



# Parents and Teachers Talking Together (PT3)

## *Introduction Information*

On average, parents and teachers spend only 15 minutes a year talking to each other. 15 minutes!

At a time when learning expectations are being raised for all students in all schools, it is more important than ever that the two groups most responsible for student learning — parents and teachers — better understand each other.

### **What do parents and teachers most want for our students? And what do we need to do to get what we want for our students?**

These two questions are paramount. Answers to them are at the heart of this four-hour workshop, which was developed by Kentucky's Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence. Since 1994, over 14,000 teachers and parents have used it as a platform to talk about changes occurring in Kentucky's schools.

This platform brings together the two groups of adults who are most concerned and most knowledgeable about students — parents and teachers. It is the start of a different kind of conversation between these adults who need to know each other and understand the changes and challenges being seen in classrooms. Research shows that when parents are involved in their child's school, students perform better and the school improves. Parents and teachers, talking and building a relationship, are a powerful combination.

This four-hour workshop (plus time for a meal) is perfect for organizations such as parent information centers, family resource centers, community education funds, parent-teacher groups, school-based decision making councils and schools. To facilitate open conversation, the discussion groups are small and informal and focused exclusively on identifying educational needs and implementing the changes necessary to meet them.

### **Thousands of Participants,**



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## Encouraging Results

For many of the over 14,000 parents and teachers served by the program, these sessions mark the first time they ever really share what they think about education. The results have been hugely encouraging.

Parents and teachers who participate in *Parents and Teachers Talking Together* sessions report increased understanding and concern for each other. In fact, facilitators talk about the “magic” that occurs during the session when parents and teachers begin to understand each other better. Parents and teachers also report an increased awareness of the school — its needs, concerns and priorities. And it all comes about in such a positive way that the actions first discussed during the event often are implemented.

Many schools use *Parents and Teachers Talking Together* sessions as a “needs assessment,” giving schools input from parents for their school improvement plan. Schools often find it challenging to obtain good input from parents for the plan. The event provides not only a list of desires, but also some practical ideas for actions to be taken.

Tamarack Elementary in Owensboro, Kentucky, for example, sent copies of the charts generated in its *Parents and Teachers Talking Together* session to every teacher and parent — along with a cover letter saying the ideas were being given to appropriate committees of the school-based decision-making council for action.

Experience shows that the most frequent responses to the second question of *Parents and Teachers Talking Together* — “What do we need to do to get what we want for our students?” — are:

- Create more and clearer communication among parents, teachers and administrators.
- Encourage more and meaningful parent involvement.
- Provide resources, technology, supplies and time.
- Model positive problem-solving behavior by adults who are good role models, mentors and guides.
- Set clear, realistic expectations and high standards for student achievement.
- Help parents and teachers work together, take responsibility and be accountable.
- Provide a positive school climate.
- Show appreciation and recognize when someone does a good job.
- Respect parents, teachers, students and administrators.
- Reduce the student-teacher ratio.



These answers set in motion the solutions required to make a real difference for children. Teachers and parents often admit that the discussion makes them more aware of the need to issue invitations to parents to come to the school and be more involved. They recognize that one-on-one contact is essential for reaching the harder-to-reach parents.

Many realize that they must use various communication strategies. At Fairview Elementary in Boyd County, Kentucky, for example, one parent volunteered to write and edit a school newsletter. Another volunteered to type each issue. With these commitments, the principal agreed to find the money to copy and distribute the newsletter throughout the entire community because those attending the session believed local businesses, churches and other community groups should receive it..

The impact can be ongoing. One school hung the charts generated during the *Parents and Teachers Talking Together* session in the teachers' lounge and regularly checked to see how the school was doing against the actions planned. In Graves County, Kentucky, the superintendent strongly encouraged all principals to schedule a session. As incentive, he provided stipends for both teachers and parents. Results were compiled and studied by administrators, teachers and parents. Common areas of need in the district were identified.

The impact can be very personal, too. After many sessions, parents and teachers alike are heard making comments such as, "We realized we share the same concerns and desires," and "You know, they really do care about our children." After sharing several hours and a meal together, talking about what they want for their children, parents and teachers form comfortable relationships that lead to much better communication. They have engaged in a different kind of discussion than they ever have before. It is the start of something they want to continue and are not likely to forget.

### **How Can a *Parents and Teachers Talking Together* Session Be Modified?**

The *Parents and Teachers Talking Together* structure is simple and can be adapted to meet specific needs in a community. In Kentucky, sessions have brought together students and teachers, business people and teachers, and business people and administrators. Questions may be modified somewhat. For example, participants might be asked, "How do we as a community define student success?" "How do we as a community work together to ensure success for all our students?" Caution: If you choose to modify questions, make sure you leave them open ended so they generate a variety of ideas. Once questions are posed, participants respond with exciting and unanticipated answers that lead to productive discussion.

In other instances, the questions can be modified to address specific concerns. In southeast Kentucky, for example, organizers conducted sessions with low-performing schools. The questions were modified to address academic achievement, becoming "What do we want our students to achieve?" and "What do we need to do



to get them to achieve at higher levels?" In northeast Indiana, the process was used in support of a literacy program in elementary schools. The questions became, "What do we want for our students as they learn to read?" and "What do we need to do to get what we want in terms of literacy?"

### **We Want To Hear from You**

This guide provides all the information a trained facilitator needs to conduct a quality *Parents and Teachers Talking Together* workshop. However, we have found that communities benefit more when on-site facilitator training accompanies this guide. One model that has worked well is for Prichard Committee staff to conduct an actual *Parents and Teachers Talking Together* session while a small number of trainees observe, and then conduct facilitator training with those observers the next day. Please contact us if you are interested in exploring such an approach.

