

*The Chicago Teachers' Center (CTC) of Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU) has developed an approach to building family partnerships that is based on CTC's collaborative work with schools and communities, informed by the body of research on the relationship between parental involvement and student success (Estes, 1997) and grounded in the belief that adult learners are self-directed, goal-oriented, and capable (Moll, et al., 2001). CTC programs build on the fact that adult learners have "accumulated a growing reservoir of experience, which is a rich source for learning" (Knowles, 1980).*

**For More Information  
Contact:**

Margaret Boyter-Escalona  
m-boyter@neiu.edu  
312-563-7106  
Parent Services Manager

## The Issue

Effective partnerships with families are essential to creating and sustaining high quality schools, but this is very challenging. Research establishes that when parents are actively involved in supporting their children's learning, no matter their income level, social status, language, culture, or race; students have more positive attitudes, better attendance, and higher test scores, higher graduation rates, and greater enrollment rates in post-secondary education (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Programming focused on increasing parental involvement is particularly important in large urban areas in which poverty, racial, ethnic, and language differences can be obstacles to positive connections between families and schools.

## Communities of Adult Learners

CTC partners with a variety of public schools in majority Latino and African American neighborhoods across the city of Chicago and in the near western suburbs of Berwyn and Cicero. In Chicago, 42.1 percent of Latinos are foreign-born according to the 2005-2007 American Community Survey (ACS) analysis by the Latino Policy Forum. In the 4th Congressional District where most of our majority Latino schools are located including those in Cicero and Berwyn, 46.3 percent are foreign born. Of the Latino population five years and over in Chicago, 99.1 percent speak a language other than English at home and 44.8 percent speak English less than "very well." In the 4th District, 92.1 percent of the Latino residents speak a language other than English at home and 51 percent report that they speak English less than "very well." (self-reported measure, 2005-2007 Community Survey three-year testimonials)

Many Latinos in Chicago, Berwyn, and Cicero are Mexican immigrants from rural and semi-rural areas. Those who are parents of children enrolled in our schools are often monolingual Spanish-speakers with limited education. Most schools in Mexico are more formal than those in the United States, and parents are not encouraged to participate in school life in the way that U.S. schools are presently using to interface with parents.





The idea of participating in the school-family dialogue is often new to these immigrant parents because of their unfamiliarity.

The British-based Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reaffirms that parent involvement in schools in Mexico is growing, but is still limited. Poorer areas of the country would most benefit from this involvement, but these parents do not have the means to be involved (Hopkins, et al., 2007). Similarly, on this side of the border, Valdes (1996) finds that when families emigrate from Mexico to the U.S., they are “living lives that require large amounts of energy to survive.” Though Valdes studied families living in the southwestern U.S., immigrant families in Chicago, Berwyn, and Cicero face these same struggles with low paying jobs, often in the disappearing manufacturing sector, language issues, immigration status, low education rates in the home country, and adaption to a new culture. These factors require “a more personalized approach to interacting with families” (Valdes, 1996).

In the African American communities, many parents have widely divergent feelings about their own schooling experience. The parents who had negative experiences often do not feel comfortable taking part in school-family relationships and activities, while parents who are involved in the civil rights movement have advocated for the establishment of principal selection committees at local schools. Also, changing economics affect this community.

“The near collapse of our financial system has been devastating, but the impact on communities of color has been catastrophic,” says Herman Brewer, acting president and CEO of the Chicago Urban League at their April 2010 spring summit. The organization also unveiled its new education policy recommendations which included, among other key points, family engagement in learning.

Over the last ten years, CTC has found that parents from both the Latino and African American communities are steadily embracing the concept of parent engagement and involvement in the community of school, but this occurs only after a foundation of trust has been firmly established.

CTC mirrors James Comer’s view “the need for parent participation is greatest in low-income and minority communities or wherever parents feel a sense of exclusion, low self-esteem and/or hopelessness” (1980).

### Historical and Philosophical Approach

Building trust, understanding, and mutual cooperation with families is the cornerstone of CTC’s approach to developing family partnerships. CTC values parents’ experiences and knowledge through interactive engagement.

