Kaiser Permanente funds Parent Teacher Home Visits in South Sacramento community health initiative
Early success in pilot collaboration between SCUSD, EGUSD and PTHV

(SACRAMENTO, CA) Home visits to new parents have a long history in health care, especially to infants at risk. But you may be surprised to know that the home visits Kaiser Permanente is funding as a community health initiative in South Sacramento are focused on school success in the K-12 grades.

The funder’s big-picture vision of community health includes supporting positive relationships between families and their children’s schools. The Kaiser Permanente Community Fund awarded a $20,000 grant in September to a cross-district effort aimed at strengthening community ties in South Sacramento. The collaboration involves elementary schools from both Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) and Elk Grove Unified School District (EGUSD), and the Sacramento-based nonprofit Parent Teacher Home Visits (PTHV), which trains teachers to connect with the families of their students, starting with a voluntary home visit.

“School success impacts the factors that we know have long-term implications for the health of individuals and ultimately the whole community,” says Carol Serre, Community Benefit Manager, Kaiser Permanente, Greater Sacramento Area, which funds health initiatives that impact low-income, underserved and at-risk populations. “Parent Teacher Home Visits improve the school climate for the students, the families and the educators, and leads to increased college and career opportunities for students.”
Family engagement has long been proven to be an indicator of student and school success, which is why both state (LCFF) and federal (ESSA) statutes mandate that schools reach out to their families. Yet most credential programs fail to prepare teachers to make that essential connection.

“The majority of teaching and administrative credentialing programs across California do not provide course work or even a class on family engagement. Here in Elk Grove, 78% of teachers and administrators in EGUSD have never received training on how to engage with their families,” said Lisa Levasseur, an experienced teacher who now leads Family and Community Engagement for Elk Grove Unified School District.

“Getting families and teachers on the same page is more important than ever,” says Lysette Lemay, a SCUSD veteran teacher and the Sacramento Area Coordinator of Parent Teacher Home Visits, “but that can be a challenge. The program is completely voluntary for everyone – after a few teachers try it and find it is worth the investment, more teachers and staff come on board. In the same way, once families see that the visits are about connecting to the success of their child, the good word gets out.”

Figure 1: Teachers and the family discuss their hopes and dreams for their student, leading to common goals. Home visit in Sacramento City Unified School District (Courtesy PTHV 2017)
The project in South Sacramento started last Fall, with training for teachers in 4 pilot schools. Each school is on track to meet its goals, and both districts hope to expand the number of schools participating. “We just submitted our midyear report and are so excited about the growth here,” says Lemay, who plans to apply to Kaiser Permanente for a second year funding.

Local officials say initial evaluations are overwhelmingly positive. “Teachers and principals have reported the training to be powerful, relevant, engaging and motivating. They have appreciated the honesty and structure of both the model and training,” says Levasseur.

![Image](image.png)

Figure 2: In an Elk Grove, CA training, teachers roleplay a phone call to families asking for a home visit (Courtesy PTHV 2016)

For example, an anonymous evaluation from a teacher who was trained by PTHV and then tried home visits wrote: “The connection that was created (on the home visit) will enhance my teaching. I feel that if you can connect with a child, and they know you will respect them and listen, they will do the work you ask of them. Specifically, by knowing some of her likes I can use those to help motivate her and keep her interested in the instruction.”
First-grade teacher Nancy Whelan Brown, of John Ehrhardt Elementary in Elk Grove, says “This year we were introduced to the concept of home visits. At first I have to admit that I was a bit skeptical that it could make a difference in my interactions with any of my students or change the way that the students and their parents felt about our school and their child’s future. I was wrong. The benefit to all was noticed immediately. My students felt that I cared just a bit more and felt they were connected to me on a new level. The parents felt more comfortable approaching me with any questions or concerns and I felt that I understood their individual roads a bit more clearly. I am looking forward to starting the year off with many home visits and look forward to seeing the difference it will make.”

Parents quickly warmed up to the visits, once they understood the purpose. Elizabeth Mariano, a parent of an elementary student, was a little taken aback at first. “When the teacher first called I thought my son did something wrong. I have two older boys and we never received a positive phone call before, especially a teacher wanting to come to our home. I thought for sure my son did something wrong,” she said. But the visit made Mariano a fan. “We loved the home visit. It was completely positive the whole time and my son felt really proud to have his teacher in our home. I think it is very important for the teachers to take the time to know their students and families outside of the school. After the home visit I now feel very connected to the school and to my son’s teacher. I hope more schools do this,” she said.