Regardless of how you decide to proceed, we would like to hear from you. After your community conducts a *Parents and Teachers Talking Together* meeting, tell us how it went. What are your shared priorities? Where will you start? What are you accomplishing?

## *Planning a Parents and Teachers Talking Together Meeting*

You need at least three people to conduct a meeting like this successfully. Ideally, one-person (more, if possible) will take responsibility for coordinating the event — organizing, recruiting and being there to ensure that things run smoothly. In addition, two facilitators will guide the discussion. This chapter describes the roles of the coordinator and facilitators, and offers helpful checklists to keep track of the work.



## **Coordinator's Checklist**

### **Obtain Facilitators**

- Identify two community volunteers willing to be trained to conduct the sessions.
- Provide facilitator training. There are two options. Experienced facilitators may simply need to study this guide thoroughly before the event. Or, you can contract with the Governor's Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership, which will provide facilitator training.

### **Enlist Assistance**

Identify volunteers to help plan and conduct the event.

### **Determine Focus**

*Should this be a district wide discussion? Or should it focus on one school?*

If the discussion is to focus on one school, consider working with that school's leadership and/or parent-teacher group.

Ensure that all dialogues include both parents and teachers — up to 15 of each to be divided into subgroups. Each subgroup should range from five to 15 participants; groups need not be the same size.

### **Schedule a Meeting Place and Time**

Remember, allow four hours, plus time for a meal.

Allow space for a maximum group of 30 participants.

Select a site where a group of up to 30 can be divided into two small work groups and then can reconvene. Options include:

- one large room and one smaller room for a group of 15;
- one room large enough for two groups to work at opposite ends of the space; or
- one large room for large-group meeting and eating, and two smaller rooms for groups of 15.

Locate a setting that is hospitable and informal. Options include a school, a church social hall, a community center or a private home.

Provide adequate supplies:

- two easels that hold flip-chart pads



- two flip-chart pads
- colored markers
- two rolls of masking tape
- name tags
- two sets of 100 or more contrasting colored dots, such as Avery 3/4" Color Coding Labels
- four to five 5" x 8" Post-it pads

Arrange for the appropriate room setup for both the large group work and the two small groups

### **Arrange for Refreshments**

Because food entices participants, discuss options for obtaining food for the event. A lunch or dinner would be appropriate for a four-hour event.

- Determine sources of food and/or money for food.
- Make arrangements for food service at the event.

### **Make It Easy for Participants To Attend**

Determine if you will provide childcare and how you will do it.

Determine how to provide transportation for those who need it.

### **Invite Parents**

Strive for a representative mix of participants so the group represents the diverse make-up of the school community, seeking qualities such as:

- an equal number per school (if working with the whole district);
- an equal number per level (elementary, middle and high school);
- socioeconomic diversity;
- academic diversity – talented and gifted, special education, average student;
- racial and ethnic diversity; and
- nontraditional parents and caregivers.

Determine the most effective method of invitation:

- personal contact or phone calls (tends to be the most effective strategy);
- public announcement with sign ups; or
- an invitation letter (see page 36 for sample).

Ask participants to commit to attending, and compile a list.



If more than 15 parents wish to attend, plan a second event.

Send a reminder notice or give a quick reminder call.

## **Invite Teachers**

Determine the best method to attract teachers from the district or school. Options include:

- contacting the district central office for assistance and support in reaching teachers;
- contacting individual teachers.
- contacting the local education association for assistance and support; and
- contacting the superintendent or board of education to request their support for teachers attending (this event often is approved for professional development credit).
- Determine who shall be invited.
- Strive for a representative mix of participants, seeking qualities such as:
- an equal number per school (if working with the whole district);
- an equal number per level (elementary, middle and high school);
- academic specializations;
- socioeconomic diversity; and
- racial and ethnic diversity.

Ask participants to commit to attendance, and compile a list in advance. If more than 15 teachers wish to attend, plan a second event.

## **Conduct the Event**

Obtain handouts and supplies.

Check with the facilitators regarding supplies and other needs.

Ensure that food arrangements are complete.

Arrive early to check room setup.

Greet participants and provide name tags as they arrive.

Welcome participants and introduce facilitators.

## **Dealing with the Media**



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*Parents and Teachers Talking Together* sessions are not subject to Open Meeting Laws. We have found that parents and teachers are more open with their ideas and concerns if reporters are not in the room. It is important to have a safe environment so conversation can flow freely.

That said, *Parents and Teachers Talking Together* may well attract local media interest. Sponsors can deal with such interest in the following ways:

Invite the media to interview participants after the session. Check with participants before making such arrangements.

Invite the media to come in at the end of the discussion to hear the priorities and the next steps decided upon by participants. Again, participants should be asked in advance if they would allow such media attention.

It is better to say nothing than to provide only partial information, because not providing the location of the session will cause reporters to become skeptical and believe someone is hiding something.

Use the opportunity of media interest in *Parents and Teachers Talking Together* to advertise the sponsoring organization and its activities.

## Wrap Up

- Close the session and thank participants and facilitators.
- Decide on the continuing role of the sponsoring organization with this effort, if any:
  - Does the group want to continue?
  - Are specific actions needed?
  - Do people want to continue the conversation?
- Encourage the facilitators to complete the feedback sheet for use by the sponsoring organization.

## Following Up

Facilitated conversations like *Parents and Teachers Talking Together* are more successful if there is follow-up. Participants come away from the program feeling empowered and motivated, but do not do anything unless someone reaches out to them. The coordinator often takes the lead. This may mean contacting people who volunteered to work on committees, sending out a newsletter or posting information on a Web site. Don't waste the positive impression created during this productive meeting! We recommend that the initial follow-up occur within 30 days of the *Parents and Teachers Talking Together* session.





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