TEACHING FOR CHANGE
Building Social Justice Starting in the Classroom

Tellin’ Stories Project of Teaching for Change
Professional Development for Parent Coordinators, Teachers, and Schools

Contact: Allyson Criner Brown, Associate Director, acbrown@teachingforchange.org

Background

Over 40 years of research shows us that involving families and the community contributes to children’s academic and social success. Despite this knowledge, schools and policymakers continue to grapple with ways to effectively engage all groups of parents in the education of their children. Many immigrant, low income and ethnic minority families do not feel welcome at their children’s school, let alone involved, and are marginalized from formal engagement in their child’s school. Parents are viewed as obstacles to their children’s progress and are often blamed for any shortcomings.

Teaching for Change has developed a highly successful approach to family engagement which successfully addresses the limitations of a one-size fits all approach. Tellin’ Stories has been recognized by the Harvard Family Research Project’s National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group as one of the most effective approaches in the country for engaging traditionally marginalized parents (2010). Our work is informed by research on best practices for engaging parents to improve student achievement; but most importantly, our work is field-developed and tested with the families so when theory and research conflict with families’ knowledge and experience, we revise our project to best meet the needs of our constituents.

Tellin’ Stories is a unique approach to parent engagement that begins with community building as the basis for leadership and collective action. When parents feel they have the power to change and control their circumstances, their children tend to do better in school. When schools work with families to develop connections, families become powerful allies and advocates for public education. All school staff, from the principal to the custodian, can benefit from learning more about how to work effectively with parents and community members.

Teaching for Change offers professional development and consulting for schools and school districts to implement a family engagement approach based research and best practices learned from our work in schools for more than 15 years.

Featured Professional Development Workshop

Between Families and Schools: Creating Meaningful Relationships

This full-day workshop engages participants in rethinking their assumptions about parent involvement and why traditional approaches are often unsuccessful.

Creative and effective alternatives are offered as participants develop strategies to effectively build relationships with parents. This workshop is tailored to the needs of participants and is particularly useful for teachers, school staff and administrators.
### Other Professional Development and Consulting Topics

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<th>Build a Better Back to School Night</th>
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### Quotes from Tellin’ Stories Partners

“The teachers really helped us [Spanish-speaking parents] learn how to help our kids with reading. We were closed to those activities and opportunities before, but now they are open to us.”

Parent, Thomson Elementary

“I think most of the benefit has been with the kids. They see their parents in the building, especially the first graders, and they are excited about learning every day. They know their parents know what they are learning and are connected to their school.”

Principal, Thomson Elementary

“Parents are WAY more involved, comfortable, and active here [at Orr] than before Teaching for Change started working with us. And way more so than I’ve seen in other schools.”

Teacher, Orr Elementary

“[With Teaching for Change] we’ve been able to have more conversations, to build connections with our parents.”

Academy Leader, CAPCS Amos II
### Assumptions About Parent Involvement

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<th><strong>TRADITIONAL ASSUMPTIONS</strong></th>
<th><strong>TELLIN’ STORIES ASSUMPTIONS</strong></th>
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<td>Schools determine how parents are involved. Parents’ roles are limited to fundraising, chaperoning and attending PTA meetings.</td>
<td>Families and school staff together decide meaningful ways for parents to be involved in multiple roles: as teachers, supporters, advocates, decision makers, ambassadors and monitors.</td>
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<td>Parents need to have specific skills to be resources. Many lack the capacity or willingness to be involved. (deficit-model)</td>
<td>All parents are resources to their children’s schools. Schools must recognize and cultivate the knowledge and strength of each family.</td>
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<td><strong>Starting point:</strong> Hold a PTA meeting and have parents sign up for committees.</td>
<td><strong>Starting point:</strong> building trust through sharing our stories.</td>
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<td>Diversity is a challenge. School culture must be imposed on the educational community.</td>
<td>Diversity is a strength. School culture and leadership must reflect the diversity of the school community, and racism must be addressed.</td>
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<td>School knows best, is solely responsible for decision-making, and passes knowledge on to families.</td>
<td>Everyone has knowledge and has children’s best interest at heart. Collaborative decision-making.</td>
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<td>A system-chosen standardized test determines accountability.</td>
<td>Families, schools and communities hold each other accountable.</td>
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<td>Parents who are not visible at the school are not contributing to their children’s education.</td>
<td>Parents who help their children at home to be ready for school each day are contributing to their education.</td>
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<td>Underlying message: parent involvement is not important for school success.</td>
<td>Parent involvement/family-school collaboration is required for school improvement</td>
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**Contact**

Allyson Criner Brown, Associate Director  
acbrown@teachingforchange.org
FOR MANY SCHOOLS, parent-teacher conferences, back-to-school night, and report card day are the only attempts to bring parents and teachers together. Typically, these meetings do little to foster sustainable parental engagement and sometimes the format even hinders meaningful collaboration.

