National study shows Parent Teacher Home Visits builds relationships that interrupt race and class bias

Sacramento – Building communication between families and their student’s teachers via a voluntary home visit program has been shown to improve metrics like reading test scores and attendance. But can the home visit break down historic and unconscious racial, cultural and socioeconomic assumptions, or implicit bias, that educators and parents may have about each other?

The Parent Teacher Home Visits (PTHV) organization is marking its 20th anniversary with a multi-city evaluation, conducted by RTI International and Johns Hopkins University in three parts. Just released Study I focused on how implicit bias impacts school success, and whether the PTHV model aligns with interventions that interrupt the unconscious assumptions that may get in the way of teacher/family collaboration.

Teacher mindset, which may include unconscious stereotypes and lower expectations, the study notes, can be a significant factor in the disparities between outcomes for student achievement, disciplinary
consequences and graduation rates among children of color. These differences may lead to assumptions and missed opportunities, but teachers report that home visits help them connect, discover strengths rather than deficits and make curriculum accessible and relevant to their students.

The independent researchers at RTI International began with a landscape study that cited evidence that unconscious assumptions about race, socioeconomic status and culture, also known as implicit bias, are causative factors for documented achievement and opportunity gaps among students of color and students in poverty. While implicit bias is unconscious, studies show that mindsets can change. Relational approaches in particular, the study cites, are a powerful intervention for changing bias, especially ongoing practices that deepen understanding between groups, both individually and in the school culture.

The study found that following the Parent Teacher Home Visits (PTHV) process, both educators and families reported a change their assumptions and attitudes about one another. Both groups described an increase of communication between home and school.

Researchers discovered that in general, across all four major metropolitan school districts, families who participated in PTHV reported being more comfortable around school staff and teachers. As their perceptions of educators shifted from “distant authority figures” to “relatable” people with common goals, “families reported increased confidence in reaching out to educators and communicating about student’s needs.”
Some of the teachers who previously held “deficit” assumptions about the families of their students found their perceptions shifting with home visits, moving to “recognizing students’ capabilities” and realizing that families’ care for their children takes shape in diverse ways. Educators reported increased understanding and empathy towards their students and families, and described changes in their behavior and their teaching practices, such as including students’ interests and home cultures in lessons to improve student engagement and motivation, and handling discipline with more empathy than in prior practice.

Attention to bias, and the study of intervention effectiveness, is more important than ever in US public schools, which serve a majority of students of color, over 80% Latino, Asian and African American. And the majority, 70%, of public school students live in low-income households. At the same time, the majority of teachers are white, middle-class and female. Even when a staff is diverse, a single teacher is likely to work with students (and their families) who are ethnically, racially, linguistically or culturally different than their own.

PTHV was created by parents in a low-income neighborhood in South Sacramento in the late 1990’s, who, with the help of Sacramento ACT community organizers, gave voice to alienation between local schools and the community. In partnership with both the school district and the teachers union, they developed an inexpensive and fast way to build both accountability and trust: train teachers to make voluntary visits to the families of their students, on the family’s home turf.
The three phases of the PTHV National Evaluation, including Study 1: Mindset Shifts, are funded by Flamboyan Foundation, WK Kellogg Foundation, National Education Association and the Stuart Foundation.

For more information, see www.pthvp.org for an executive summary and the full report of Study 1: Mindset Shifts.

Photos courtesy of Parent Teacher Home Visits

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