CTC has long emphasized the relational approach, placing human relationships and their nurturance at the heart of the school reform dialogue. Strategies in reaching out to parents follow this same paradigm of building openness and trust (Olson, 1998). Our programming builds upon parents’ current knowledge base to address their self-identified goals for future knowledge. Program staff meet the parents as learners, acknowledging that adults possess a myriad of experiences or funds of knowledge to contribute and to build upon. Defined by researchers Moll, Amati, Neff, and Gonzalez (2001), funds of knowledge refers to the “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p. 133).

In the 1991 study *Principals Speak*, researchers found that the basic structure of roles and relationships in public school systems tend to be bureaucratic, not collaborative (Seeley, 1990), excluding parents of immigrant or disenfranchised students from the school-home dialogue process. The New York City School principals in this study called for a new partnership model and proposed viewing families as resources to the school and its students.

From this starting point, CTC developed a strong program educating and organizing parents to be partners in their children’s schools. The ground was fertile for this growth, as the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988 had radically changed the structure of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), by creating a Local School Council (LSC) at all schools. The LSC consists of six parents,

two community members, two teachers and the principal. The LSC chair, who is elected by the Council, must be a parent. The LSC has the power to hire and evaluate the principal, approve the annual School Improvement, and the budget.

Chicago is the only large urban district to decentralize to the local school level, giving significant powers usually invested in elected public officials to parents, community residents and teachers. This decentralization has led to the institutionalization of resources for immigrant parents, which increases parent involvement, improves community relations, and ultimately reduces achievement gaps. (Marschall, 2008). With this 1988 law, principals had to look to their communities for support. Giving parents decision-making authority helps to balance the authority of professionals (Epstein & Dauber, 1991, Dauber & Epstein, 1993).

Like CTC, many Chicago community based organizations believe that parents can help shape education. These organizations have often partnered with CTC, including Youth Guidance which implements Comer’s model of family engagement; the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA), which trains parents as literacy ambassadors; and Designs for Change which supports parents as reading aides in schools.

In 1992, when LSCs began, CTC incorporated a learner-centered educational approach with adults in the context of a federally funded Worker Education Program. Workers in the program were often parents of children attending CPS, so engaging families in CTC’s school improvement efforts was a natural outcome. Parents grasped a better understanding of their children’s school experiences and better served their communities by becoming involved in their schools (Estes, 1997, p. 9). CTC refined its model of family partnerships with funding from the Chicago Annenberg Challenge, the U.S. Department of Education, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, and Arthur Foundation. Currently CTC serves more than 6,350 families.

CTC’s approach, grounded in best practices in adult education and rooted in worker education, recognizes families as contributing members of society who have much to offer the school community (Estes, 1997, pp. 7-8). The model is assets-based, adhering to the concepts of Paulo Freire: (a) that adult learners/parents have rich and varied life experiences; (b) adults’ deep reservoir of experiences must be tapped in order to optimize learning; and (c) it uses problem posing education where people “come to feel like masters of their thinking by discussing the thinking and views of the world... because this view of education starts with the conviction that it cannot present its own program but must search for this program dialogically...” (Wallerstein, 1987). Freire’s metaphor aptly fits: learners are not receptacles to be filled up with information (Freire, 1970).

This long history of recognizing families as active, knowledgeable partners in supporting student success is the foundation for an approach that develops respectful, trusting relationships as well as true school learning communities in which families, educators, students and community partners collaborate (Epstein, 2005). The CTC model empowers adults to express their concerns, create solutions, and provide leadership to meet challenges throughout their children’s education.

