

# NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOLS SUPPORTING PARENTS

L. R. Holloway



Parents take part in a workshop reading activity at Pickard.

Time was, Ana Nunez would only appear at the front door of Jose Clemente Orozco Community Academy to escort her 9-year-old daughter Yuriena to and from school.

A 32-year-old immigrant from Mexico with modest English skills, she found the building intimidating, a place meant only for students and school officials.

But today, she walks through the doors with pride and confidence. She chats with her daughter's teacher and regularly speaks with school administrators and other parents, who are helping bridge her language gap.

Dr. Victoria Cadavid, principal of Josiah L. Pickard Elementary, believes that engaging her students' parents in an entirely new way has had a positive influence on academic achievement.

In 2003, while other schools across Chicagoland saw a dip in math scores for students in grades 3 to 8, Pickard saw a 6.1 point gain on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, the Chicago Public School's primary measurement for academic achievement. This was a five times greater increase than a group of similar schools.

"Parents have been helping their children at home, which makes a difference," she said. They have been attending mathematics workshops to learn how to help their children with things like determining place value, figuring out percentages and solving word problems. "This has contributed to the increase in our math scores and helped us maintain our reading scores."

Meantime, at another school in the largely Latino Pilsen neighborhood John O'Connell, an assistant principal at Orozco in his

twelfth year at the school, said that teachers at Orozco have begun to share teaching strategies and lesson plans, a new and big achievement. "Teachers are now talking about ideas and things that they've tried in their classrooms," Mr. O'Connell said. "At one time, that was taboo. People were too scared and nervous to try new things. But now, you have veteran teachers opening up to new ideas."

What is happening at Orozco and Pickard Schools?

These schools are part of a pioneering partnership between the Chicago Public Schools and Strategic Learning Initiatives. SLI, a Chicago-based non-profit, is dedicated to improving schools and accelerating student achievement in networks of neighborhood schools. Today, SLI is working with a group of schools who have come together as the Pilsen Education Network (PEN). Pilsen is a low-income, densely-populated and mostly Mexican immigrant neighborhood just southwest of the Loop, where 95 percent of students qualify for the federal government's free or reduced-price meals program. It is a community where the stresses of everyday

life can easily push aside a family's emphasis on their children's academic achievement. But a new focus on education is alive and well in Pilsen today, thanks to the PEN schools' commitment to continuous improvement.

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Dr. Victoria Cadavid, Assistant Principal  
Josiah L. Pickard Elementary



Dr. Cadavid (right), Principal of Orozco Community Academy,



Elaine Ratajczak, PEN Parent Facilitator.

In addition to Orozco and Pickard, the other schools involved with SLI's program are Manuel Perez Elementary and Octavio Paz Charter School. PEN and its work with parents, teachers, and principals and administrators is funded by contributions from the participating schools and the generous support received from a number of Chicago foundations, including The Chicago Community Trust, Chicago Public Education Fund,

Motorola Foundation, Polk Bros. Foundation; and Prince Charitable Trusts.

PEN is a four-year program, offering a series of hands-on workshops to help parents engage more in their child's education. Through regular workshops, the program helps parents learn how to help their children with reading strategies, science experiments, solving mathematics problems and building self-esteem, among other things.

The workshops are tailored for each school, designed through surveys and input from parents and teachers. Parents decide whether workshops are held only in Spanish or both English and Spanish.

Parents also receive leadership training so that they can run the workshops and meetings as skilled facilitators; a feature that continues to draw more and more parents. In its second year of operation, PEN's workshops are drawing an average of 33 percent of the network's families. The city-wide average for parent engagement in elementary schools is 7 percent. Some parents, teachers and administrators interviewed at Orozco and Pickard credit SLI with helping to push open the doors of better communication. Parents now talk more openly with teachers and school officials about homework, school activities, and discipline. The open environment allows parents, teachers and administrators to develop shared values that shape a culture of trust. (Improved trust is a key to improving academic performance at many schools in Chicago, surveys show.)

Parent Ana Nunez, for example, said that she has learned how to better communicate with Yuriena. She recently attended a self-esteem workshop along with some 25 other parents at Orozco in a festively decorated-classroom filled with the clamor of toddlers and the scent of freshly brewed coffee.

The group was given outlines of a gingerbread figure named Ginger and a story of how words hurt people. With each criticism read from the story, parents were instructed to rip the paper figure.

school," the story begins.

"Well, Ginger was kind of slow to get up that morning, and her mother said, 'Quit being lazy and get up.'"

Rip.

The story continued. "I wish you were more like your sister, she's never lazy in the morning.' And that hurt Ginger's feelings."

Rip.

Later, parents were instructed to piece Ginger back together with tape.

In this exercise, the tape represented scars that take time to heal and the effort needed to effect healing itself, remarked Cris Whitehead, SLI's parent engagement director who works with program staff and each school's parent-facilitators to provide all of the PEN parent workshops. Murmurs spread across the room as parents chatted about the challenges of building a child's self-esteem. Each of them seemed touched by the exercise.

