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Teacher house calls

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Heather, a kindergartner at Stix Early Childhood Center, got an unusual visit on a snowy Friday earlier this month.

Her teacher, Karen Pittinger, came to talk to her and her grandmother about schools, her friends and the year so far.

Pittinger brought a gift bag, with notebooks, mechanical pencils and a book about tropical birds. "Since you're one of my best readers, I have a feeling you'll grow into it," Pittinger said.

A new program in the region is sending hundreds of teachers to their students' doorsteps.

The concept of home visits isn't a new one. A federal study has found that teachers rate such visits as effective. Yet, the concept has been stymied by a lack of training and — more critically — funding to cover overtime pay.

Now, with the support of a philanthropic foundation, three St. Louis districts have started home visits in a program being tracked by researchers. The Teacher Home Visit Program has been in place at Valley Park Elementary for three years, at Maplewood-Richmond Heights for two years and will be expanding in the St. Louis Public Schools. Already, city schools have conducted nearly 600 first visits.

The program offers families two home visits a year, as well as several family-focused events.

The effort is as much about supporting students as it is allowing parents and guardians to discuss concerns.

For example, as Pittinger visited Heather, the teacher took time to speak one-on-one to the girl's grandmother, Anna.

While Heather finished her dinner and read a book about the tooth fairy, Pittinger and Anna discussed a book report and Heather's report card.

Pittinger mentioned that Heather is sometimes distracted, which might lead to difficulties in first grade.

But she also said, "Heather is a really good thinker, and she's an involved thinker. You've done a very nice job with her."

After each visit, the teachers fill out a report, stating what they learned and whether they felt they were adequately trained to address any concerns.

Karen Kalish, of the St. Louis-based Estelle W. and Karen S. Kalish Foundation, decided to start the home visit program after attending a conference in Los Angeles in 2005. Kalish, who also runs a program that links local police officers with elementary school students as well as several other nonprofit initiatives, was inspired by the growth in parental involvement that took place in school systems elsewhere.

"We need this desperately in St. Louis," she said.

The home visits are part of a pilot study by the Missouri Institute of Mental Health, which conducts research on education.

Virginia Weil and Liz Sale, evaluators of the home visit program study for the Missouri Institute of Mental Health, said the study will determine whether the visits improve academic performance.

They said parents have already offered positive feedback. Teachers, meanwhile, say they have gained a greater perspective on the home environments of students and of parent expectations, Weil and Sale said.

Rick Sullivan, chief executive officer of the St. Louis Public Schools, said he likes the idea of teacher home visits but is waiting to see if they can be proven effective. "When we complete the first year, we can determine whether or not it truly is an academic program that will work," he said. "Will it improve the performance of students in schools, will their attendance go up, will parents become more involved as a result of this?"

Kalish has sought to eliminate some of the problems that home visit programs have had in other cities. To make visits safer, teachers go on visits in pairs.

The visits can also take place at nearby restaurants or libraries if parents feel uncomfortable with allowing the teachers into their home.

In the St. Louis Public Schools, teachers who go on home visits are paid by the district for their extra time. At Maplewood-Richmond Heights and Valley Park, teachers are paid by the Teacher Home Visit Program foundation, supported by the Kalish Foundation.

Linda Henke, superintendent of Maplewood-Richmond Heights schools, said the arrangement with the foundation has allowed the district to offer a service that its community has wanted for the past five years.

By the end of Pittinger's visit to Heather's home, the teacher had discussed Heather's interests, hobbies and learning habits with her grandmother, and Heather showed off her impressive book collection and recited the plots of several Harry Potter movies.

As her teacher prepared to leave, Heather said that she likes having her teacher visit her at home.

Her grandmother added, "It shows me that they're interested in how she's actually doing."

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