

# ASCD Express 13.02 - Organizing Your Most Powerful Allies

In Sync with Families

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## Organizing Your Most Powerful Allies

*Allyson Criner Brown*

A project of Teaching for Change based in Washington, D.C., [Tellin' Stories](#) is a unique approach to parent engagement that begins with community building as the basis for leadership and collective action. Through signature activities like Story Quilting, where family members' personal stories create the design of a collaborative quilt, and monthly parent-principal chitchats, Teaching for Change helps schools create deep connections with parents and caregivers. Those connections invite families to become powerful advocates not only for their own children but also for public education as a whole.

Allyson Criner Brown, Teaching for Change associate director and Tellin' Stories project manager, describes how the project expands traditional models of family engagement in schools.

### ***ASCD Express: Why is storytelling at the heart of parent engagement?***

**Allyson Criner Brown:** We focus on storytelling because we believe—and there's other research that validates this—that sharing our stories is an effective way to build relationships. Sharing our stories can help us see through the real and perceived barriers that divide us. If we're going to work together for the education our children deserve, sharing stories is an important way to build relationships that allow us to do that.

***Express:* How can parents' roles be limited within a school? How does the Tellin' Stories approach expand the possible roles for parents?**

**ACB:** The traditional model for parent engagement is built around a white, suburban, middle-class model that says parents can be fundraisers, chaperones, members of parent-teacher associations—or come to parent-teacher conferences or back-to-school nights and read to their child at home. For the families we work with, mostly low-income families of color, that is just not the most effective model. [[This chart](#) highlights traditional assumptions about family engagement.]

Instead of the school prescribing a few limited outlets for parent engagement, our model acknowledges that parents play multiple roles. They are their child's first teacher; they are supporters, advocates, decision makers, ambassadors, and monitors. Often, the parents we serve are seen as not being capable of these roles, and a lot of schools aren't sure how to build the partnerships that allow families to step into these roles. Schools tend to put a premium on parents who have higher-education experience and tailor engagement strategies to that group. We believe, as laid out in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, that people's lived experiences are also valid forms of knowledge. Pairing this inclusive view of parent strengths with the fundamentals of community organizing creates the platform for families of color and low-income families to step into a variety of influential roles in the school community.

This is community organizing 101: you start by building relationships, and you use that to have people, across the community, talking about what they want to act on.

***Express:* What school practices can contribute to strained relationships between educators and parents? What can educators do to avoid these misunderstandings?**

**ACB:** If a school doesn't have a welcoming, friendly environment where each person who comes to the school feels respected, that's one of the first things that can turn a parent or caregiver off. I can't tell you how many family members I've talked to say, "I went to the school, and the person at the front desk was rude to me." And that was their last contact with the school.

Part of having a friendly, welcoming culture across the school involves being open to opportunities for families to play a real role in school decision making. For example, as part of our partnerships with schools, we require principals to have an open monthly meeting called a "Parent-Principal Chit Chat."

These meetings have high attendance rates because we treat them as community building opportunities—we do things to make it a warm welcome, like including an icebreaker that everyone participates in. We also treat parents and caregivers as people who are invested in their child's school and education and actively seek to partner with them and invite them into decision making—whether those decisions are big or small. For example, at one of our principal chats, the school was undergoing a building modernization, so the principal brought in catalogs of the playground equipment that she had to choose from. Parents broke into groups and took 10 minutes to review the catalogs and then weighed in on what kind of playground equipment they wanted to have at the school.

In another meeting, a principal wanted to talk to parents about whether the preK–8 school should "departmentalize" the 1st and 2nd grades. When he approached me with this topic, I said, "We're not going to use the term 'departmentalize,' because that's going to be unfamiliar to parents." So we ran that meeting as an interview. I interviewed him Oprah style. We talked about the issue in plain language, and we walked families through the pros and cons of having multiple subject area–specific teachers in the 1st and 2nd grades. He respected their input, and, in the end, the school departmentalized the 2nd but not the 1st grade. When people feel welcome and valued, when you

invite them to the meeting, they are more likely to come.

***Express:*** **The field-tested nature of your project allows you to pivot the approach based on families' needs. Can you talk about a time when that happened?**

**ACB:** We have a core of signature activities—like the story quilting and parent-principal chitchats—and we come to our partner schools over the summer with a draft plan for engagement, which is based on conversations with stakeholders. We revise that plan once we meet with parents in mid-September and find out what issues are important to them. But even then, that plan can shift at any moment based on community needs.

Last year, we had set our engagement plans for all our partner schools, and then the presidential election results came in. Suddenly, a lot of our parents' fears became immediately tangible. We're working in schools with large immigrant populations. If there's someone in the family without legal documentation, there's heightened concern; but even in the families with legal documentation, there's incredible concern. After the November 2016 presidential election, we immediately [held meetings with parents](#).

We didn't want to make any assumptions, so we structured the meetings so that people could share how they felt the election was influencing them directly, how their children were feeling, and what they thought the school and administration should know. Then we supported the administration in thinking about how parents could be a part of making sure all the children in the school felt safe, because there was a lot of uncertainty and anxiety. One thing that came out of that was that parents wrote messages of encouragement to the students so that they would know they were safe, loved, and looked out for. Messages from parents were put up on the walls of the schools to reaffirm that when you are in these communities, you are safe and loved. Instead of the school making a statement about the election results, we helped the parents and school figure out how to craft a response together. These experiences build the relationships and sense of community that are a

springboard to other family-led or -centered actions—like workshops on immigration and immigrant rights, establishing community-supported funds for immigration legal fees, and organizing white parent allies to accompany immigrant parents going for their Immigration and Customs Enforcement check-ins.

We don't prescribe what family engagement should look like in your school. Tellin' Stories is an approach and a toolbox, so when parents say something like, "We don't know what's going on in the classroom," we can turn to our toolbox and say, "OK, we have a couple of activities that address that—that's our grade-level dialogues and our academic classroom visits."

We're still doing reading workshops, teacher appreciation week, the spring carnival—but we're also looking at the things that are important to the school community and figuring out how families and schools can work together to support that.

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Laura Varlas is the project manager for *ASCD Express*.

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