



Stanton Elementary School teacher Sheryl Garner (right) on a home visit with the Colbert family



TEACHER HOME VISITS

School-family partnerships foster student success

THE VISIT TO ALMARD BISHOP'S HOME promised to be a difficult one for his teachers. Alnard had been held back in kindergarten because of his behavior, and now that he was a 2nd grader at C. W. Harris Elementary in Washington, D.C., things were no better. Alnard had stalked out or been put out of class so often that the teachers hadn't been able to test his reading and math skills.

But when the teachers—the 2nd-grade team-teaching pair and his 1st-grade teacher—settled around the dining table with Alnard's mother, the four of them talked instead about how Alnard idolized his older brother, how he loved helping with classroom chores, that he was keenly aware he was older than his classmates, that he liked math, that he loved having the teachers text pictures of him to his mother.

"I want so much for my son," Sabrina Bishop told the three. When they asked what it was that she wanted, Bishop answered with a modest goal: "Him trying to succeed. Maybe not succeeding, but just trying."

By the end of the meeting, Bishop had agreed to visit the school to see a class project, a move that Alnard's math teacher, Jonathan Robertson, predicted would be "hugely useful." Robertson, meanwhile, had agreed to Bishop's request to have Alnard tested for learning disabilities. "I'll see to it," he said.

Afterward, I asked Robertson and his co-workers—who

received an hour's extra pay for the visit—how it would inform their teaching. They talked about using what they'd learned about Alnard's interests and routines to engage him in lessons and "leverage" his behavior.

But mostly, they said, the visit was about building a relationship with Alnard's mother, who worried deeply about him but was largely absent from the school where he was having so much trouble. "A lot of our families have lost trust in our system, but being in her house, that was her zone," said Susan Freye, Alnard's 1st-grade teacher. If the visit helped develop a partnership between Alnard's mother and his teachers, "we've turned the tide," she added.

A Turnaround Strategy

Volumes of research suggest that one key to a child's academic success is having "engaged" parents. But parents know that, to teachers, engagement means a fairly circumscribed round of activities—back-to-school nights, parent-teacher conferences, potlucks, interactive homework. "I had expectations of what the parents were supposed to do," says Melissa Bryant, a math teacher and dean of students at D.C. Scholars Stanton Elementary, a novel partnership between the Washington, D.C., public schools and Scholar Academies, a charter operator. "I never heard what they wanted me to do."

by JUNE KRONHOLZ

“No one ever asked me my goals,” adds Katrina Branch, who is raising six children in D.C., including the four children of her murdered sister. I met Branch at D.C.’s family-funded Flamboyant Foundation, which trains—and pays—teachers to visit their students’ homes as part of a strategy to use better relations between schools and families as a means to improving academic achievement.

“Teachers are the experts in pedagogy, but families are one hundred percent the experts in their children,” says Kristin Ehrgood, a Teach for America veteran who launched Flamboyant with her husband in 2008 to focus on family engagement, a slice of the education-reform pie she decided wasn’t drawing enough attention. “We need one another.”

But making the connection isn’t getting any easier. Charters and magnet schools now draw youngsters from neighborhoods perhaps miles away. In cities that are undergoing big demographic changes—either growing or shrinking—neighborhood-school boundaries are in flux. Working parents have less time to volunteer at their kids’ schools, and security precautions—locked doors, sign-ins, ID badges—discourage the casual drop-in.

The concept of having teachers visit their students’ homes isn’t particularly new. Montessori pioneered the idea to smooth first-day-of-school jitters for toddlers, and Head Start has long used home visits to teach parenting skills to young mothers. Some charters require home visits as part of their admissions process. The Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), with 183 schools, visits newly enrolled students. “It’s not mandated, but it’s in our culture,” says Steve Mancini, director of public affairs, adding that KIPP has “decoupled” home visits from acceptance.

