The Five Non-negotiable Core Practices of Parent/Teacher Home Visits

Introduction

Carrie Rose, Executive Director, Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project:

Good afternoon, everybody. I appreciate you joining us. I just wanted to do a quick overview for you about the Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project. So the concept behind our project is simple. The idea really began back in 1998, when we thought what if we carved out space for the most important people in a child’s life to come together in a unique setting, share their common dreams and expectations, and together start to use tools in a meaningful way that would help students in their academic and social success.

In the past year, we’ve trained about 5,000 teachers, we’ve expanded to about 400 participating schools in 19 states, and last year we conducted over 31,000 relational home visits. Our model has been adapted in so many diverse settings, and therefore looks a little different depending upon the location. But no matter where you are across the country, the home visiting model will look the same in these following ways:

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

2. Focus of the first visit is relationship-building only: we discuss hopes and dreams.

3. Teachers are trained, and compensated for visits.

4. No targeting – If we can’t visit all students, we intentionally visit a cross-section of students.

5. Educators conduct visits in pairs, with reflection on assumptions, strengths, and bringing what they learned back to the classroom.

Beyond these five absolute core practices, home visits can look different across the country. That’s why, in this webinar, it was important for us to bring together 5 experienced home visit practitioners to talk about their experience bringing this home visit model and the 5 absolutes to their communities and launching the work in their particular region.

Big picture, briefly, our model is designed to have two visits. The first is relational, as I mentioned, about building trust, sharing hopes and dreams and opening lines of communication. The second visit is more informational, about academics and building capacity. Both visits take about 30-40 minutes. The first visit generally happens in
the summer or the fall. The second, in the winter or the spring. Now those can be adapted, and we’ll talk about that. But big picture that’s what we’re looking to do.

And then finally, before we turn it over to our panelists, just a couple of quick notes on the outcomes. We have lots of resources around research and data you can find on our website www.pthvp.org. But in brief, for staff and families we’ve been able to show an increase in trust and empathy and capacity to better engage students. And for students, of course, our evaluations reflect how home visits are supporting their attendance, their academic success, behavior and school climate, suspension and expulsion rates, and are they leaving school successfully and then going on to college and career.

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

Panelist: Lysette Lemay, Sacramento, CA Regional Coordinator, Teacher in Sacramento City Unified School District for 15 years

Currently we have about 46 school sites within Sacramento County that are using this model for conducting relationship-building home visits with their families. As a teacher in the district, I’ve conducted tons of home visits to build trust and communication with my families. In terms of the core practices that make our model of home visits unique, one of them is that visits are voluntary. They’re voluntary for staff as well as for families. So we all may opt in or opt out of conducting or receiving home visits.

As a teacher, that core practice was important to me, because we’re all very busy and we have many many things that we are asked to do, and expected to do, and for me, home visits was the one strategy that I could use to make meaningful connections with my families and with my students, that was not something that I HAD to do. It wasn’t a box to check. It was simply a strategy that I found to be a great use of my time and energy, and so it became a part of my teaching practice.

Also, when the model was developed, it was super important to the founding parents and teachers that this be something that teachers and staff members could choose to do. Often times, when we are made to do things, the energy can be a little weird, so by choosing to go into a home, sit with a family and get to know them, that is coming from a genuine place in our heart. It’s something we really want to do and some place we really want to be.

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At the schools where I conducted home visits, it absolutely was a voluntary practice, but our administrators lifted it up as an important strategy that could be used to not only build those relationships with our students and our families, but to help to change the culture and climate of our campus in our community. So we started with the willing, those who wanted to go out, and soon enough, through word of mouth, not only from teachers who were conducting home visits but most importantly from family members and student who received the home visits, the practice started to spread as more and more teachers were compelled to go out on visits themselves after hearing the positive experiences had by their colleagues and family members.

2. Focus of the first visit is relationship-building: we discuss hopes and dreams

Panelist: Collin Radix-Carter, Pre-K Teacher, Shaw Elementary School, Boston Public Schools, Boston, MA

This is my second year at the school, as well as in the district. Our school reopened two years ago, after being closed for four years prior. As we were reopening, our staff and our principal were new to the community. So we wanted to find a way to facilitate the relationships that were needed, especially because we are a growing school. The home visit project was a part of trainings that the district offered. So most of us went to be trained, and we started doing home visits, starting with the PreK team. We’re looking to expand our home visit program to all of our grades, as our school grows. Last year, Boston Public schools trained 25 teachers in six school sites. Massachusetts has active home visiting efforts in Boston, Springfield, Lawrence and Salem. These last two are districts are managed by a nonprofit partner, called 1647.

