up college savings accounts, consider elementary school options when deciding where to live, and add their names to waiting lists for high-quality preschools. Most of the families we have profiled know what they want, but do not have a plan for getting there. Students usually gain access to guidance counselors in middle or high school; parents should have a "guidance counselor" for themselves, starting when their children are infants.

2. Continue increasing high-quality school options.

School choice by itself will not solve the problems discussed here, but it does serve as a useful tool for families and a scarcity of quality options remains a pressing concern. Expanding the number of schools that can serve a diverse student body well and maintaining high standards for all schools would mean fewer dead ends and bad choices for families. Even in communities that offer school choice, families frequently find themselves unable to upgrade when they assess their options. When families find that their only choices are bad choices, it is enormously frustrating.

3. Increase the capacity of existing schools to serve high performers more effectively.

For many reasons, most high-achieving students are probably not going to transfer schools. In those cases, we must get better at supplementing their learning through in-school strategies (e.g., school-based tutoring, pull-out

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programs for high-achieving students, personalized learning, competitive academic teams/clubs) and out-of-school strategies (e.g., high dosage tutoring, scholarships to learning centers like Kumon, high-quality and affordable afterschool and summer learning programs). We cannot continue to take a hands-off approach and hope everything works out.

4. Direct additional resources and support for educators and schools.

Many of the schools attended by the students profiled here face chronic resource shortages and are forced to make difficult decisions every day about where to expend their time and energy. Ensuring that schools have the right funding to hire effective guidance counselors, afford teachers time and space to assess student progress more comprehensively, and provide rigorous coursework and academic programming to meet the needs of high-achieving students is essential.

5. Focus schools on getting the basics right.

Even in the absence of additional resources, it is clear that there are many steps schools could take to address some of the challenges presented in these case studies. Poor communication with families, inattention to existing data, missed deadlines and lost paperwork are all concerns with straightforward, inexpensive remedies.

6. Provide clearer, more accurate information about academic progress.

Many of the families described here are receiving mixed or misleading messages about their children's performance. Discrepancies in the information they receive are rarely acknowledged or discussed, leaving families uncertain

about what data to trust and how to respond. Schools can address this issue by improving report cards, enhancing information systems, and assisting teachers with data analysis.

7. Expand early warning systems.

We typically think of early warning systems for students as focusing on high-risk issues like large numbers of absences or behavior problems; the sorts of things that signal trouble down the line if unaddressed. We should continue investing in these systems, but also use them to spot high-potential students who should be monitored and kept on track.



EdNavigator is a nonprofit organization that helps hard-working families find a path to success in school and beyond. Currently operating in New Orleans, LA and Boston, MA, EdNavigator partners with leading local employers and community organizations to bring expert educational support to employees at their place of work. Each EdNavigator member is connected with a Navigator who provides guidance and hands-on support with everything from choosing a preschool to keeping a child on track for college. Navigators, who include veteran teachers, principals, and school counselors, also assist adult learners who may have educational goals of their own. They help families solve problems, translate report cards, and get things done.

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