Meet the Family

BY WARREN HYNES
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WHEN JULIE HIRCHERT sees her students in the classroom on the first day of school each year, it’s often not the first time she’s met them. Like many culturally responsive educators, Hirchert uses home visits to form bridges to her students and their communities and to create space and trust with families from the very beginning of their relationship.

“I think it’s the most important investment of teachers’ time,” says Hirchert, a middle-school math teacher in Romulus, Michigan. “It allows you to reach your students in a different way than you did before. This is the foundation for anything else that is important.”

The social, emotional and academic benefits of home visits are well documented and widely acknowledged. But although the number of teachers doing home visits across the country is steadily growing, the consistency with which these visits are conducted varies greatly, a fact that limits the scope of their impact. More administrators, however, are taking note of the importance of home visits and grappling with the scalability challenge: How can a school or district launch and maintain a successful home-visit program that benefits all students?

Build Investment

“Just go with the willing and it will spread,” says D’Lisa Crain, administrator of the Department of Family-School Partnerships in the Washoe County (Nevada) School District.

Crain’s approach includes identifying teachers who advocate for home visits and giving them opportunities to spread the word to their colleagues at staff meetings and in training sessions. Many districts also hold testimonial sessions to increase staff interest and participation. Michelle Mares, home visit coordinator for Denver Public Schools, helps ramp up investment by fostering friendly competitions among participating schools, such as catering lunch for the school that conducts the most home visits in a pay period.

The compensation that staff members receive for the training and time it takes to conduct home visits is another key way to build investment. Gretchen Viglione, an elementary-school teacher in Sacramento, California, who has
conducted home visits for five years, says compensation gives the program respect. “It’s a way of hearing from your school, ‘Yes, we believe in you and yes, we’re going to pay you to do this,’” Viglione says.

In districts where funding is tight, compensation may require creative scheduling and budgeting.

“There are not always funds to compensate teachers for their work in home visits outside of a teacher’s contract hours,” says Sonia Galaviz, a fifth-grade teacher and teacher-educator in Boise, Idaho. “Many schools have work days before the school year begins. An administrator could give teachers leave during those days to conduct visits, instead of being in the classroom. Also, schools with Title I funds may be able to use that funding creatively to support teachers and staff in schoolwide home-visit efforts.”

Offer Training
Home visits can do more than bring teachers and parents together as educational partners; when executed skillfully, they can also help bridge cultural gaps between schools and families.

“It’s a hands-on cultural diversity training opportunity,” says Linnette Camacho, administrator of the Family Education Department in Springfield (Massachusetts) Public Schools. “It provides an opportunity for the teacher, parent and student to be on the same turf.”

To maximize the benefits of this opportunity districtwide, successful home-visit programs offer training and preparation that emphasize best practices for connecting and communicating with families, particularly when bridging cultural differences.

Debriefing also becomes part of a sustainable training model. St. Paul, Minnesota’s home-visit program, which is coordinated by the local teachers’ union, holds its debriefing sessions in the autumn and spring. “Staff has time to talk as a group and in small groups or pairs about the joys and struggles they’ve had with this round of visits,” says Nick Faber, coordinator of home visits for Saint Paul Federation of Teachers. Faber says teachers also share concerns they’re hearing from parents so the union can better advocate for parents’ needs. This learning is then funneled back into the school community via Professional Issues Committee meetings and negotiations.

Create Partnerships
While some schools and districts may have the internal expertise to coordinate the logistics and training for a home-visit program, many do not. In these cases, strong partnerships can be the key to success: The ideal home-visit model features partnership, for example, among the school district and a nonprofit, the local teachers’ union or a local college or university.

**SPECIALIZED NONPROFITS** The California-based Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project (PTHVP) is widely considered the pioneering nonprofit specializing in home-visit programming. The organization hosts an annual conference featuring up to 400 educators, promotes regional gatherings and publishes home-visit newsletters. HOME WORKS! and the Flamboyan Foundation also work to provide the support, guidance and financial resources necessary to coordinate and train all participants and stakeholders.

**HIGHER ED. INSTITUTIONS** Colleges and universities can help support home-visit programs, from training...
“[Home visits] change the power dynamic of the traditional teacher-parent relationship. You create the possibility for the family to gain power by sharing what they know to be true. If we’re going to walk the walk of teachers and parents as co-educators, we have to share that power.”

CARRIE ROSE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, PTHVP

Critical Training Elements

Training and preparing for a home visit can be as important as the visit itself. Consider these pointers from the experts when designing the professional development for your home-visit program.

- Review logistics, such as how to make contact, how and when to schedule visits, whether and how to record discussions with families and what to do with the documentation and data.
- Remind teachers to leave assumptions behind and keep an open mind regarding each family and their culture.
- Some prior knowledge is essential, such as whether a translator will be necessary (it is not appropriate to use the student as a translator), whether the home has a working telephone number or if the child lives between two households.
- Coach teachers to establish the purpose for the visit ahead of time. Goals should focus on getting to know the child as a learner and setting the stage for partnership, not on problematic behavior or performance.
- Model how to talk about both the student and the family. Some families may have significant needs. Connecting them to resources can benefit their child’s learning.

In-service teachers to helping to locate translators. University staff with experience engaging families are often eager to meet with administrators and educators to discuss best practices, research in the area of home visits and what might be the best approach and fit for the local community. The University of Montana’s Institute for Educational Research and Service, for example, serves as a statewide coordinator for home visits.

Toolkit

Home visits help students, families and educators. How can they work in YOUR school? Visit » tolerance.org/meet-the-family

TEACHERS’ UNIONS

Teachers’ unions such as the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) can support home-visit programs in a few ways. State association affiliates of the NEA and AFT can access various funds through the local district teachers’ association to increase family involvement through home visits. Districts could even partner with the local association and share the costs associated with training teachers and staff and compiling any data and documentation resulting from the home visits.

Sharing Results

Collecting data before and after home visits offers evidence that the program has contributed to improvements in areas such as attendance, behavior, student achievement and family involvement. It’s an unexplored frontier for many schools, but an important one.

“If you can’t say, ‘Here’s how we’ve impacted kids to achieve,’ your likelihood of continuing funding is going to be greatly reduced,” Crain says.

Anecdotal evidence can also be powerful, particularly when it helps educators confront their blind spots and biases. Lisa Levasseur, project director of the PTHVP in Sacramento and a former teacher, recalls one home visit she conducted with a family whose son didn’t like to write. Levasseur discovered that the family’s Hmong culture treasured oral storytelling, and the boy valued this. Back at school, she began handing the boy a tape recorder for writing assignments. He then recited his stories and transcribed them into writing.

“I would have never learned any of that during a parent-teacher conference,” Levasseur says.

Home visits have the power to debunk all kinds of misconceptions about students and their families, even for teachers who share a similar background. Kara Wilson, who was raised on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation, teaches on the reservation in Poplar, Montana, and also conducts home visits. Wilson admits she’s made assumptions about some families she’s visited based on things she’s heard.

“But after I got to know them, it changed my view of them,” Wilson says, “and it may have changed their view of me as well.”

Wilson says she would value a home-visit program whether she worked on a reservation or not.

“If more teachers went out and visited, they would find their jobs easier because the parents trust them and they trust the parents and they have a common goal,” Wilson says. “It pays off.”

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