

## CHALK TALK: At the Core

By ELIZABETH DEVLIN

Published in print: April, 2016

The children's faces were looking up expectantly while I prepared for the closing activities of the literacy night held for students who received reading intervention support at school. The children had shared and presented the highlights of their learning and taught some activities to their families. Families surrounded their children nestled between the book stacks in our school library. The teachers, principal and assistant principal stood with certificates in hand ready to acknowledge the students' effort and achievement. I had planned something a bit different for the closing before those certificates were given out; something I hoped would strengthen the home-school partnership. It was time for parents to share their hopes, dreams and aspirations for their children.



It was a bit bold for an ending, but I had done my homework. Studies indicated that schools need to show respect for families input, value the diversity and cultures of families, and highlight shared goals. Instead of only telling parents every way to support reading at home, schools need to listen to parents and guardians and invite them to tell their stories. Schools that listen to and share parents' hopes, dreams and aspirations for their children positively affect student learning.

I turned to the parents and guardians, "Your children have shared their goals and learning with you. I invite you to share your hopes and dreams for your children." There was silence. A small doubt crept up from my stomach, but I quickly took a breath, smiled and listened to the silent thought.

A mother of one of my students looked at me with that "I think I can go," look. I urged her on. She looked directly at her daughter and said, "Never give up. I always want you to push yourself. You should feel proud of yourself...This is a great group..." It felt like everyone in the room was coming up for air then relaxed into something special. A father said, "I hope you love reading and learn to read anything you want..." Parents nodded their heads. Another parent rose and said, "...I want you to want to learn, enjoy reading and see reading and writing as tools to get what you want and where you want to go."

More hands went up. Soon there was a gentle rolling of comments and crescendos of passion as parents and relatives spoke. The children were lifted and wrapped by everyone's words. At the literacy night for the older students, similar aspirations were shared. The final parent to share rose slowly and said, "Quiero decir..." Spanish filled the space. We heard her voice and felt her words first in Spanish then translated into English. Parents spoke words of love, commitment and the power of literacy to change lives.

The literacy night set me in motion to continue finding ways I could strengthen the partnership with families. So shortly after the final literacy night, when the District offered a training to participate in the Parent-Teacher Home Visit Project, I signed up.

On the first home visit, I saw my student cuddle with her hamster, display her paintings and show me a sight word she had learned that day that she found in a book. She was exuberant. Her parents told me about their schooling in Puerto Rico and told me their hopes and aspirations for their daughter. I shared information about the Friday bag that her daughter brought home from her lessons. But, mostly, it was a

From the Daily Hampshire Gazette, Northampton, Mass. Used by permission.

time for me to listen. The home visit threaded its connection to the school the next day through my student and her sister to me.

Listening school communities can build relationships of trust and strengthen shared goals, which optimize learning. Finding time to do this is no easy feat given the demands on time both for staff and families. Yet, efforts continue to grow in this area through Parent Guardian Organizations, family centers, parent-teacher conferences, presentations of learning, community walks...the list goes on. A collaborative relationship with school and home breathes new life into the coined but resonating phrase, "...it takes a village to raise a child." It takes a village to educate our students, a village of the community, the school and the child's core, the family.

*Elizabeth Devlin is a reading specialist at Wildwood School in Amherst. She is a teacher consultant with the Western Massachusetts Writing Project.*