But the notion of formalizing home visits—that is, training and paying teachers, and including once- or twice-yearly visits as part of a school’s outreach and turnaround efforts—got its unlikely start only in the late 1990s. As she tells it, Yesenia Gonzalez, a Mexican immigrant mother who left school to work in the fields of California’s Central Valley, became angry that her 5th grader couldn’t read and that her Sacramento school wouldn’t talk to her about its failure.

Gonzalez eventually contacted a church-based community-action group that, in turn, began interviewing teachers who were seen as “successful” in Sacramento’s inner-city neighborhoods. The idea was “to find out what they were doing different,” Gonzalez told me, “and the one thing they were doing different was they were visiting the families.”

The community group launched a pilot home-visit program

with six elementary and two middle schools and, in 2002, spun off the Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project as an independent nonprofit. The project says it now has 432 participating schools in 17 states and the District of Columbia. Flamboyant, which is the Parent/Teacher project’s D.C. partner, says the project has trained



Sacramento school district students welcome their teachers for a home visit. K-12 teachers in Sacramento conduct over 2,000 relationship-building home visits every year.

teachers in 122 of D.C.’s 300 traditional and charter schools.

The home-visit concept is simple. Schools that apply to become part of the project are surveyed to ensure that a majority of teachers are willing to make home visits and that the school leadership is committed to supporting them. Even then, visits are voluntary for teachers and parents alike.

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The visit is get-to-know-you style, positive, and not academically focused (although visits to high schoolers center on the mechanics of college admissions). Ask about the family’s interests, expectations, hopes and dreams, and previous experience with the school, a manual handed out at the training sessions advises. Invite parents to attend a specific school function, and “share one (only one) expectation you have for this student,” it adds.

“It’s a very different dynamic than the parent-teacher conference,” says Karen Mapp of Harvard’s Graduate School of Education, who studies family engagement and sits on the project’s advisory board. There, the teacher imparts information and the parent listens, all in the confines of the classroom.

Teachers visit homes in pairs, both for safety reasons and so they can share reflections. They don’t take notes or even carry a notebook: that might make them look like social workers or truancy officers on an inspection. And teachers are paid at the school system’s hourly rate—\$34 in D.C., \$20 in Montana, and \$38 in Sacramento, where the district budgeted \$275,000 for home visits in the 2015–16 school year.

Most districts pay for the visits with Title I funds: the federal education law requires them to use at least 1 percent of their Title I dollars for family-engagement activities. (In Sacramento, that excludes about 10 schools that don’t receive Title I money, says Lisa Levasseur, the Parent/Teacher project’s California director.) But private donors also underwrite some projects. Flamboyant initially paid for home visits by both traditional and charter school teachers, although the district has since taken over funding for its schools.

Parents and Teachers as Partners

I attended the project’s home-visit trainings in both D.C. and Sacramento, and found that teachers’ concerns were pretty much the same on both sides of the country. What if you spot evidence of neglect or abuse? Work through your principal to report it to protective services, “but homes don’t look like the home you grew up in. Check your assumptions,” a trainer cautioned D.C. teachers.

What if the parents don’t speak English? Take a translator. What if the child lives in a homeless shelter? Meet in a neutral spot like a park or coffee shop. What if the parents refuse a visit? Call back, but don’t press—other parents will persuade them to come around. What if the family wants to feed you? Excuse yourself or enjoy the meal; your choice.

The training materials advise what to say when proposing

a home visit (“This really will help me to be a better teacher for your child”) and how to keep in touch with parents afterward. Use phone calls and e-mails, and send photographs via text message (“Daneesha ... taught the class how to ROCK two-digit multiplication,” the training manual offers).

Stanton Elementary’s Melissa Bryant told me about her first reaction when her principal proposed home visits five years ago: “I considered myself a solid teacher. All of a sudden, I’m supposed to go sit on someone’s couch?” Stanton had been overhauled the previous year—new teachers, new leaders, a longer day, new curriculum, professional development, the charter partnership—but passing rates on D.C.’s standardized tests hadn’t budged out of the single digits.