A wide range of programming grows out of this community-based relational approach. When beginning a school partnership, CTC initiates opportunities to meet parents through existing parent organizations. Parents participate in needs assessments to help identify community priorities. In response, CTC collaborates with parents to create an array of academic, cultural

*“What we are doing at CTC is developing and nurturing a culture of achievement, not only in the schools, but in the communities as well.”*

**Wendy M. Stack, Director**  
Chicago Teachers’ Center and  
GEAR UP Chicago Alliance







and social-emotional workshops meeting these needs. Through this process, transformative learning occurs and parents are valued for what they bring to the process. This perspective transformation can cause them to critically reflect on and ultimately change their and their families' lives as well (Mezirow, 1995).

Perspective transformation occurs frequently in CTC sponsored book clubs. These sessions spark deepening conversations where parents share their own struggles. The power of these discussions is evident in one mother's statement after reading Don Miguel Ruiz's *The Four Agreements*. She said that the book opened her eyes and she became less demanding of her family, knowing they were "doing their best." These informal interactions also demonstrate the importance of life-long learning.

## Strategies for Parent Involvement

### Parent Advocate Model

One of the key strategies CTC uses to increase parental involvement is its parent training model, a process that hires and trains Parent Advocates to take leadership roles in: (a) identifying needs/interests, (b) recruiting parents, (c) organizing and facilitating programming, and (d) leading presentations at local and national conferences on effective roles for families in education.

By supporting Parent Advocates, CTC programs increase the presence of parents in the schools. Parent advocates are insiders who are leaders in their local communities, and know first-hand the struggles of families in low-income neighborhoods with high crime rates and low school completion rates. This familiarity is comforting and builds a trust so they can educate other parents about issues in the education pipeline -- from early childhood learning to college preparation.

CTC has found this grass roots connection to be at the heart of a successful parent program because it provides them with an avenue for personal and professional growth. The program-wide result is a highly effective team of deeply committed individuals from the school communities who work cooperatively toward achieving common goals with measurable results. Many parents have gone on to further their own education and have facilitated workshops. Other parents have gone on to take leadership positions in their schools and communities. Carmen began as a parent of a school ten years ago. Now, she is the parent coordinator of one of the participating high schools. Likewise, Dolores was once a cohort parent, and now she leads sessions at a Summer Academy.

### Parent-Teacher Connections

Creating direct connections among parents, teachers, and students is critical to supporting strong relationships based on mutual respect. "When parents send us their child, they are sending us the very best they have, the very best child they could produce," says Christy McNally, a 7th grade teacher in Kansas (Paulu, 2003). Recognizing this is the first step teachers and staff must take toward building respect and trust for the shared learning experiences that help to level the playing field and unite participants in their common goal of supporting students. Collaboration between parents and teachers enhances the children's learning in the classroom (Boyter-Escalona, 2005).

Parents now participate in professional development opportunities with teachers and support children's learning in classrooms. Parents take part in CTC's Teacher Professional Development sequence that includes the Young Adult Literature (YAL) Conferences, Inquiry-Based Curriculum Development Institutes, and Summer Academies. In addition to increasing substantive parent/teacher interactions, this programming helps to address cultural and language differences among parent groups and between parents and staff, supports bi-literacy and mutual learning, and has subsequently led to Literature Alive, a conference that is organized by and for parents.

## Key Parent Initiatives

### Book Clubs

Parents involved in CTC's teacher professional development literature conferences have organized book clubs that include book titles their children are read-

ing in school. CTC's Parent Advocates organize parent book clubs at the schools to read and discuss books identified through parent surveys. Parent Advocates, facilitate group discussions in the book clubs. They also lead arts activities and other projects planned around themes from the books.

Over time, book club selections have become more challenging and reflect parents' deepening interest in themes related to culture, gender and family. From genres in self-help to great literature and authors from Stephen Covey to Walter Dean Myers, to Isabel Allende, the book selections represent parents' growth. Book clubs are now held in many of CTC's partner schools, and in each case, the clubs maintain respect for parents' choices in titles and provide support for expanding their interests.

### Conferences

Program-wide activities such as the *Literature Alive* Conference feature authors of book club selections speaking about their work. CTC supports large-scale events that bring families and educators together around literature. In addition, to *Literature Alive*, CTC has created *Voces* and *Feria del Libro*, both of which are conferences that consist of author discussions, and roundtables for parents, children and teachers, including collaborative parent/teacher presentations followed by individual workshop opportunities for each group that are held over several days. Most books featured at these bilingual/ bicultural events are available in Spanish and English and many are included in the school curriculum.

