



# Parent/Teacher Home Visits: Creating a Bridge between Parents and Teachers as Co-Educators in Springfield, MA and Seattle, WA

*“Our investment in Springfield and Seattle teacher home visits is first and foremost an investment in teacher effectiveness and enriched student learning. The equally enduring value of our investment is in the strengthening of the very fabric of our communities through the partnerships that these programs rely upon for their planning, execution and success. Students, their parents, unions, districts, and community organizations come together through home visits to change educational outcomes for the better.”*

**Harriet Sanford, President and CEO, The NEA Foundation**

A critical mass of research evidence over the last two decades indicates that gains in student achievement are possible when parents support students’ learning in the home. This is especially true for traditionally underachieving students and holds promise for narrowing the achievement gaps.<sup>i</sup> While many schools chart the number of parent teacher conferences held, or the number of parents who volunteer in classrooms or attend school events, a growing number of schools are creating deeper, egalitarian collaboration with parents. These schools embrace a philosophy of partnership that goes well beyond the one-way and often negative or discipline-related communications from teachers to parents.

In these communities, accounts of deepened trust between parents and teachers, and regular sharing of their respective knowledge and understanding of students’ needs, interests and progress, are becoming more the norm than the exception, and are common in two of the NEA Foundation’s Closing the Achievement Gaps Initiative sites—Springfield, MA and Seattle, WA. Parent/teacher home visits have become a core strategy for increasing student achievement in low-performing schools.

How do they do it? Springfield has adopted a model of home visits developed by the Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project (PTHVP) of Sacramento, CA. This model is founded on the core belief that “parents and teachers are equally important co-educators given that the parent is the expert on the individual child while the teacher is the expert on the curriculum that must be mastered for success.”<sup>ii</sup> Other distinguishing features of the model include:

- visiting all students’ homes irrespective of student achievement level to ensure that the visits are not associated exclusively with problems or disciplinary action
- voluntary participation by parents and teachers
- compensation for teacher time

- multiple visits per year over the course of students' entire career from elementary to grade 12

In Seattle, a similarly structured model has been developed. Schools in both communities are attempting to break the “cycle of blame” for student underachievement or failure and, instead, acknowledge up front that it takes coordinated effort, resources and time on the part of both parents and teachers to change results for kids. The visits are part of a greater strategy within each district to improve student outcomes and teaching effectiveness through union, district and community partnerships. The teacher home visits in Springfield and Seattle tell powerful stories of collaboration, trust and relationship building and results.

### **Union, District and Community Collaboration**

In 2006 in Springfield, MA, the Pioneer Valley Project (PVP), a coalition of faith based congregations and unions in the Springfield area, joined with the Springfield Education Association (SEA) to create the first teacher home visit program in the city at Duggan Middle School. PVP worked with Duggan to design and implement the home visit program, and to train and support the teachers. The SEA signed a memorandum of understanding with the school principal that stated that visits would be voluntary on the part of teachers and parents, that teachers would be compensated at their usual rate, and that teachers would not be evaluated on home visits in any way.

In 2007 this memorandum was then signed by the superintendent after he agreed to expand the home visit program citywide based on the success of the Duggan pilot program. The SEA organized votes of teachers in three quarters of the city's schools to demonstrate support for home visits, and eighty-nine percent of teachers voted to bring the program into their schools. Eight schools were selected for training, and by 2010-11, approximately fifty-seven teachers across these schools had visited over 500 families. A Springfield teacher conveys succinctly the spirit of collaboration that has driven the success of parent/teacher home visits in the schools:

*It's a message put in your own mind and those parents' mind that we're a community. It takes a village to raise a child. When you work together you create a better atmosphere. And that's a huge message. I think that's why it's so powerful.*

In Seattle, union and district collaboration is codified in its current teachers' contract. The contract provides for a Partnership Committee focused on closing the achievement gaps and consists of an equal number of district and union appointees. Within its charge, the Committee must “develop, train and implement a parent/guardian and community engagement process that supports school staffs in reaching out to community resources and the parents/guardians of the students we serve.”<sup>iii</sup> Since 2009, 545 staff have made over 1672 family visits in the NEA Foundation-funded “Flight Schools.”

### **Trust-Building**

Trust—and deepened relationships—among teachers, parents and students are at the core of the success of the parent/teacher home visit model, as is a shared understanding that the whole purpose of the visit is to improve the achievement and life opportunities of students.

