

Tellin' Stories Documentation Report: Parent Engagement at E.L. Haynes Elementary School

Prepared by Policy Studies Associates, Inc.

Introduction and Overview

Teaching for Change (TFC) launched the Tellin' Stories parent-engagement initiative to promote school and family partnerships. The initiative seeks to strengthen relationships among parents and school personnel and to help schools develop welcoming and academically rigorous climates for learning. Drawing on the cultural diversity of the schools it serves, Tellin' Stories accomplishes its goals through workshops, training sessions, and other activities that serve as forums for parents and school staff to develop plans for achieving shared goals of heightened student achievement and positive school communities.

TFC contracted with Policy Studies Associates, Inc. (PSA) to provide technical support and to document the Tellin' Stories approach to parent engagement at the Kansas Avenue campus of E.L. Haynes Elementary School in Washington, D.C. PSA analysts conducted in-person interviews with parent participants, the parent coordinator, teachers, and administrators. Interview questions encouraged respondents to describe the effects of Tellin' Stories efforts on their own behaviors and on the school's educational climate. PSA analysts also obtained activity descriptions prepared by TFC; these summaries describe program events hosted at the school during the 2010-2011 school year.

This report documents the Tellin' Stories approach to parent engagement by describing the initiative's activities, parent and staff experience with the initiative, and perceived changes to the school environment, as reported by respondents. Interviews with parents, teachers, and school administrators revealed the following:

- Tellin' Stories attracted and involved parents who would not normally participate in parent-engagement activities.
- Parents who participated in Tellin' Stories activities reported feeling welcome in the school environment.
- Tellin' Stories encouraged parents, teachers, and school staff to find ways to bridge differences and to use the strengths of all participants in addressing school-wide issues.

Parent Engagement Activities

The Tellin' Stories project at the Kansas Avenue campus began at the start of the 2010-2011 school year. Activities focused on strategies to strengthen the school community. Each parent-engagement activity, such as the initiative's quilting project, served as a forum for parents and staff members to share their goals for student achievement and their concerns about the school environment. Based on these conversations, parents organized themselves into smaller working groups to explore further the issues raised during meetings and to develop plans to work with school staff to address problems. With administrators and teachers, each working group planned additional parent-engagement activities and events to increase involvement and improve school conditions, including principal roundtables and the Roving Readers program.

Quilting sessions. At the start of the school year, parents and school staff members began the Tellin' Stories quilting project. The project began with parents describing their hopes and dreams for their children, some of which they incorporated into the quilt. The quilting project culminated in a school-wide celebration during which parents presented the quilt to their children and school staff. Each quilting session created a unique forum in which parents could discuss their vision for student achievement and school conditions. As parents discussed their concerns with each other and with school staff members, they developed plans to address issues in the school community.

During interviews, parents and staff members discussed the benefits and outcomes of the quilting project. Several parents, for example, described the welcoming atmosphere of each meeting, which helped them feel more comfortable sharing their concerns with other parents and school staff members in attendance. Parents also explained that the quilting sessions helped them feel that they had a voice in the school. As one parent explained:

We're able to come up with solutions to problems and have an opportunity to be involved in what happens at this school.

Teachers and administrators who attended quilting sessions commented that the activity helped them connect with parents in ways that had not been previously possible. By sharing ideas and concerns, parents and school staff developed stronger relationships. As a teacher reported:

[The sessions] were intimate, and it was an eye-opener to hear the stories from the families.

It has helped parents become comfortable in the school. Even the parents who aren't of [my] students talk to me in the halls.

Parent working groups. During the spring semester, parents organized themselves into four working groups to address the concerns raised during the quilting project. Each working group addressed a priority for school improvement; the priorities included improvements in academic achievement, student behavior, communication, and diversity. Working groups

developed plans to address each priority and presented their ideas to school staff members. Based on suggestions from parents, school staff members created a list of parent engagement-activities to address each group's concerns.

Principal chats. Bimonthly roundtables involving the principal and parents created an opportunity for parents to share their concerns with the school's leader. The roundtables contributed to the school's atmosphere by improving access to staff members and school administration. Several staff members explained that the ability to meet with the principal and discuss school-wide issues was a valuable experience for parents. One teacher explained:

Our parents have commented on the visibility of the administration, and I think the parents see the principal's devotion to the students.