### Workshops

Based on needs assessment, CTC creates customized curriculum and conducts workshops in the parents' native language. CTC acknowledges parents' experience and prior knowledge by engaging them in these relevant workshops often facilitated by parent advo-

ates. In this way, parents become directly involved in their children's education and improve their own life-long learning goals. Overarching themes include: Achieving Personal and Family Goal Setting; Overcoming the Barriers to Academic Success; Building Knowledge about the School System and College Readiness; and Securing Resources for College. Other workshops focus on arts integration, team building, computer applications, and cultural events. These workshops build and expand on cultural and social capital.

## Program Outcomes

As the direct result of the camaraderie among parents and staff, parents' perspectives have been transformed. Mothers who were once too shy to come out of their homes or congregate with other parents in front of the school, are now participating in book clubs. Others are enrolling in ESL, GED, or college courses, and still others are taking lead roles facilitating trainings, in LSCs and in classrooms with teachers. They perceive themselves and their communities in new and more powerful ways. Betty, a Parent Advocate, stated, "Without this program, I never thought that my child could go to college."

Parents' leadership capacity will remain long after CTC-funded programs are gone. By building and sustaining parent networks, CTC is igniting a legacy of strong parent presence and an enhanced support system for students. This model for successful community connections is highly replicable nationwide.

CTC believes, like Yates, that "education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire." Our experience collaborating with families bares this out after almost 20 years of innovative partnerships.

*"We don't package curriculum...We tap into the experience and the expertise of our parents, who have lots of wisdom, lots of experience. Many of our parents were isolated...CTC became a source of community involvement."*

**Margaret Boyter-Escalona**  
Chicago GEAR UP Alliance  
Parent Services Manager



### Transforming Families through Innovative Programing

Silvia, a book club participant, began to expand her reading material from the Readers' Digest and TV Guide to YAL titles, including *Bud not Buddy*, a book her daughter had been assigned in school and they began to read it together. Silvia took full advantage of parent programs and remained an active reader. She has attended and presented at conferences for both parents and teachers. Silvia believes that modeling the behavior of a reader and leader strongly influenced her daughter's goal of becoming a lawyer.

"This program has had a positive impact on the parents and students at my high school. The program has also strengthened the bond between my daughter Paulette and me. We have had an opportunity to attend two overnight college visits together. As a result, we have ongoing conversations about college. After our last college trip to Illinois State University, my daughter is less apprehensive about leaving home for college. The Program has also provided many opportunities for parents to come in the school. Many times parents are only invited to school if their child has done something wrong. CTC invites parents for positive experiences."

Shirley

"The workshops helped me communicate better with my children and they also gave me tools to prepare my children so they can attend college. It was a joy being part of the Parent Book Club because reading in the book club gave us an opportunity to relate to the books through our own life experiences."

Maria Evilia

"This program has helped to develop an academic aspiration in our daughter. She has received great motivation, specifically on college visits, and her academic level is soaring, dreams about higher education increased. As parents it has helped us to develop a reading habit, to participate in school and community activities, our lives have been turned around and [we have] become enthusiastic readers."

Acasio and Minerva

"This program has been very important to me because it has helped me to create a bridge with my son. Now he is aware of my involvement in his school, and I don't feel isolated anymore because I know what is happening."

Yolanda



### Parent Advocates as Community Insiders and Outreach Links

Norma did not have many educational opportunities or support growing up. She was told that "college wasn't for her." Working as a Parent Advocate became the opportunity for her to tap into her natural abilities. She created a family support system in her school, ran the food pantry, linked parents to social services, spearheaded fundraising activities and involved families in the community. Norma developed curriculum with teachers in institutes and worked alongside teacher/artist teams in summer programs. She presented at conferences and helped to solidify the base of programs and parental involvement at CTC. Setting an example for her own children, Norma also attended GED classes despite her failing health.

