

# **Evaluation of the Tellin' Stories Parent Engagement Initiative: Preliminary Analysis of Activities**

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## **Summary**

Policy Studies Associates Inc. (PSA), under an agreement with Teaching for Change (TFC), began its evaluation of the Tellin' Stories parent engagement initiative in Fall 2011. The evaluation is designed to assess the implementation of the initiative and provide insights into outcomes associated with participation in parent engagement activities. This memo discusses preliminary findings from TFC's mid-year assessments and activity observations at three partner schools in the District of Columbia.

## **Methods**

Evaluators observed six activities across Thompson Elementary School, E.L. Haynes Kansas Avenue Campus, and Brightwood Elementary School. At Thompson Elementary, Tellin' Stories activities emphasize strategies to strengthen the parent community and support partnerships between parents and school personnel. Evaluators attended one quilting session, a welcoming climate walkthrough, and an academic workshop at the school.

Tellin' Stories quilting sessions encourage parents and school staff to develop relationships and discuss their goals for their children; during the session at Thompson, parents discussed their vision of their ideal school and worked on their quilt squares. The welcoming climate walkthrough was designed to provide parents an opportunity to tour the school building, discuss features that supported a welcoming climate, and suggest improvements. Participants in the academic workshop, facilitated by TFC staff and one of the school's parent coordinators, discussed strategies for effective communication between parents and teachers.

At Brightwood Elementary and E.L. Haynes, activities build on the relationships between parents and school personnel and seek to support strong academic partnerships between home and school. One observation of the Roving Readers occurred at each of the two schools. The Roving Readers program trains parents and other caregivers to read to students in classrooms throughout the school. At both schools, evaluators observed parents reading to a range of grades and leading activities related to the stories read aloud. Evaluators also observed a principal chat at Brightwood, which served as an opportunity for the parent community to voice their concerns about student performance and the school's overall climate. This meeting, facilitated by parents with support from TFC staff, highlighted parent-led opportunities to raise and develop plans to address concerns.

To guide observations, PSA developed an observation instrument to capture data on activity features hypothesized to contribute to desired outcomes for parents and school personnel. The instrument focuses on features that promote community-building and strengthen

home-school academic partnerships, which are examined within the context of six of the parent engagement outcomes described in the Tellin' Stories logic model:

- Parents feel welcomed and included within the school and parent communities.
- Increased parent engagement supports a strong school community.
- Increased engagement helps parents support student achievement, at home and at school.
- Communication between parents, teachers, and other school personnel improves.
- Parents work proactively to address issues or concerns.
- Increased collaboration among parents, teachers, and other school personnel is evident.

Observers examined interactions among parents, school personnel, and Tellin' Stories staff members during planned activities. At the conclusion of the activity, observers assigned a value of "0" or "1" to each indicator to note the presence of the indicator during the session. It is possible that some indicators will not be observed during an activity. However, when all observed activities are aggregated for analysis, there is an expectation that these indicators will be present across all activities. PSA also collected interview data and results from the mid-year assessment from TFC. A preliminary analysis of data from these sources follows.

## **Summary of Preliminary Findings**

- ***Observable indicators suggest that parent engagement is welcomed, supported, and valued at Tellin' Stories partner schools.***

The observation tool examines this outcome through indicators that highlight the extent to which (1) parents are comfortable sharing their opinions and (2) school personnel support a welcoming environment. Data collected by TFC from Orr Elementary and Thompson Elementary suggest that parents and teachers share positive views of parent engagement at their schools. Across all sites, evaluators observed interactions that demonstrated parents were comfortable engaging other parents and school personnel. Observable evidence that school personnel respected and valued parent participation was also present. At two sessions attended by school administrators, evaluators observed that these individuals participated in the discussions without taking control, actively listened to parents' opinions, and demonstrated a willingness to work jointly with parents to address concerns.

- ***Observable indicators suggest that Tellin' Stories activities support improved communication both among parents and between parents and school personnel.***

To assess the extent to which activities support improved communication among parents and between parents and school personnel, the observation tool looks for evidence of meaningful opportunities for participants to exchange ideas as well as the extent to which school personnel and Tellin' Stories staff share key information about school policies, procedures, and academic standards.