The visits are neither punitive nor focused on students' or parents' deficiencies. In Seattle, for example, the visits are focused explicitly on:

- building stakeholder trust;
- creating “contact persons” for each family at the school;
- increasing awareness among families and students regarding student achievement, high school graduation requirements, and support opportunities at their school; and
- increasing understanding among school staff regarding the needs and realities that ethnically and linguistically diverse students face.

The importance of trust between teachers and students cannot be overstated: In a Consortium on Chicago School Research (University of Chicago) study, researchers report that “student performance is better where students report high levels of trust for their teachers and where they report that teachers provide personal support to them ... this is consistent with other research that found that schools with strong teacher-student relationships are more likely to have greater student engagement, reduced absences, and better graduation rates.”<sup>iv</sup>

Reflections from teachers in Seattle and Springfield summarize the sentiments regarding trust often heard in parent/teacher home visit sites in both communities:

*The communication becomes better, and students are not afraid to tell you something that they need or that their parents need, or to have a phone call home because they know that phone calls can be just about business, about school. And they know that you and their parents are on the same page. It's all about them. What does this child need to do better?*

*Teacher, Springfield, MA*

*At a minimum they [the visits] have increased the relationship both ways. Teachers feel more comfortable picking up the phone, and families are more apt to call and talk to us. I can do problem solving because I know that person.*

*Teacher, Seattle, WA*

### **Results for Students**

An independent evaluation (1998-2001) of 14 parent/teacher home visit pilot schools conducted at California State University at Sacramento revealed that standardized test scores in schools conducting visits increased at a higher rate than the Sacramento school district as a whole. <sup>v</sup> Two important factors affecting student performance have become evident across participating schools—student motivation and teaching effectiveness. With regard to student motivation, a parent in Springfield observes:

*It has encouraged her [my daughter] to be the best she can be. Because now when she tackles something, a new task, she attacks it to the best of her ability just in case a teacher comes by, so she can show a teacher some of the improvements she's made. It's kind of like the teacher has become a surrogate parent for my child. It's very, very helpful.*

A reflection by an administrator in Springfield sheds additional light on how increased student motivation and behavioral shifts are affecting attendance rates and disciplinary referrals:

*Overall our disciplinary referrals have gone down, and particularly among the students who are involved in the project...I do see a decrease in their referrals to the office because of their behavior. Their attendance has also increased. I believe it's now because the parents see a real ally in the school.*

A critical factor driving up student performance is enhanced teaching effectiveness. In Seattle, teachers reported gaining greater perspective into students' personalities, learning styles and "emotional foundations for learning," enabling them to teach "the whole child." At a time when effective teaching is increasingly associated with teachers' ability to differentiate instruction and address cultural, social and emotional dimensions of student learning, the recognized value—and possible demand for—parent/teacher home visits stands only to increase.

### **Moving Forward**

Compelled by its firm belief in the role of parents as co-educators with teachers, since 2008 the NEA Foundation has provided resources to the Sacramento-based PTHVP to refine the model, develop training materials, and deepen its capacity for collecting and analyzing data on the teacher home visits. The model has been implemented in 11 states, with training underway in schools in two additional states. Concurrently, through its Closing the Achievement Gaps Initiative, the NEA Foundation has provided support to eight communities—including Springfield and Seattle—to strengthen community, union and district collaboration as a mechanism for ensuring high levels of student achievement. As early and successful adopters of parent/teacher home visits, Springfield and Seattle continue to set a standard for other NEA Foundation Gaps sites—and indeed, districts across the nation—as they explore and undertake bold measures to make sure that all children receive the support they need to succeed.

### **Selected Resources**

- Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project (Sacramento, CA), <http://www.pthvp.org/>
- National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, <http://www.ncpie.org/>
- The SEDL National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, <http://www.sedl.org/connections/>
- National Network of Partnership Schools (Johns Hopkins University), <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/center.htm>

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Henderson, A., & Mapp, K. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (available for download at <http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf>)

<sup>ii</sup> PTHVP Information Packet (available for download at <http://www.pthvp.org/>)

<sup>iii</sup> Collective Bargaining Agreement between Seattle Public Schools and Seattle Education Association, 2010-2013: Certificated Non-Supervisory Employees, p. 9

<sup>iv</sup> Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago. (2007). *What matters for staying on track and graduating in Chicago public high schools: A close look at course grades, failures and attendance in the freshman year*. Chicago, IL: Elaine M. Allensworth & John Q. Easton, p. 30.

<sup>v</sup> Cited in Ferlazzo, L., & Hammond, L. (2009). *Building parent engagement in schools*. Santa Barbara, CA: Linworth, p. 21.