

Perspectives / Let the Dialogue Begin

Marge Scherer

Her kindergartners couldn't stop bothering one another. What to do? She asked a friend, Mr. Arnold, a high school teacher and father of one of the children, for guidance. He said he'd like to come in. An imposing man, he sat down on the floor with the kids and began telling a story about what it was like when he was a little boy and his big sister incessantly picked on him. His mother got his sister to stop.

"What did your mother do?" the children wanted to know, expecting the worst. "She asked my sister, 'Don't you want your brother to grow up to be a good Daddy?'" And that worked? "Well, yes, although like most of us, she had to be reminded from time to time." The children were off on a discussion about how it felt to be picked on, why they felt compelled to tease other kids, and, finally, what they could do to stop themselves.

Vivian Gussin Paley, author of *White Teacher* and *You Can't Say You Can't Play*, told that story at a recent conference. Her topic was "Let the Dialogue Begin," that is, how to make parents true partners in their children's education. "It took me 20 years to ask a parent for guidance about a classroom situation," Paley marveled. Although she had invited parents to help celebrate holidays or chaperone trips, asking them in for advice—enlisting them to help solve problems—was a revelation that would forever change the way she taught. Always a listener to students, she began in earnest to listen to parents.

Parents as partners in classrooms and schools is hardly a novel concept, but implementing the idea is far from easy. The Public Agenda surveys tell us that, increasingly, parents and educators are not seeing eye to eye—that while parents do not necessarily agree with one another about what good teaching is, they are increasingly skeptical of what the experts say it is. Misunderstandings are rife, and efforts to reform schools are stifled when, in fact, improved education is what most parents want.

After examining 175 community efforts, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform came to a similar conclusion: Although there is no one right way to implement public engagement, in-depth dialogue leads to one predictable result—the feeling of efficacy on the part of those involved:

The process of bringing people together—talking, listening, developing a shared vision, and creating a plan of action—has value in and of itself. It brings new people into conversation and decision making around schools. It builds trust and good will. It expands the capacity of the community to undertake effective problem solving and to bring additional resources to bear. ("Reasons for Hope, Voices for Change" 1998).

Vivian Gussin Paley brings home the point:

My biggest regret was that I waited so long to understand that I had it in my power to make school like a family, a place where you enjoy the casual intrusion of those who are learning to love each other. . . .

We keep the families out (of schools), and there is no reason to. Our jobs as educators are better when everyone is involved. We are on the wrong track if we feel we can educate children without the families.