Roving Readers. Parents and school staff members launched the Roving Readers program to address concerns raised about student achievement. The program trains parents and other caregivers to read to students in classrooms throughout the school. Participants attend training where they learn strategies for reading aloud to children, both in the classroom and in their homes.

In addition to adding to the number of volunteer opportunities available to families, Roving Readers helped create a bridge between home and school. Through training, parents and other caregivers learned both the importance of reading to children and the importance of reading in non-school settings. One parent explained that Roving Readers opened opportunities for families to discuss books at home:

The students can form bonds with their parents and siblings by discussing the books shared. Roving Readers has helped strengthened the relationships between the home and the school community.

Effects of Parent Engagement

Improved communication. Research shows that positive communication between families and school staff enables stakeholders to gain an understanding of school goals, student learning needs, and effective home-support strategies for enhancing students' academic achievement (Hoover-Dempsey & Walker, 2002). Parents, teachers, and administrators agreed that the Tellin' Stories project helped to improve communication both among parents and between parents and school staff. Parents, for example, explained that participating in Tellin' Stories activities had helped them meet other families and learn more about the cultures represented in the school community. One parent said:

[Tellin' Stories] is about getting to know one another and about different cultures. In the process, we learn that we're all the same.

The openness in communication between parents and staff members and observations of the positive impact of parent engagement have encouraged more parents to share their thoughts and concerns with school staff. One parent explained:

Parents are more willing to share their ideas because they see that the school is moving in a direction that respects their opinion.

School staff members have also begun to think of new ways to share information with parents, including the involvement of students and parents with the delivery of morning announcements to share information about events and volunteer opportunities at the school.

Engaging new parents. Several features of Tellin' Stories have not only increased the number of parents engaged in the E.L. Haynes community but also expanded the diversity of parents who participate in activities. One staff member explained that the success of Tellin' Stories is its ability to “draw a diverse group of parents and parents who wouldn't normally participate” in similar activities. Parents who were either new to the school or had never participated in parent organizations explained that they were initially reluctant to become involved. However, after attending Tellin' Stories events, these parents became active participants in the project:

When I first came to this school, I didn't intend to participate in any parent engagement activities. When I came to [Tellin' Stories] on the first day, I found something different. I've come to participate in many activities.

Many of the features of Tellin' Stories influenced parents' decisions to participate. Some parents felt that it was friendlier and more personable compared to other parent-engagement activities in which they had participated.

I didn't participate in any parent activities before this. I was a little afraid of the PTA-type meetings, but I loved the idea of Tellin' Stories so I decided to come.

What attracted me to Tellin' Stories is that it is more personable instead of sitting in a meeting and being talked at.

Tellin' Stories parent-driven agenda was also a draw for many parents. One parent explained:

It's good for people to recognize that this is a parent vehicle. [We] can make changes through Tellin' Stories.

Improved school environment. Parents and school staff members who participated in interviews agreed that increased parent engagement and collaboration with school staff has had a positive effect on the school environment. Parents explained that the opportunity to interact with each other and with school staff has helped them feel part of the school community. One parent explained:

The parents and students feel more comfortable in the building. The activities that Tellin' Stories has provided has helped create that feeling.

School staff members explained that although the school has an open-door policy for parent visits, it needs to make a greater effort to encourage parents to attend events and volunteer in their children's classrooms. In one staff member's words:

We need to be more intentional about inviting parents to come in, especially for parents we don't see a lot. We need to be more creative about what we do.

Creating a culture of family engagement. A recent report by the Harvard Family Research Project describes family engagement as needing to be continuous across a child's life, entailing commitment and changing parent roles as children mature into young adulthood (Harvard Family Research Project, 2010). Tellin' Stories has helped foster a culture of family engagement among parents, one that many staff members hope will persist after students leave the elementary school. Two of the parents interviewed explained that their participation in Tellin' Stories has set a foundation for continued involvement in their children's education.

Tellin' Stories has made me more comfortable becoming more involved in my child's education. This is a place where we can express our ideas, and it's benefited both the parents and the children.

[Tellin' Stories] has helped me learn what I can do to help my child have the most fruitful experience in school that she can have.

Teachers and administrators said that setting the foundation for engagement would encourage parents to be involved in their child's education through college. Staff members hope to use parent-engagement opportunities to provide parents with resources to help them support their children beyond elementary school.

