Understanding the importance of the family-school connection is vital to teachers and their students. Research shows that parent involvement is an important gauge of student success. Findings indicate it improves attendance, attitude, behavior, test scores, grades, and reading achievement, especially in elementary school (Aronson 1996; Fehrman et al. 2001; Strickland 2004; Speth et al. 2008).

Changes in Parent Involvement

Schools traditionally encourage parent/family involvement through open houses, parent information nights, and math and literacy events. Due to various factors, family participation in these types of in-school activities has decreased in recent years. Increasing multifaceted responsibilities—jobs, family, aging parents, education—has decreased their availability to volunteer or attend meetings. How then do teachers make that vital connection to families?

Home Visits

One possible solution is to conduct home visits. Home visits, where teachers and administrators visit families, have emerged as a successful means for fostering the parent-school connection while respecting the responsibilities and constraints on families’ time. The federally funded programs Even Start and Head Start, as well as many charter schools, have adopted home visits as part of their parent involvement plan (Vogel et al. 2006; U.S. Department of Education 2004). Of course, teachers...
must check with their own district before conducting any home visits. It is important also that teachers visit at a time and location both convenient and comfortable for the family.

Teachers who conducted home visits found that they offer unique benefits. Home visits are opportunities to connect with families, experience students in their home environment, and develop a deeper understanding of students and their experiences.

“The home visit is an effective tool to really see the environment of the kids—the interaction between the kids and the parents in their own home,” Martha, a second-grade teacher at a charter school, said during an interview. “I think it helps us as teachers to be more sensitive to a situation that a child might be dealing with.”

Beth, a preschool teacher, noted “It is very nice to have a sense of the children before they come [to preschool]. The home visit is able to provide that.”

Furthermore, many parents and students greatly appreciate the visit. “Many are tickled to death that we are willing to come to their turf, and sometimes that is so important in the trust relationship—to meet them on their turf first,” she continued.

Suggestions from the Field

A focus group of preK–2nd grade teachers, formed to discuss the educators’ experiences with home visits, found that the first time home visits were conducted, some teachers were apprehensive about how the idea would be accepted. They acknowledged that some parents were uncomfortable to have teachers come into their home. However, once the initial apprehension passed, parents usually were warm and welcoming, which put the teachers at ease as well. Based on feedback from this focus group, the following suggestions can guide teachers in helping parents feel more comfortable with home visits.

- **Be open to home visits.** Make home visits known through an introductory letter at the beginning of the year, but allow families to decide whether they want to participate. Also let parents choose where to meet—e.g., home, library, coffee shop, or community center.

- **Be flexible.** Scheduling can be difficult. Being flexible with meeting times encourages home visits.

- **Be at ease.** Some parents may feel that the teacher is there to judge them and their home. Setting a relaxed tone through a casual appearance and conversational style encourages parents to be more comfortable.

- **Be helpful.** Teachers in the focus group combined fun with functionality. They discussed expectations for the year and suggested ways to support their children. Many teachers took special items, such as literacy baskets that included books, games, cards, and library information to encourage reading and interaction—a welcome basket with purpose.

- **Be prepared.** Having an agenda, checklist, or notes ensures that all necessary information is covered and helps teachers feel confident talking to parents.

**Go the Extra Mile**

Participating in home visits requires teachers to go the extra mile—figuratively and literally. They must step out of their comfort zone—their classroom! Home visits may take extra time and effort, but the benefit of creating the family-school connection is worth that extra mile.

**References**


