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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Connecting Family Engagement to Academic Success</th>
<th>Build a Better Back to School Night</th>
<th>Develop a Family Literacy Program in Your School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop a Strong Family Engagement Work Plan</td>
<td>Designing Parent-Principal Chit Chats that Parents Want to Attend</td>
<td>Demystifying Parent Outreach and Recruitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a Welcoming School Climate</td>
<td>Effective Academic Parent-Teacher Dialogues</td>
<td>Cultural Sharing and Community Building with Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a Family-Friendly Parent Center</td>
<td>Improving Parent-Teacher Communication</td>
<td>The Secrets to Engaging Parent Meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn to be a Great Parent Coordinator</td>
<td>How to Share Data with Parents</td>
<td>Attendance, Testing, and ELL: How to Turn the Tough Topics into Engaging Parent Meetings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 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

#### Traditional Assumptions
- Schools determine how parents are involved. Parents’ **roles** are limited to fundraising, chaperoning and attending PTA meetings.
- Parents need to have specific skills to be **resources**. Many lack the capacity or willingness to be involved. (deficit-model)
- **Starting point**: Hold a PTA meeting and have parents sign up for committees.
- **Diversity** is a challenge. School culture must be imposed on the educational community.
- School knows best, is solely responsible for **decision-making**, and passes knowledge on to families.
- A system-chosen standardized test determines **accountability**.
- Parents who are not visible at the school are not contributing to their children’s education.
- Underlying message: parent **involvement** is not important for school success.

#### Tellin’ Stories Assumptions
- 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.
- All parents are **resources** to their children’s schools. Schools must recognize and cultivate the knowledge and strength of each family.
- **Starting point**: building trust through sharing our stories.
- **Diversity** is a strength. School culture and leadership must reflect the diversity of the school community, and racism must be addressed.
- Everyone has knowledge and has children’s best interest at heart. Collaborative **decision-making**.
- Families, schools and communities hold each other **accountable**.
- Parents who help their children at home to be ready for school each day are contributing to their education.
- Parent **involvement/family-school collaboration** is required for school improvement.

**Contact**

Allyson Criner Brown, Associate Director

[acbrown@teachingforchange.org](mailto:acbrown@teachingforchange.org)
Parents Tell Councilmember Catania: Our Children Deserve Classrooms

March 19, 2014

ORR (DCPS) PARENTS invited David Catania, Councilmember and chair of the Education Committee, to hear their stories and tour the building which badly needs modernization. Nearly 30 parents attended with their children, along with teachers and members of the local community. Parents expressed their concerns about the safety of the playground; stagnant air and poor natural lighting; places where the building is crumbling; and, most significantly, the open floor plan (in which there are no walls separating classrooms or hallways). The modernization was slated to begin eight years ago but has been delayed every year since.

Teaching for Change, a partner with the Orr Parent Center, helped plan and facilitate the event which featured parent leaders. A father talked about how his three-year old daughter wandered off from her classroom in her first week of school and could not be found for nearly an hour. “Where could she have gone if her classroom had walls and a door?” he asked the Councilmember. A teacher discussed how the open-space classrooms presents enormous challenges for himself and others, particularly where classrooms are separated only by a rolling chalkboard or less. A mother shared that her daughter’s asthma flares up so badly that she and the school have a plan for her daughter to be moved from the third floor to the first floor when she has episodes. Another mother shared how the school had not only wrapped itself around her son in Kindergarten, but also supported her; she recently earned her GED after getting information and support from Orr’s well-known Parent Center.

The consistent theme among parents and teachers was their love for the school and the staff, but yet the urgent need for the school to be modernized. Councilmember Catania thanked the parents for sharing their stories and pledged to be a champion for Orr’s modernization.

Parent Testimonials

From David, parent of two students

“Orr doesn’t have any windows or walls in their classrooms. I have become used to this over the years my children have been going here and hardly think about the walls and windows now. When I went to read to my daughters class that was all I could think about. While I was trying to read, everything was a distraction. A book that should have taken me 5 minutes to read took 20! Because there are no walls all the noises in the other classrooms are distractions. Other children talking, laughing, running, crying, teachers teaching or disciplining others, visitors walking around the school – anything can get the students off task. Because my child’s class is by the door, the teacher had to keep getting up to answer the door if people were trying to come onto the floor. It was exhausting to read to the students for those 20 minutes.