Principals at the pilot schools value Parent Teacher Home Visits for their positive effect on school climate as well as individual academics. Evaluations in Sacramento and other locations show increased attendance, decreased discipline issues and improved test scores. Paul Cordero, Principal at Florin Elementary in Elk Grove, joins his teachers on home visits. “I went to a home visit yesterday to the house of a parent I see every day. It was the first time she mentioned that she wants to be part of our school and help to organize events that will bring in her friends. The confidence and ease she displayed
in the comfort of her kitchen (as she prepared a plate for me and her child’s teacher to take home) was something I had not seen before,” says Principal Cordero.

Figure 4: Principal Paul Cordero and student (Courtesy Elk Grove Unified School District 2017)

Parent Teacher Home Visits can have a big impact in middle and high schools as well as elementary grades, say educators. “Parents are often unsure about how to get involved in school, especially as their children get older. The positive relationships that are built during a home visit create a great opportunity for the school and the parent to identify ways for them to become more engaged with their child’s education. The initial home visit also opens the door to a more meaningful partnership with the school and community” says Principal Mike Anderson, Jackman Middle School, a Title 1 school in Elk Grove Unified School District.

In addition to the pressures of time for both teachers and parents, Lemay cites statistics about the increasing diversity of public schools, where the majority of students are from families of color, and a majority of school children come from low-income neighborhoods, yet teachers are 80% white and middle class, and are not likely to live in the communities of their students. As with the lack of family engagement training, teachers are not likely to receive diversity training, and often need help establishing trust with families who have historically felt alienated from the system.

“Our unconscious assumptions about each other can keep us from working together,” says Lemay, the long-time Sacramento teacher that now heads up the program in the region. “Every family has its own individual culture, and I will be a better teacher if I learn about my student’s home, their challenges and their strengths.”
Figure 5: Teachers on a home visit learn the strengths and interests of their students, and then weave those into the lesson plan back at school. (A home visit in Sacramento - Courtesy PTHV 2017)

Principal Cordero agrees that meeting families where they live leads to more effective partnerships. “Building relationships with families is critical to student success. Home visits allow us to understand our parents’ cultural perspectives, what their life-view and circumstances are, and how we can work together to help their child,” he says.

“Their hopes and dreams for their child is what the family and the teachers have in common, and when they meet in person, outside of school, to talk about the child, they learn from each other how to support that child’s success,” says Levasseur, who adds that the visits are opportunities to replace assumptions and/or stereotypes with real-life relationships. “Bottom line is that mindsets are being changed about the importance of relationships and listening to another’s perspective.”

Seeing her son’s teachers connect with him as an individual was what convinced Dawnielle Meier of the program’s value. “I thought it was a really great opportunity for the kids to see their teachers outside of school and for his teachers to see where he lives and get a better understanding of what his life is like at home. I would absolutely recommend other schools doing this and teachers continue this practice,” Meier said.
Kaiser Permanente is a non-profit, integrated health care delivery organization whose mission is to provide high-quality, affordable health care services and to improve the health of our members and the communities we serve. Through partnerships with community organizations, government entities, and public agencies, Kaiser Permanente works to address issues that affect overall community health. In Northern California, Kaiser’s Community Benefit Programs Department provides grant support to organizations that address health disparities and pressing needs in low-income, underserved and at-risk communities.

Parent Teacher Home Visits started in South Sacramento, where parents in a low-income neighborhood used community organizing principles to develop a voluntary home visit strategy intended to build trust and accountability between parents and teachers, interrupting a cycle of blaming each other for low student achievement. The model was refined with teacher allies, and a nonprofit was created with the support of a unique collaboration between the local school district, SCUSD, the teachers’ union, SCTA, and the community organizing group, Sacramento ACT.

Parent Teacher Home Visits connect the expertise of the family on their child with the classroom expertise of the teachers. The visit is not a “drop-in,” but rather an appointment set between two willing colleagues in a setting outside of the school. The student’s home provides the most opportunity
for learning and sharing, but teachers also may meet families at the library, a park or a coffee shop if needed. While the model is active in a wide variety of settings across the US, all follow the following five non-negotiable core practices:

● Visits are always voluntary for educators and families, and arranged in advance.

● Teachers are trained, and compensated for visits outside their school day.

● Focus of the first visit is relationship-building; we discuss hopes and dreams.

● No targeting – visit all or a cross-section of students so there is no stigma.

● Educators conduct visits in pairs, and after the visit, reflect with their partner.

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