The home visits began as one last effort by a demoralized staff, Bryant says, but became “the thing that put my school on a different trajectory.” Parents and teachers began to see one another as partners with the common goal of catapulting kids across the great chasm of the achievement gap, she says. Parents now ask for books, supplementary lessons, retesting when they suspect their children have learning disabilities. “We’re on the same page now,” Bryant adds.

By midway through the 2015–16 school year, when I talked with Bryant, Stanton’s teachers had visited 411 of the school’s 540 students. The school, which once was scheduled for closure because of its woeful performance, now has had another school merged into it. Of course, the charter partnership, the new teachers, and the other reforms had an impact, Bryant agrees, “but you don’t see your effort come to anything if you don’t have the families involved too.”

One drizzly Saturday morning, I joined Abbeygale Wright,

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a pre-kindergarten teacher at D.C.’s Eagle Academy charter school, and Josephine Mazyck, its family-engagement leader, for a visit with Edward and Maya Samuel and their son, Edmund, a shy toddler who eventually wandered off to play. After chatting about little league soccer and Edmund’s slowly growing confidence, Wright asked the Samuels what they thought of the school’s curriculum.

Maya Samuel was ready: She didn’t like the homework (“Homework, at three? Whoa?”), so Wright explained that it gets parents involved in the day’s lessons. She worried that Edmund was too young for field trips, so Wright explained,

“If we don’t take them, the parents might not take them. Why start them off late when you can start them off early?”

Edward Samuel worried that a recent video, which included some rap lyrics, wasn’t appropriate; Wright agreed. He asked how he could volunteer his photography skills at school; Mazyck invited him to shoot an upcoming basketball tournament she was organizing.

At the end, I asked the Samuels what they got out of the hour. Maya mentioned better communication, but Edward cut to the larger point: “The kids see the parents and the teacher interacting. They see our relationship. They see we’re working together.”

An Investment in Families

There’s not much research on home visits, and what little there is can’t directly link home visits to learning outcomes. But in a study for the Flamboyan Foundation, Johns Hopkins University education professor Steven Sheldon compared 2,469 students who received home visits in the 2012–13 school year with a similar group of 2,239 students attending the same D.C. schools who weren’t visited. The visited children were absent 2.7 fewer days than the children who didn’t receive home visits, a 24 percent reduction in absences, Sheldon calculated.

Because research shows that children with better attendance are likely to be better readers, Sheldon also calculated that the odds of scoring proficient on D.C.’s reading-comprehension test were 1.55 times higher for students who received a home visit. Sheldon calls that a “small-to-moderate effect size,” and puts it in line with other well-constructed family-engagement

Affluent, laid-forward parents respond, as well: they call and ask for information rather than become accusatory when a rumor sweeps the carpool line.

interventions. He also cautions that the evidence isn’t “slam-dunk causal. You can’t say that getting a home visit leads to a reduction in absenteeism.”

Then why do them? I asked. Why not spend the money on, say, another reading teacher? Sheldon argued that a reading teacher might help some of a school’s children, but home visits are an investment in its families and community. “What goes on at home, all of that is part of the problem and all of it is part of the solution,” he said.

Certainly, some school leaders aren’t waiting for the slam dunk. Jennifer Thomas, principal of D.C.’s Hearst Elementary, told me about the “sizable” achievement gap between the 27 percent of Hearst’s students who live in the

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affluent, mainly white neighborhoods nearby and the out-of-boundary students, of whom most are African American and many are from low-income families.

The school’s plan to close the gap includes “engaging families academically,” she said, and home visits are part of that effort. Midway through the 2015–16 school year, Hearst teachers already had visited two-thirds of their families and were “strategizing” how to approach those parents she called “reluctant.”