"I like the activity," one parent said, speaking through a translator. "Sometimes we do hurt our children's feelings, especially when they do badly on their grades. I feel like this is helping me communicate better with my daughter. If you keep telling your child she's dumb, she starts believing it."

Cris Whitehead noted that parents frequently want self-esteem workshops to help both their children and themselves. But self-

esteem is not the only thing that concerns these parents. Many want to be coached on how to help their children with homework at a time when teachers are doling out more and tougher assignments to help students meet higher academic standards, said Elaine Ratajczak, Chair of the Pickard Local School Council and also a PEN

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#### Parent at a PEN Workshop

parent-facilitator.

"Last year, they wanted to know about science experiments," said Mrs. Ratajczak. "So we did a workshop called, 'Understanding Science Experiments.' We actually had parents do experiments at a workshop. We told them that they needed a hypothesis, a purpose and all the steps to making a successful experiment."

Mrs. Ratajczak went on to note, "We also showed them how they could actually help their children, not only to do the science experiment, but how to enhance their exhibit boards. Even if the parents don't read English, they can still help children with those



Francisca Gonzalez and Marv Canchola, former parent participants.

details. They can say, 'Hey, I don't see a hypothesis. Where is it?'"

Pickard's parent workshop in December was buoyant with enthusiasm, with 57 parents attending. Icebreakers at the start of the workshop helped parents get better acquainted. Then, dozens of parents worked at tables with one another and their toddlers on a hands-on reading project, designed to help parents assist their children with a similar school project.

Dr. Cadavid took satisfied glances across the room and talked easily with parents and SLI organizers. She said, "PEN has helped spark a new level of parent engagement," at her school.

Elaine Ratajczak commented further, "People keep coming back because we're listening to them and taking their ideas."

Teachers and administrators receive encouragement and training through PEN as well. Assisted by SLI facilitators, they learn practical strategies and tools to improve the quality of classroom instruction and reinforce shared leadership, the cornerstone of Mayor Richard M. Daley's school reform plan, known as the Chicago Public School 2002 Education Plan.

In its second-year of operation, SLI has made great strides.

During its first year (2002-2003), three of the four schools improved faster in reading than a comparison group of 233 schools with similar family incomes, according to PEN's annual report released in August 2003.

Last year, on the ITBS math test scores, the network gain was 7.5 times greater than the 1.2 percent gain of the comparison group.

To be sure, SLI is not alone in its efforts to overhaul public schools at a time when policymakers from the White House on down have designated it a nationwide priority. But few organizations or programs of its kind have seen such a quick turnaround in academic achievement and parent engagement. School officials state that PEN's success is based on its ability to engage everyone in the decision-making process.

"There are other programs that focus on one of the stakeholder groups, but SLI's program is unique in that it addresses all groups - teachers, parents and administrators - in one program," said Karen L. Morris, a SLI co-director and longtime CPS veteran teacher and principal.

No longer are decisions about classroom instruction limited to administrators; everyone from parents to teachers is empowered to bring about change through building consensus. And parents learn to work with teachers and school administrators, a relationship that was ripe for misunderstanding in the past.

"Teachers learn practical teaching strategies and tools they can use the next day," said John Simmons, president of SLI, who has been consulting in education for over 30 years. "Parents have fun

Principals learn how to share leadership as they grow school leaders and focus their time on becoming instructional leaders."

While parent engagement is a key part of SLI's strategy for accelerating student learning, the program

also incorporates four years of teacher training workshops and professional development, SLI instructors encourage teachers to share teaching strategies, lesson plans and focus on improving classroom instruction.

Because PEN trains both teachers and parents to be trainers the network schools and the district has the capacity to continue the training at the end of the four years and to initiate new networks across the city.

John O'Connell, the assistant principal at Orozco who oversees professional development, said that 25 of the school's 31 teachers are involved



Parents at Orozco Academy take part in a workshop activity.

in PEN. The program has helped teachers speak the same language as far as professional development and instructional strategies are concerned.

"The workshops have provided our teachers with new energy to go out and try new ideas." He cited a handout from PEN for eighth-grade teachers, which guides them through five days of vocabulary instruction.

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**John O'Connell, Assistant Principal  
Orozco Community Academy**

"Monday: Introduce a 'list of the week' of five to 12 words," the handout begins.

"Tuesday: Students work with meaning by creating multiple definitions, students analyze denotative and connotative meanings, students develop synonyms and antonyms for list words..."

For their part, PEN officials say that it is the schools that are most responsible for the improvements. PEN simply provides parents, teachers and administrators with tools and tactics they can use to succeed.

"The parent workshop facilitators are parents from the neighborhood who know the community and who know the needs of everyone involved," Cris Whitehead said. "Another factor is that it's a continuation; the workshops are not one-shot deals. We have a minimum of 14 workshops a year and they're structured with hands-on activities. At those workshops, parents see their friends and neighbors instructing them, not strangers. And they're not sitting there with us explaining something and having them do it. They're explaining things to each other and doing it themselves. They are the leaders."

*The writer, a former staff member of The New York Times, is a graduate of Macalester College, the Academy of the Sacred Heart High School and William B. Ogden Elementary School.*

