

## Home visits by teachers pay off in the classroom

Subhead: Schools say kids are more likely to behave

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Of the Post-Dispatch

Text: Six St. Louis schools are turning the parent-teacher conference on its head by sending teachers to visit the homes of their students.

The home visit is an age-old idea that has gotten a second look in St. Louis and other urban districts nationwide. Participants hope to build a bridge between teachers and parents, creating a more supportive learning environment for students in the classroom and at home.

Preliminary results of the St. Louis Public Schools Home Visit Project have been encouraging, said Karen Kalish, whose family organization, the Kalish Foundation, started the program in February.

An independent evaluation of teacher surveys about each visit found that nearly all teachers reported gaining new insights into their students' interests, concerns and needs because of the home visits. More than half of the teachers reported that the students they had visited were more likely to complete their homework and were behaving better at school.

In addition, nearly half of the parents had attended various school events after the visits -- a marked increase in participation.

"Some of these parents didn't have a positive experience with schools," Kalish said. "We want to have them start thinking about what they want for their child, and we help them on the road to get there."

The foundation picks up the tab, paying teachers for the time they spend visiting students' homes and sponsoring family nights at the six schools. The foundation also tries to find assistance for families in need, whether they lack blankets, coats or a child's eyeglasses, Kalish said.

This fall, teachers made more than 500 visits, serving more than 300 students.

Each of the six schools was asked to participate because of low test scores and a need for more parental involvement. Each school also had an administrator who would encourage teachers to get involved.

Evelyn Thames, a first-grade teacher at Adams Elementary, said she wouldn't have believed that home visits could make a difference if she hadn't seen the results firsthand.

When Adams Principal Sharonica Hardin approached teachers about joining the program, Thames said, she was against the idea of going to strangers' houses.

But the school's other first-grade teachers weren't able to participate because of other commitments, so Thames reluctantly took over the task.

Now she's a true believer.

On a crisp December afternoon, Thames and a colleague, reading specialist Arnetta Fraction, crisscrossed the

neighborhood around their school. They arrived at each home equipped with compliments for their students and a willingness to listen to their parents.

Sam Jones wrote good sentences that day in class. But his mother, recently separated from Sam's father, needed help finding a new job and paying her bills. Thames scribbled furiously on a notepad and promised to call back with some phone numbers.

Kayla Hutch is a blossoming scientist. Her mother showed off the holiday homework that Kayla had already started -- two days before school let out for the holiday.

"She is a wonderful child," Thames said. "If I could clone her, I would."

Alexia Black is always ready with the right answer to a question. Her parents, LaTonya Black-Brown and Joe Brown, beamed with pride as they spoke about how Alexia reads books to her younger brother and sisters.

Later, Black-Brown said she valued the visit because it gave her a chance to talk one-on-one with her daughter's teacher.

"I know Ms. Thames is interested in my child, and she wants to push her more," Black-Brown said. "And it makes it more comfortable for me to pick up the phone and call her, and she'll do something about it."

Then the teachers visited Myron Davis.

"There's my boy!" Fraction calls when Myron enters his family's front room, where his father, his mother and most of his eight siblings had already gathered.

Myron, 7, had been suspended the week before for his role in a fight that pitted four boys, including Myron, against a fifth boy, Thames explained.

Then she fixed her gaze on Myron. "You know I told you you're smart," Thames said. "You know what's right, and you know what's wrong. So don't do it again. We've missed you."

Myron isn't one of Thames' students, but it doesn't matter. As the only first-grade teacher visiting students' homes, Thames visits students from the whole grade.

"Once we got started, all the kids were begging us to come," Thames said.

St. Louis' program is modeled after similar projects in such places as Sacramento, Calif., and Austin, Texas.

The Sacramento City Unified School District started its program in 1998 to encourage communication between parents and teachers. In fact, representatives from the Sacramento program trained the St. Louis teachers who volunteered for the task.

Gloria Hernandez is the former executive director of Sacramento Area Congregations Together, a faith-based group that sponsored the district's first home visits. Hernandez said the visits worked well because teachers and parents alike gained insights into the other side of a child's life.

The visits are not prompted by a problem, so parents grow comfortable talking to a teacher about a child's needs. If a problem crops up later, Hernandez said, parents are more likely to listen to a teacher's concerns.

And teachers learn about their students' lives too, Hernandez said. She recalled a teacher who had assigned her students to measure their beds and sofas as part of their homework. One student came back with unrealistic answers. A home visit revealed that the child was living in a house without furniture, Hernandez said.

The program "really opens doors and breaks down the fears and assumptions that people have about each other," Hernandez said.

At Meramec Elementary, 10 teachers participate through the project, and others volunteer to go out on their own time, said Principal Jeanetta Stegall.

Stegall said she wanted to get more parents involved with her school. But she also wanted teachers to better understand their students' lives -- the child who lives in a shelter, or the young student who takes care of younger siblings while their parents are at work.

"It's difficult for a child to be at home playing a miniadult, then come to school and play another role," Stegall said. "Even though a child's body is coming to you, you are not always dealing with a happy-go-lucky 8-year-old."

Thames echoes the sentiment. She said the home visits had given her more empathy for her students and more patience when some of them act out.

"I really started to understand the behavioral problems in my classroom," Thames said. "Sometimes children come to school and they are already angry when they get here. I have better insight."

Photo(s):

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Cutline: Photos by ANDREW CUTRARO / POST-DISPATCH

(1) Evelyn Thames, a first-grade teacher at Adams Elementary, gives Alexia Black, 7, a congratulatory hug after telling her parents about Alexia's good work in school. Thames' visit to Alexia's house in St. Louis was part of the St. Louis Public Schools Home Visit Project.

(2) Evelyn Thames comforts Catherine Jones and her son, Sam, 7, during a recent visit to their apartment in St. Louis. Jones said she was in danger of being evicted from her apartment and was afraid it would affect her son's schoolwork. Thames said home visits gave her a better understanding of the challenges some of her students face. (\*

Note: This photo did not run in the Illinois editions.)