Teaching for Change’s Tellin’ Stories initiative offers a powerful alternative with its signature activity, parent-teacher grade level dialogues. Grade level dialogues are structured conversations between parents and teachers regarding students’ academic success. In this format, teachers across a grade level host a communal meeting to exchange information with parents and find ways to support each other. Teachers share what the children are learning, how they are learning the content, and what strategies parents can use at home to encourage their child’s academic success.

The first grade teachers at Thomson Elementary School in Northwest Washington, D.C. host a dialogue every month. With the help of Mandarin and Spanish interpretation services via headset, their December gathering began with laughs and levity as the group of three teachers, 25 parents, and their children shared holiday memories to break the ice. Teachers Kate Solli, Jennifer Ijeoma Akujuo, and Katy McIntyre briefly explained that students were learning about shapes and asked parents to help collect unneeded 3D shapes around the house (such as tin cans and tissue boxes) for an ongoing project.

The teachers also introduced feedback charts to be sent back and forth between school and home. Solli explained, “We’ve spent four months with you and your children now. We want to know what’s been good for you, and what can we think about changing for the new semester.”

Afterward, the dialogue melted into a pleasant hour of simple holiday arts and crafts to show parents something they could do with their first graders at home over the holiday break.

Miriam Estabrook held her kindergarten dialogue in her classroom earlier in the month. During the hour, Estabrook showed parents examples of the worksheets, learning aids, games, and websites students were using in class. She also shared year-end goals, which included learning to count to 20 forward and backward, learning to recognize words as a foundation for reading, and learning how to write letters properly.

Parents thanked Estabrook for teaching their children but expressed concern that they felt unable to help in the process. One parent commented, “I feel like I’m not prepared to help my son. We try to do school work with him at home, but we don’t do a 100 percent job.” Another parent chimed in, saying, “Thanks for everything you do for our kids because at home we want to help them learn, but we’re working sometimes and don’t have the time.”
These and other comments led to an engaging discussion of homework, with some parents in favor and others against. Estabrook shared her own viewpoint, stating, “I think at this stage, what parents can contribute most at home is that their child is happy, well-rested, and ready to come to school. The most important thing in both parenting and teaching is that we do our best to be there for [the children].”

The group reached accord when she agreed to assign homework but suggested that parents regard it as an optional supplement. At the end of the gathering, parents left with individual packets filled with their child’s work, a copy of the book the class was currently reading, and information about resources online and at the city’s main library.

In November, at the fourth and fifth grade level dialogue at Orr Elementary School in Southeast D.C., parents gathered to hear about their children’s math and reading progress. Fourth grade teacher, Carla Grady explained that the goal was to have at least 90 percent of the class at reading proficiency as measured by the standardized DC CAS tests. She displayed and explained the scale on which reading progress was tracked and showed parents a few books their children were reading currently, as well as a few types they should be reading by the end of the year.

Fifth grade teacher, Jamila Thompson taught parents “The Five Finger Rule,” a handy trick to identify whether reading material was adequate. Thompson then listened to and answered parent questions, ranging from “Are there websites my child can visit to improve their reading?” to “How often are students tested?”

Next, fourth and fifth grade teacher, Ms. Butler showed parents the tiles and blocks used to help her students understand mathematic concepts, and suggested substituting similarly shaped household items as homework aids.

“Math has changed a lot from when I was growing up,” she said to everyone. “The way we teach math here in DC is changing, and so many parents across the city are asking, ‘What do I do?’”

Thompson picked up where Butler left off and walked parents through a long division problem using the Lattice method, which many parents say previously confused and prevented them from helping their children at home. Fourth and fifth grade teacher, Karla Lockhard subsequently closed the meeting with a mini-story quilting exercise, in which parents created small illustrations depicting what unique traits they contribute as parents, and what unique traits their child contributes as a student.

Teaching for Change’s spin on the parent-teacher conference offers several advantages over traditional formats, including:

- A communal, interactive forum that dispels adversarial or authoritarian undertones, which sometimes taint parent-teacher conference
- Time efficiency for teachers, who no longer have to prepare individual reports for each student
- Practical guidelines, tools, and activities that parents can use to help their child excel
- Opportunities to collaborate with peers and swap ideas
- A supportive community that helps both parents and teachers feel less isolated and more confident

When done well, grade level dialogues empower and equip parents to have direct impact on their children’s academic outcomes, foster a sense of support between parents and teachers, and encourage parents to get involved in their child’s school in other ways.

“It was different from a usual parent meeting,” said Ms. Owens, a parent. “There’s more parental involvement and questions. Before, I would just meet with the teacher.”

