Testimony

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The swine flu prevented me from going to Mexico so I started doing research on what would make a difference on high school graduation rates. My school has a large immigrant population, with many English language learners. My interest in the culture of immigrants preceded home visits. I see myself as a US white, middle class, English speaking woman who is in solidarity with people in Latin America. In my house in DC we have welcomed Central American families to live with us for periods of 6 to 10 months, which is a mutually enriching experience.

I met Carrie Rose and found out about home visits. Immediately there was a connection with my colleagues. We went to the conference and it really opened our eyes. I still remember to this day some of the stories, the testimony people gave about the impact of home visits.

Our principal recently said that he wants the entire school involved in some way, so we expect our numbers will increase again.

The home visit project brings into clear relief that in school we only see one part of that student. We’re used to that one part. But when we go on a home visit, we realize that child is the son of a mom, and the brother, and all these other relationships and interests. What we thought was our job, to deal with a kid for 60 minutes of the day, we now realize limits us to only a small part of the picture.

One home visit is just the beginning, but on a visit I learn more about the student, and I’m also learning more about my own assumptions- which I thought I had left at the door. One assumption that I thought I had left at the door was the idea that a parent has to show up at the school in order to do a good job as a parent. I never said this or even thought this consciously. And yet when I met a father who never came to the school, I found I still had this attitude toward him. On a home visit, from talking with him it was clear he cared very deeply about his daughter. When came time to ask “what are your expectations of me, “ he said “ I can't answer the question because I never went to school myself. “

I also learned that his wife was still in El Salvador, and he was very effectively running his household and raising his six kids, holding it all together in very difficult circumstances. The older girls were sometimes missing school to help take care of the younger children. The daughter that went to our high school had a job in a tapas restaurant, and on Tuesday nights she worked late. Her history teacher was on the visit with me, and she decided not to give her tests on Wednesday mornings, when she would be tired.

Another student who I got to know, Osvaldo, was a little quirky, a little annoying. We did a home visit, met his mom, and found out two very important things. The district had moved him from six grade to 9th grade, telling the mom he was too old for middle school. We were shocked at this. We recognized that it
was very important for the school counselor to know this and that the student would need to be supported. We now had a wider lens in which to view his behavior.

We also learned that the mom cleaned offices in the evenings. She did not want her son at home all those hours at home alone, playing video games or whatever, so she put him to work alongside of her. She was very proud of him, and he was very proud of doing it. We were impressed that the mom had found a strategy to protect her son within her area of expertise. Without knowing any of the back story, I would have thought to myself, “I wouldn’t send my kid to work at night.” But it added to my respect for her and to how we engaged the son in schoolwork.

Most of these visits are in 1, 2 or 3 story walk-up apartments. This building looked no different. We walked in the door, said hi to the mom, and the dad got up from the computer. Why was I surprised? My assumption was that the immigrant parents are not computer literate. In that visit, the father said I want my son to graduate from college, because I was only able to finish 2 years of university back home. This was also reflected in the mother’s hopes and dreams: she said she wanted her sons to read because she knew it would be important to their education, and she wanted them to find things that interested them. I said we have a great library with wonderful librarians, you should come and visit. So I checked in with the librarian and told them about the visit, and that the family was interested to know what kind of books they had. And we sat down and called the family and made an appointment for the next day for the mom to come in. The mom, who only spoke a little English, was really coming from outside her comfort zone to come into the library, in more ways than one.