

Tellin' Stories

*Lexington Park Elementary School
Lexington Park, Maryland*

A needle, thread, and a whole lot of felt helped stitch families from Lexington Park Elementary School into a tighter community during a special quilting workshop last year. The school's Tellin' Stories program brought 35 parents and community members and 40 teachers to the local library to share their own life stories and define the tapestry of Lexington Park's population.

Members of the Action Team for Partnership (ATP) wanted to implement a workshop that helped parents and community members feel more welcome at the school. Lexington Park is located in between two distinctly different neighborhoods: a naval base on one side and a low-income neighborhood on the other. The school includes a some highly transient families who, in the past, have not always connected with teachers and staff. The ATP and others at Lexington Park wanted to change all that.

At a meeting with representations from the Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC), the ATP learned about a school in Washington DC that initiated a quilt sewing workshop to create a welcoming climate of partnership for highly mobile families. Lexington Park decided to host their own workshop series, instituting nine workshop sessions between September and May of last year.

The school initially publicized the event with a flier sent home to families. Later in the year, promotional materials included testimonials from parent participants at the earlier sessions.

Tellin' Stories was adapted to fit families' busy schedules. Each month from September through May, a handful of families from diverse backgrounds met at the library either in the morning or the evening, depending on which time was most convenient. Each session began with a healthy breakfast or snack—depending on the time of day—and an introductory activity. For example, a nutrition-

ist began one session with a discussion about healthy bedtime snacks.

After an opening activity, participants received typed prompts asking for ideas about such things as their "best educational experience" or even the "saddest day of my life." Interpreters were on hand to assist non-English speakers in the group. Quilters then designed a square using pictures and words made of paper. Later, they translated the paper patterns into a final felt square. At the end of the process, volunteers gathered all squares and sewed them into a quilt that included the school's banner.

Tellin' Stories participants hailed from such countries as El Salvador, Greece, Bulgaria, Mexico, and India, as well as the U.S. As months passed, the culturally diverse families began to form friendships. Parent participants and staff expressed thanks for the community-bonding experience. One attendee described the activity as "a peaceful atmosphere where there was a lot of support, love, and friendly conversation." "It's fun and interesting learning about the traditions of different cultures," another person said.

The workshops cost about \$500. The school used Title I funds and donations from a local fabric store to cover the expenses.

Lexington Park's ATP hopes to host the workshop again. They are working on ways to secure more funding and tie the quilt squares to the students' academic curriculum.

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