It's about encouraging parents to be involved in their child's education through college...we need to make the road clear for parents.

We're not just educating for E.L. Haynes, we're educating for life. It's vital that we speak about how [parents] can seek out resources for their children.

Changes to professional behavior. Increased parent engagement at E.L. Haynes had a positive effect on the professional behavior of teachers and school administrators, according to respondents. As several teachers and school administrators explained, increased parent involvement had increased educators' sense of accountability to the families served by the school.

[Parent involvement] holds us accountable to our students and the families in this school. I'm not afraid to work hard to build relationships.

It's definitely made me a better teacher. I expect high levels from my students, and the parents expect a lot from me...it's made me want to be more accountable to them.

Staff members also stated that the parent engagement initiative taught them new strategies to engage families. One teacher explained:

It's challenged me as a teacher to go beyond my normal strategies to engage parents and do things that I would have never done.

Recommendations from Participants

Parents and school staff members expressed their satisfaction with the Tellin' Stories project and the positive direction in which it has helped moved the school. Tellin' Stories helped create a welcoming environment in which parents could feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and concerns. Parents, teachers, and administrators appreciated the opportunity to learn from each other and work together to create an environment that supports student learning. As Tellin' Stories prepares to continue its work at the school, interviews with parents and school staff suggest that there are areas where the project can be improved to increase parent engagement. The following recommendations are offered based on suggestions offered directly by parents, teachers, and administrators.

Support parent attendance. Parents and school staff members commented that, although there is consistent attendance at Tellin' Stories events, they would like to see more parents participate in activities. Both groups recognize that certain challenges affect parent attendance, including transportation and scheduling conflicts, and suggested that parents and staff work together to improve attendance. For example, parents suggested hosting organizing events in the evenings and on weekends to improve attendance. One parent explained that it was challenging for her to attend meetings during the week and would like to see some activities on Friday evenings. Another suggested holding principal roundtables multiple times during the week so that parents would have more options to meet with school staff.

Clarify the purpose and goals of Tellin' Stories. Several parents interviewed explained that they were initially hesitant to attend Tellin' Stories events because they did not know what to expect from the project. One parent described the project as “mystical” but eventually became an active participant after attending several events. One of the parents interviewed said that clarifying the purpose and goals of Tellin' Stories might increase parent attendance:

I think there needs to be more of an explanation of what parents can expect at meetings; more parents might come out.

Parents and staff members who have participated in the project may consider delivering a presentation at the start of the school year that outlines the structure and goals of Tellin' Stories. Parents can also share their experiences informally with parents who are new to Tellin' Stories.

Informal conversations, in particular, can encourage parents to build relationships with new parents. As one parent explained:

Everything boils down to relationships. The point of this activity is to build relationships to make you want to come back to events.

Engage parents in student academics. Research on the effects of parent engagement on student learning concludes that an ongoing conversation between parents and teachers about their respective roles in students' learning is essential to building the relationships and understanding that promotes achievement (Redding, Langdon, Meyer, & Sheley, 2004). Teachers and administrators said that, while they are excited about the level of parent engagement at E.L. Haynes, they would like to see parents become more involved in academics.¹ One staff member, for example, explained that she would like more follow up on the *Hopes and Dreams* discussion in which parents engaged at the beginning of the school year. Staff members also suggested organizing more events for families with limited English ability to help them better understand learning standards and how they can support learning at home.

References

- Harvard Family Research Project. (2010). *Family engagement as a systemic, sustained, and integrated strategy to promote student achievement*. Retrieved August 15, 2011, from <http://www.hfrp.org/content/download/3633/102372/file/FINE-FamilyEngagementCommentary-Updated-061411-2.pdf>
- Hoover-Dempsey, K.V., & Walker, J.M.T. (2002). *Family-school communication*. Paper prepared for the Research Committee of the Metropolitan Nashville/Davidson County Board of Public Education, Tennessee.
- Redding, S., Langdon, J., Meyer, J., & Sheley, P. (2004). *The effects of comprehensive parent engagement on student learning outcomes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.

¹ During the first year of the project, Tellin' Stories activities focus on strategies to build relationships between parents and school personnel. Activities during the second year will build on these relationships to support strong academic partnerships between home and school.