Mildre, identified the need to hold one-on-one tutorials with parents to help them use the CPS reporting system to access their children's data. This individual method reached otherwise isolated parents. In a community of immigrants, where hundreds of different small towns and cities of origin may be represented, social networks are absent and it is difficult to connect with others in the new city. By offering multiple ways to be involved, parent-to-parent partnerships are fostered. Whereas meeting in large groups might feel intimidating, Mildre's individual approach offered a collaborative method to access a world of information on a new school system in a very different culture.

Maria, a Parent Advocate, noticed fliers advertising CTC's YAL Conference for teachers and wondered if parents could attend this conference. This may seem like a simple request, but given the normal separation of school and home cultures in this immigrant community, the request to attend a professional conference for teachers was a transformational moment. This request led to program-wide book clubs now run for and by parents at each school. Parents have only needed initial guidance and support before launching these programs that have quickly become cornerstones of our work.





## References

- Boyter-Escalona, M. (2000). Taking the parent role and re-defining it for the school. *In Annenberg Challenge Saucedo Network newsletter*.
- Comer, J. P. (1980). *School power*. New York: The Free Press.
- Dauber, S. L. and Epstein, J. L. (1993). Parents' attitudes and practices of involvement in inner-city elementary and middle schools. In Chavkin, N.F. (Ed.), *Families and Schools in a Pluralistic Society* (53-72). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press
- Epstein, J. L. and Dauber, S. L. (1991). School programs and teacher practices of parent involvement in inner-city elementary and middle schools. *The Elementary School Journal*, 91(3), 289-305.
- Epstein, J. L. (2005). Links in a professional development chain: Preservice and inservice education for effective programs of school, family, and community partnerships. *The New Educator*, 1(2), 125-141.
- Estes, F. (1997). *Partners in progress. A monograph on the worker education program of Northeastern Illinois University*, Chicago, IL: Chicago Teachers' Center Press.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. London, UK: Continuum Publishing Company.
- Henderson, A. T. and Berla, N. (1994). The benefits of parent participation in schooling. *A new generation of evidence: The family is critical to student achievement*. St. Louis, MO: Danforth Foundation and Flint, MI: Mott (C.S.) Foundation.
- Henderson, A. T. and Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, Family and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: National Center of Family & Community Connections with Schools: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.
- Henderson, A. T. and Mapp, K. L. (2007). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to Family-School Partnerships*. New York: The New Press.
- Knowles, M.S. (1980). The modern practice of adult education. *Pedagogy to andragogy* (2nd ed.) (44-45). New York: Cambridge Books.
- Marschall, M.J. (2008). *Local School Councils and Parent Involvement in Chicago*, Vol. XIV, Number 1 & 2, Harvard Family Research Project
- Mezirow, J. (1995). Transformation theory of Adult Learning. In Wehlton, M.R. (Ed.), *In defense of the life world* (39-70). New York: SUNY Press.
- Moll, L., Amanti, C., Neff, D. and González, N. (2001). Funds of knowledge for teaching: A qualitative approach to connect households and classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 31(2), 132-141.
- Olson, J. B. (1998). *A Relational Approach to School Improvement, Dialogues and Perspectives* (2). Chicago, IL: Chicago Teachers' Center Press.
- Paulu, N. (2003). *Helping your students with homework: A guide for teachers*. Office of Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, 32.
- Seeley, D. S. (1990). Restructuring schools and school leadership. *Principals speak: Improving inner-city elementary schools*. The Principals Speak Project, The College of Staten Island/CUNY.
- Torres, M. V. (2009). *The blueprint for Latino investment: A Latino legislative agenda*. Public Policy Institute of the Illinois Legislative Latino Caucus Foundation Latino Policy Forum
- Valdes, G., (1996). *Con respeto: Bridging the distance between culturally diverse families and schools: An ethnographic portrait*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Wallerstein, N. (1987). *Problem-posing education: Freire's method for transformation*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books.