I asked Thomas how she thought that sitting around the coffee table with a family could impact learning. “I don’t think you can quantify it and tie it to an assessment,” she conceded, but the visit “changes the dynamic.” Parents feel comfortable sharing information about traumas that might be haunting their children, she said. Children open up to a teacher who has seen their bedroom or patted their dog.

Tough conversations—as when a child is unruly or needs special-education testing—become easier. Even the affluent, laid-forward parents responded, she said: they call and ask for information rather than become accusatory when a rumor sweeps the carpool line.

Beyond that, she said, the visits help teachers differentiate their lessons based on what they learned about the kids. That differentiation—a hot concept in education these days—is one of the unexpected fruits of home visits, Harvard’s Mapp says. “We can get teachers the information they need to reach students individually,” she explained.

Teachers told me about assigning books on sports to soccer-crazy boys and drafting math problems about yardage and patterns to fashion-giddy girls.

More poignantly, Kamille Seward, a 2nd-grade teacher at Excel Academy Public Charter School in D.C.’s tough Anacostia neighborhood, told me how a visit to the chaotic home of a disruptive 2nd grader persuaded her to switch from disciplining the girl to “affirming” her with “positive attention.”

“It only takes one person to throw off an entire lesson,” Seward said. “As soon as I improved that relationship, things as a whole in my class started to improve.”

Acceptance and Resistance

By all appearances, the Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project enjoys an easy relationship with school leaders and school unions

feature

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alike. The project is housed in the Sacramento school-district headquarters, and administers the home-visit budget for the district. The national teachers unions contribute to the project's \$700,000 budget and have representation on its advisory board, as do private donors. The local union manages the program in St. Paul, Minnesota. In D.C., the district's central-office staffers

education secretary Arne Duncan to double the amount districts must spend on family engagement never made it into law). But districts also worry about liability and safety, Rose says.

Parents may not trust the process: "There's an immigration fear, a CPS [Child Protective Services] fear," Jessica Ghalambor, a 7th-grade teacher at Sacramento's Fern Bacon Middle School, told me. And teachers can feel that they're imposing. "The call is the hardest: you're inviting yourself over," she added.

Beyond that, superintendents, principals, and their agendas change, says Rose. In Helena, Montana, and St. Paul, unions have written home visits into their contracts to prevent that happening.

One blindingly bright afternoon, I accompanied Ghalambor to the home of 8th grader Yoveli Rosas—Ghalambor's student the previous year—along with Yoveli's current teacher and a school counselor, who acted as translator with the girl's Spanish-speaking mother.

Ghalambor said she was drawn to the girl "by her silence" the previous year—a child who was years behind in reading skills but too shy to reach. After that year's home visit, "the transition in class was incredible," Ghalambor said. "I know there's no scientific basis, but the very next day you could see the change. I could tell she knew I cared."

At this latest visit, the talk meandered from Christmas customs to pimples to bed-times to Yoveli's concerns about drugs in the neighborhood. The family's pet chicks and pumpkins from the garden were passed around. Josefina Rosas, Yoveli's mother, offered to bring tamales to the school's Heritage Festival, and promised that her husband, a landscaper, would attend a meeting about the upcoming class trip to D.C.

Finally, Ghalambor asked about Rosas's hopes and dreams for Yoveli. To go further in school than she and her husband had so Yoveli will "have more chances," Rosas quickly answered. Yoveli, whose reading has improved but still lags, had a more immediate goal: to read a 300-page book. "You remember last year when you came, the bookshelf was half full?" she reminded Ghalambor gaily. "This year it's overflowing."

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Home visits change the dynamic. Abigail VanDam (right) and Makede Yiman (left) from Stanton Elementary School visit with the Walters family.

shadowed teachers on a home-visit day, and Chancellor Kaya Henderson received a home visit from her child's teacher.

That doesn't mean there isn't "oh my gosh, tons of resistance," says Carrie Rose, the project's executive director. Much of that resistance has arisen because the project is competing with so many other initiatives for money (a call by former