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Connecting with

In St. Louis, parents become far more engaged with school when educators meet them on their home turf.

Linda Henke

Mike Maclin, assistant principal for Maplewood Richmond Heights High School, and Elizabeth Whiteside, a high school math teacher, trudged down the dark steps of the apartment building to knock on the door of a tiny one-bedroom apartment where Antonio lived with his father. It was their first home visit to meet with Antonio, who was a freshman and new to the school this year. Tall and slender, Antonio answered the knock and shyly invited them in. The two educators sat on the couch and encouraged Antonio, who had retreated to a table at the other end of the

room, to join them. Antonio's dad smiled at his visitors. "Ain't nobody ever come to my house before," he said. "This is real amazing to me. When I told my aunt, she said it might be a prank call."

Maclin laughed heartily. "No," he said. "We're no prank. We're just here to see how things are going and if there are ways we can help make sure that Antonio gets the most out of his high school experience."

The conversation continued for another 30 minutes, and eventually even Antonio joined in. The talk ranged from the winning Blue Devils basketball team, to the *D* in algebra that Antonio was currently carrying and how Miss Whiteside might help, to the free breakfast program at the high school that includes a waffle bar. As the two educators left, they invited Antonio and his dad to come to a barbecue for all families that had received a home visit that semester and gave them two free tickets to the basketball game that followed the barbecue.

Antonio's dad grabbed Maclin's hand at the door. "Thanks so much for coming to see me. I want my boy to do better

than me. Seems like he should be able to do that at a school like yours. You call me if he don't get rid of that D."

Reversing the Trend

Maclin and Whiteside's visit was one of nearly 700 that have been conducted this year in the Maplewood Richmond Heights School District, a small urban district nestled next to the city of St. Louis, Missouri. Maplewood Richmond Heights has been working for almost a decade to rebuild itself into a high-quality school district after years of problems, including low test scores and a high dropout rate. In 2000, more than one-half of the families who could attend the public school chose not to do so, even though parochial or private education put a major strain on their budgets. Other families chose to move to another community when their children became school age. But in 2000, a courageous board of education decided to reverse the trend and set about rebuilding the school district into an asset to the community, one where parents felt connected and involved in their children's education.

Today Maplewood Richmond Heights is a thriving urban school district serving 1,200 students. More than one-half of

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A Program That Works

Home visits are not a new idea. Head Start requires teachers to make home visits during the academic year, and many kindergartens in the United States require home visits by teachers before school starts. In 1998, teachers in California began visiting students' homes. The programs resulted in an increase in academic achievement and test scores, improved attendance and homework completion, increased parental involvement, and improved attitudes about school on the part of both students and parents.¹

The Teacher Home Visit Program in St. Louis was inspired by these programs. In 2005, Karen Kalish of the St. Louis-based Estelle W. and Karen S. Kalish Foundation decided to launch a similar program in the St. Louis area, including

Parents at Home

the school's families live in poverty. The school population is 42 percent black and 45 percent white; 13 percent of students are from other countries. Test scores are rising. Last fall, the school district was awarded Performance with Distinction by the state's department of education, a recognition of high performance on a variety of achievement indicators.

Although the path to improvement was not easy, some important elements supported the change. In real estate, the key word is *location*. At Maplewood Richmond Heights, the key word is *relationship*. Everyone—from board members, to administrators and teachers, to bus drivers and cooks—knows that the district is committed to personalized service and to building strong relationships with students and families. The district accomplishes this in many ways, including ensuring that teachers in kindergarten through 8th grade loop with their students for two years. Over the past three years, the district has added a new tool to support relationship building and personalized service—the home visit program.

Maplewood Richmond Heights. The results of a pilot conducted in the district in 2008 far exceeded expectations. Parents who had never set foot in school were suddenly coming for conferences, and participating teachers raved about how quickly they were able to establish classroom routines in the fall following summer visits. Teachers found it much easier to make sensitive phone calls when they had previously established positive relationships with parents. The district decided to expand the program to all the schools in the district. This year marks the second year of full implementation.

In just three years, the Teacher Home Visit Program has become a crucial component of the district's success, and the results have been startling. At the end of the first semester of the 2010–11 school year, discipline referrals throughout the district were down 45 percent, and parent attendance at each school's first open house was up by almost 20 percent. Students' school attendance is nudging up as well and is slightly higher than last year's rate.

Although the district has not mandated that teachers complete home visits, the majority of teachers participate in the program. The visits are done in addition to teachers' contractual work. Teachers new to the program attend two three-hour training sessions offered by the Kalish Foundation. The first session focuses on relationship-building skills and learning how to establish a true listening stance and a partnership with parents. Teachers role-play with one another, exploring what happens when a home visit gets off to a rocky start, for example. At the first session, teachers also review the support services available through the district and the Kalish Foundation.

The second training session focuses on having "courageous conversations" about academics and attendance—and ways parents and teachers can partner to improve both. Through the Kalish Foundation, teachers are paid for the training session, and they also receive \$20 for each home visit. The district encourages teachers to visit homes in pairs, but as teachers become more comfortable in the community, they often just visit on their own. The total cost for the program is about \$50,000 per year, with the Kalish Foundation paying for approximately two-thirds of it. Over time, the district will need to find ways to support the program with district funds.

Home visits have become an integral part of how elementary teacher Gretchen Lee does business. She described her approach this way:

Over 50 percent of the time, I meet families in their homes, but sometimes they're not ready for that, so we meet at a park or coffee shop. First visits always seem more formal. A big part is affirming the parent as the first teacher. I always ask if there is anything they want me to keep an eye on. Every one of us at school does a [home] visit in the summer and a second [one] later in the year. . . .