Across the six activities observed, evaluators observed several opportunities for parents and school personnel to exchange ideas. Tellin' Stories activities also provided opportunities for parents to learn strategies to communicate effectively with school personnel. Observed findings complement results from TFC-conducted interviews and surveys that demonstrate high ratings on communication at two of its partner schools. When taken together, the behaviors of parents and school personnel highlight the impact of the parent engagement initiative on communication in Tellin' Stories partner schools.

■ ***Tellin' Stories activities encourage parents to voice and work proactively, often jointly with school staff, to address their concerns.***

Tellin' Stories activities seek to encourage parents to not only voice their concerns but work proactively to effect change in their child's school. Observable indicators include the presence of opportunities during meetings for parents to raise concerns, actively develop plans to address problems, and work collaboratively with school personnel to improve the learning environment. These indicators were present at three of the six activities observed and featured prominently during the welcoming climate walkthrough and Brightwood's principal chat. The principal chat, in particular, highlighted a parent-driven initiative to present concerns and work jointly with school staff to develop a plan to improve the school community.

■ ***Observable indicators of home-school academic partnerships were present in four of the six activities observed.***

The observation tool examines interactions that support student achievement to assess the extent to which activities encourage strong home-school partnerships. These indicators include participation in academic activities, for example "Roving Readers," or organizing to develop strategies to improve student learning. The tool also looks for evidence that school personnel make an effort to determine what parents know about school policies or academic standards and fill knowledge gaps as necessary. Across the four activities during which these indicators were observed, evaluators recorded several observations of parents participating in academic activities or developing plans to address concerns related to achievement. Indicators of school personnel filling knowledge gaps were visible during two of the four activities. The absence of these indicators from the remaining two of the six observations reflects the objectives of these meetings, both of which emphasized building relationships and strengthening the school community.

## Recommendations for TFC Activity Evaluations

At the request of TFC, PSA reviewed activity evaluations collected from participants at the conclusion of each Tellin' Stories activity. Evaluations vary slightly depending on the nature of the activity but collect data related to the quality of activities and the effects each activity has on supporting the proposed outcomes outlined in TFC's logic model. However, because the evaluations are tailored to individual activities, the evaluations may not provide a complete picture of how the activities, as a unit, contribute to the proposed outcomes for the Tellin' Stories initiative.

To accomplish this, we recommend that TFC develop a standard instrument that can be used across all activities and schools that would assess the extent to which activity features contribute to desired outcomes for parents and school personnel; this evaluation tool would also reflect previously researched indicators of effective parent engagement. As a measure of whether Tellin' Stories activities support improved communication, for example, the evaluation tool might include items that ask parents to report on the effect the activity had on their confidence in engaging school personnel. The standard instrument might also include questions to assess activity quality. However, because of the breadth of the tool, TFC may lose some ability to evaluate the quality of individual meetings.

On their own, the results from the standard activity evaluation tool can be used to make decisions regarding how meetings can be structured to achieve specific outcomes. When these results are paired with data from interviews and larger evaluations, they can provide insight into the ways Tellin' Stories has contributed to changes in the attitudes held by parents and school personnel toward increased engagement and associated behaviors. While this task is not currently included in PSA's work plan, evaluators can work in collaboration with TFC to develop and test a single assessment for Tellin' Stories activities.

## Next Steps for Data Collection and Analysis

To further explore the features of Tellin' Stories activities that promote community-building and strengthen academic partnerships between home and school, evaluators will collect additional data from partner schools. Evaluators will observe four additional Tellin' Stories activities, including grade-level dialogues, principal chats, and parent workshops, and conduct interviews with participants and TFC staff.

***Interviews with participants and TFC staff.*** Evaluators will conduct in-person interviews with TFC staff, parents, and school personnel who have participated in activities. The interviews will focus on the goals and expectations for parent engagement, levels of participation in activities, and the effects of Tellin' Stories on participants' behaviors and attitudes toward parent engagement.

***Survey parents and school personnel.*** Evaluators will survey parents, teachers, and other school personnel to assess the extent to which the parent engagement initiative at each host school has helped change behaviors and attitudes toward parent involvement, strengthen the

school community, and build strong academic partnerships. The survey will be retrospective and ask participants to consider their attitudes and behaviors before the parent initiative began at their school and after participating in activities.

## **Final Report**

A final report with analysis of data from the remaining observations, surveys, and interviews will be completed in August 2012. Relevant findings will be presented in text, tables, and graphs where appropriate.

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