Now I have so much respect for the teachers. The teachers at Orr are not only great teachers, but they have to deal with no walls, no windows, no fresh air, old carpets and hardly
any supplies. Teachers at Orr have a harder job then teachers at other schools just because of the building and the set up. It’s not fair that their jobs are harder, that are building is old and falling apart and that our children are missing out on being able to pay full attention in their classrooms. We deserve the best for our students. Renovate Orr!”

From Cherise, parent

“The Orr community welcomed us with open arms. The teachers and the parents are really nice and supportive. But the building is shocking. There are no walls in the classrooms, no windows and definitely no technology. There are TVs in some classrooms but none of them work. The building is incredibly old, the paint is pealing, the carpet has permanent stains, all the furniture is old and breaking and there is no air circulation.

My son really likes his classmates and his teachers, but he doesn’t understand why the building is the way it is. He asks me, “Why does the school look like it’s falling apart?” I shouldn’t have to take him all the way [across town] to be in a safe building. Renovate Orr!”
MARIA LOPEZ* LISTENED intently as the interpreter shared the meeting with her in Spanish. The mother of a student who loves to read, Maria came to the 3rd grade’s parent-teacher Grade Level Dialogues to find out more about what her daughter is learning in the classroom.

The third grade team at Thomson Elementary (DCPS) planned two grade level dialogues for the evening of February 20, 2014 – one immediately after school and one at 5pm to accommodate the differences in parents’ schedules. They began with an ice breaker in which parents and teachers had to partner up and play a tag-like game called “Person to Person” collectively in English, Spanish, and Mandarin depending on the leader. After a good laugh and lots of moving around, the parents and teachers sat together at the table.

Teachers then asked the parents to share something special about their children. One mother talked about her son’s enthusiasm for researching new things, most recently dinosaurs. A father shared how he admired his daughter because she does not give up easily, even when she gets frustrated by her math problems. Another mother told how her children show the family their math problems on a small blackboard in the living room. Teachers also learned that one of their most shy students recently became more independent by learning how to wash the dishes and take the bus.

Maria shared that her daughter loves to read. She then asked the teachers directly, “What do you like about our children?”

Maria’s eyes widened and her face beamed with pride as Ms. Greaves shared that her daughter was writing a chapter book. “She is planning what will happen in each chapter and I am working with her on the story,” Ms. Greaves said.

Other parents heard that their children were self-driven and highly motivated, that they ask good questions, and that they are “super excited” to share what they know.

Finally, the teachers shared reading activities and math games parents could do at home with their children. Maria watched closely along with the other parents as the teachers played games with the students and modeled reading activities.

After sharing the games and activities, the teachers left time for parents to practice the games with their children or to ask questions. Before leaving, Maria shook hands with the interpreter and the teachers and flashed a smile of appreciation as her daughter gathered her backpack and the two of them headed home.

*Name has been changed
How to Connect with Families

To see real improvements in student learning, use the summer months to build good school–family relationships.

Ann T. Henderson and Melissa Whipple

Getting off to a good start with families may be more important than you know. Research shows that strong ties with families and community can make it far more likely that your students will make major gains in maths and reading. “The key is to build strong relationships with families that focus on improving student learning.”

To forge such connections, staff members in high-poverty schools who help low-income neighborhoods engage in the following actions:

- They become familiar with community issues and families’ home cultures.
- They use community resources.
- They invite families to observe in the classrooms.
- They work as partners with families to improve learning.
- They quickly respond to families’ concerns about their children.

But you don’t have to wait until September to begin making these connections. You can use these summer months to plan for or implement activities to get off to a great start in the fall.

A High-Touch Strategy

How would your families describe their neighborhood? Would your teachers see it the same way?

How would your families describe their neighborhood? Would your teachers see it the same way?

In an article for ASCD's Education Leadership, noted family engagement expert and author of Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships, Anne Henderson, challenges school leaders to build strong relationships with their families over the summer months by planning a Community Walk, a signature activity pioneered by the Tellin’ Stories Project of Teaching for Change.

The article, “How to Connect with Families,” recommends hosting a Community Walk as a “high-touch” strategy to engage with families and the school community. A Community Walk is a parent-led tour that highlights the resources and challenges of the school neighborhood. Many communities face challenges, from unemployment or gentrification to immigration to poverty. We need to learn from people with intimate knowledge of the issues and the wonderful but sometimes hidden resources of the community.

...Touring the neighborhood will help teachers and staff members appreciate the life and soul of the community where they teach, develop deeper relationships with families, identify community resources and, enrich instruction using what they learn about families’ cultures and backgrounds.