In real estate, the key word is *location*. In our school district, the key word is *relationship*.

One of my favorite things is watching the parents' faces soften as they realize this is a real conversation. They relax and speak naturally.

Gretchen recalled a favorite memory of a home visit. The phone rang, and the parent told the caller that she was having coffee with a friend. "Well, actually," the parent said, "it's my child's teacher. Yes, really!"

The Question of Race

Rachel Ward, a high school teacher, noted that she has never had a bad visit but that some are more powerful than others. Many parents are naturally defensive and think that teachers are prying. Rachel pointed out,

Some of the defensiveness comes from issues of race. The [parents] feel that there are stereotypes in the community and that as a teacher, I buy into them. Some of the parents didn't have good experiences in school; they think we are there to catch them, to find what they are doing wrong. Some parents can't imagine teachers being on their side.

The issue of race emerged after the district analyzed the first year's data and discovered that only 18 percent of the home visits were to black families, even though more than 40 percent of the student population was black. Teachers and administrators found that black parents were much more likely to decline a home visit, especially if it was offered by a white educator.

Concerned about this trend, two black board members brought the issue to the African American Advisory Council, a parent group that had been active in the district for several years.

The Advisory Council parents came up with an ingenious idea. They offered to do home visits with parents who were reticent to have teachers visit. These parent liaisons received the home visit training, and they now follow up with black parents who have declined an educator visit. They explain to parents the district's focus on personalized service and encourage families to sign up for a visit the next time the school calls. This year's data speak for themselves: The home visits are much more aligned to the district's demographics.

What Empathy Can Do

Home visits have bought the district increased instructional time. For example, according to middle school principal Bob Dillon, parents seemed more willing to work with the school in ensuring that all 8th graders had their requisite inoculations; only two students lost school time because they couldn't come to school until they were inoculated. Tardiness has also dramatically decreased; it usually takes only one follow-up phone call to get students to come to school on time.


But just as important as school time is staff members' increased ability to put themselves in other people's shoes. As Rachel Ward noted,

When the parents are sitting in my classroom, it's my turf, and I don't feel a bit nervous. When I'm in someone's living room, I'm in *their* world. I feel butterflies and hope I do things right.

The program has brought huge rewards. High school principal Kevin Grawer noted that a single visit gives him credibility with parents—espe-

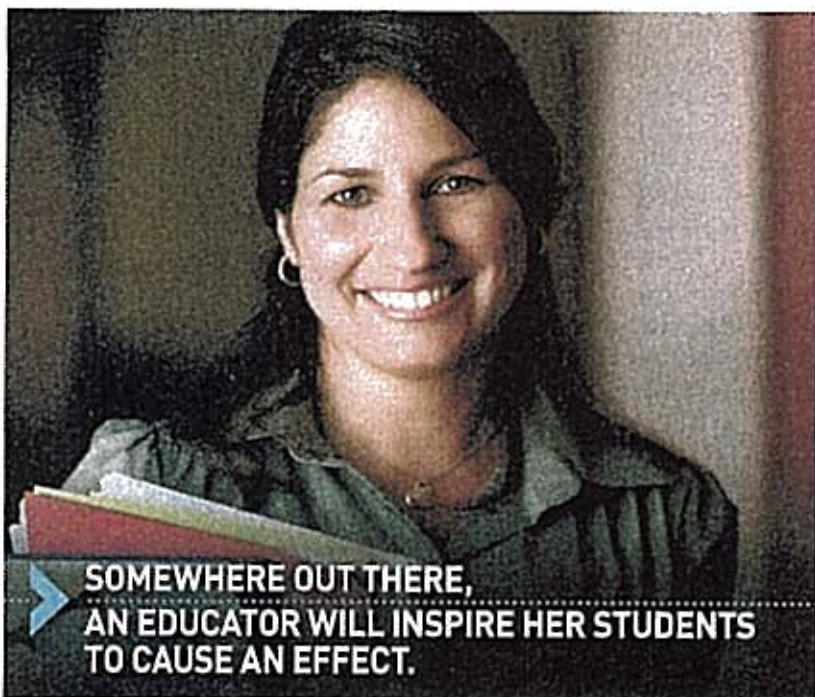
cially when the conversation concerns discipline. Kevin described a visit to a Mexican family that he had almost given up on. He had called many times, but nothing seemed to change. His visit to the family's 500-square-foot apartment was pivotal. The mother had prepared *licuado*, a kind of Mexican smoothie, and *galletas*, small sweet crackers that she served on a white plate. The mother commented, "I didn't know if I should clean for you guys; I didn't think you would come."

The conversation about school and her teen's behavior was easy, and the mother agreed they needed to work together to address the problems. For the first time, Kevin felt he made real progress. As he prepared to leave, the mother pointed to a large pile of letters and newsletters from the district, all stacked neatly on her table. He was impressed with all the communication that the school had sent out—until she explained that although she was able to speak some English, she couldn't read it. "I went back to school," Kevin said, "and used the Google Docs translator program and sent her everything. Now all of my letters to Hispanic families go out in Spanish."

Meeting the needs of a diverse socioeconomic community is never easy, but our school district has found an important tool. The Teacher Home Visit Program has moved the district to the next level in terms of serving families and educating students. For the first time, partnership with all parents has real meaning. 

www.teacherhomevisit.org

Linda Henke is superintendent of schools, Maplewood Richmond Heights School District, Maplewood, Missouri; 314-568-1221; l.henke@mrhsd.k12.mo.us.



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