The Tellin’ Stories Project at Thomson Elementary and Orr Elementary is funded with support from the Cafritz Foundation, DC Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation, the Mayor’s Office on Latino Affairs, and an anonymous foundation.
IN A PROMISING START to the 2012-2013 school year, parents at Strong John Thomson Elementary (D.C. Public Schools) convened for the first of many discussions with Principal Carmen Shepherd.

Just after the start of the school day on September 7, about 30 parents—a few with toddlers or infants in tow—gathered in the large meeting room for the first Principal Coffee & Chat of the year. The hour long monthly meetings over light breakfast were established last year through a partnership with Teaching for Change's Tellin' Stories initiative as a way to foster conversation and effective collaboration between parents and school administrators.

Trinidad Lopez, parent of second- and fourth-graders, was happy to be included. “Thank you for opening your doors to the parents,” she said. “My kids are happy to see me participating at their school.” Principal Shepherd expressed delight at seeing a full room and thanked parents for a school-year start marked by high attendance and punctuality. Parents expressed their appreciation for the adult English classes offered at the school (which serve 24 parents so far), parental support, and caring teachers, among other things.

Aided by Spanish/English translation from Parent Organizer América Calderón, Principal Shepherd covered a wide agenda, including budget concerns, new faculty members, changing math strategies, and the rise in last year’s DC CAS scores. But the gathering became a true dialogue when the floor was opened for concerns. One of the most vocal parents, Atina Garcia, mother of a pre-kindergartener and third-grader, was concerned about inadequate homework time and unsanitary bathrooms during Power Hour. Another mother of two students, Imelda Marroquin, inquired about the delay in launching extracurriculars. With every issue raised, Principal Shepherd corrected misinformation, assured follow-up, and/or admitted to shortcomings. She then pointed out her issues with incomplete homework and lukewarm lunchtime volunteering.

The productive discussion adjourned around 10 a.m., and it was announced that this year, the gatherings would alternate between mornings and evenings to accommodate more parents and their schedules. The next Coffee & Chat is scheduled for October 5.

“[The chats] help us keep the lines of communication open. It’s not our only avenue for feedback, but it’s more personal,” Principal Shepherd explains. “This isn’t a gripe session. We set aside time for concerns, but we want to find solutions.”

Thomson Elementary enters its second year partnering with Teaching for Change using the Tellin’ Stories approach to family engagement. The initiative is funded in part through generous grants from the DC Children’s Youth Investment Trust Corporation, the Mayor’s Office on Latino Affairs, the Cafritz Foundation, and an anonymous foundation.
THE CORNERSTONE OF an effective parent engagement strategy is building relationships between parents, teachers, and administrators—but schools are becoming increasingly aware that traditional conferences and meetings with parents are not exactly engaging.

“How to Have Better Parent Meetings,” Teaching for Change’s third Cross-City Parent Coordinator Training of the school year, detailed the essentials for a successful parent meeting. Twenty local parent coordinators, parent leaders, and community and parent outreach coordinators from the DC Public Schools’ Head Start office gathered January 25 at the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO headquarters for a three-hour professional development session based on Teaching for Change’s nationally recognized approach to parent engagement, Tellin’ Stories.

Led by Teaching for Change’s senior parent organizer, América Calderón, the participants broke down traditional parent meetings and brainstormed effective ways to engage parents and forge connections. The groups explored topics such as the role and characteristics of a good facilitator, developing participatory agendas, and innovative outreach ideas (such as mailing charming invitations to parents). In the first exercise, participants compared the attributes of their best and worst meeting experiences.

Head Start parent coordinator Victoria Hightower shared, “My best meeting ever was the first workshop we had with América. Teaching for Change came to [Head Start] to teach us about parental engagement and I saw the light. I want my parents to feel how I felt at that meeting.”

In another helpful exercise, Calderón assigned each group one component of planning a great meeting—outreach, agenda, facilitation, parent participation, and evaluation), and challenged them to consider traditional, good, and great outcomes for each component.

“My team makes agendas but they’re very generic. When I look at them I don’t get a sense of what they’re doing,” Head Start family services team leader Adaugo Ohanyer-enwa said. “From these trainings I’m starting to see who’s good at planning parent meetings and who could use more support.”

Another Head Start team leader, Amy Goldwasser, agreed. “This [training] put lots of labels to things I’ve learned or done intuitively. I learned that PowerPoint is, for the most part, inappropriate at schools for parent coordinators to be successful,” she said.

Finally, the groups planned agendas for hypothetical parent meetings on a range of real-world topics and presented their agendas as a team. The resulting agendas were so good that the participants asked to have them printed and distributed as templates for their own parent meetings.

“This was one of the best professional developments I’ve attended in a long time,” Carrie Jasper of the U.S. Department of Education shared emphatically as the training came to a close.