Coming in as a teacher you might have your biases about the family and the children in your classroom. But what I found since I started doing the home visits is that the visits are a great way to hear from the families what they value. So once we know from the families what that is, we can help them on their journey towards that success. I’ve found that its been a great way for our families to get to know us and they are appreciative of us meeting with them and taking the time out to hear about them and their child as a child rather than talking about academics or anything like that. And that way it creates a partnership, helping families understand that we’re there for their children, and we want the same level of success for them as their parents do.
Some of the parents may be distrustful of Boston Public Schools due to their own experience in school, perhaps in this district, with issues such as busing in the 1970’s. Some families might have that stigma as far as Boston Public Schools being out of touch, so this is our way to get first contact with families, in a sense of we are going in and not knowing anything about them. We don’t know much about their kid, necessarily, by that point, so we're going in to learn as much as we can about the family and the child as possible.

I find that when we do that, it gives me as a teacher a better scope of who the child is, besides the representation of the child I would see just in school. Now I have an idea of what they’re like at home, in the context of their family, as well as possibly in their culture. So after doing a home visit, I had a much more deeper knowledge of the child, which ultimately affected the way I taught them. So if I knew that a child had certain issues prior to their coming to our school, I tended to be a little more “Ok, if I know this child had gone through this, then I can do this thing in another way,” or if I found out that a child had gone through trauma, we could find some supports for that child as soon as possible. In doing the home visit, meeting relationally with the families, especially having the home visit talking about hopes and dreams, is basically just a great way to hear what the families value. And, ultimately, their hopes and dreams for their child become our hopes and dreams for the child.

3. Teachers are trained, and compensated for home visits

Panelist: Miesha Martin-Sanders, Minnesota HUB Coordinator, Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project, St. Paul, MN

Hi, I started off as a parent trainer, and now I am transitioning to being the HUB coordinator for Minnesota. We started the home visit project here in St. Paul about six years ago with just six teachers. (Local teacher) Nick Faber heard about Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project at a leadership conference. He had the team come out from Sacramento to train us. He approached St. Paul’s district about supporting Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project, and at the time they were going in a different direction with family engagement. He approached St. Paul Federation of Teachers, SPFT, who said yes, and ever since we have been union led. Those six teachers six years ago started off doing 12 visits. Today we have over 850 teachers trained, and we have hit almost 2,000 visits this year.

Here in St. Paul, we are representing a number of different schools. We have over a 100 different schools. We’re unique in the sense that we have teachers trained, but there may be only 5 teachers in one school and there may be 50 in another school. Along with that, we have families from a lot of cultural backgrounds, and our teachers are getting the chance to get to know more about their families by going out and doing these visits. These families are
then coming in to the schools, when they wouldn’t have otherwise, because they have that contact person and they’ve built that relationship with that teacher.

It’s important for us that teachers are compensated for their time, because, as a union, we value our teachers. We value their time, and our budgets reflect where our values are. We value when teachers do other things like coaching afterschool sports, and they’re paid for that, so we thought that it was important that if they are going to be taking time out of their already busy schedules to go out and interact with our families, to build those relationships, that they are compensated for that time.”

Carrie Rose: What St. Paul and other union-led efforts have done such a good job of is lifting up the professional development aspect of home visits. Building teacher skill sets is one more compelling reason to compensate them for their investment of their time and effort.

4. No targeting – If we can’t visit all students, we intentionally visit a cross-section of students

Panelist: Alicia Thomas, Parent/Teacher Home Visit Coordinator, Washoe County School District, Reno, NV

“We have been doing this project for 3 years now, under this national model. We started with 12 schools our first year, then jumped to 20 schools our second year, and currently we are in 24 Title 1 schools. Our program is a little unique in that we are strictly funded through our Title 1 project, but we are very excited to say that next year we will be Title 1 funded, and there is also a grant that we are hoping will come through so that we will be able to serve non-Title 1 elementary schools. So next year we expect to have 31 schools active in our district. So that’s very exciting! Currently in Washoe County, we have 550 teachers that are actively doing home visits in our district. I have a little over 750 teachers trained. We also have 50 support staff actively doing visits, and over 150 trained. I’m happy to say that our district is thriving and growing substantially every year with home visits. As the coordinator for this project, I oversee all the site coordinators at the 24 schools as well as training all the teachers in our district with my training team, keeping track of our budget and monitoring our progress and meeting our goals for the year.

In regards to my personal experience around the core practice, I came to this work with a background that’s a little different. I did a lot of truancy work, with the students that didn’t like going to school, or had major attendance issues or medical issues, and so it was more of “force them to come to school.” When I started this project, I loved it because I feel that in our schools, nationwide, we really need to bridge the gap between our families and the

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schools. Families need to feel that can advocate for their students, no matter what ethnicity they are. By doing this project, we have seen tremendous growth at our school sites, not only in the family engagement piece but also when we are looking at our evaluation we are seeing tremendous positive growth in academics, behavior and attendance. Which is super exciting! I just love going on home visits and listening to families speak of their experiences, where they are coming from. Sometimes, as educators, we do a lot of the talking and we don’t let our families do the talking, so it’s been a pleasure to go in and really get to know these families and better understand, to know the struggles they are going through and how our schools can support them better.

**Carrie Rose:** PTHVP is different than the “knocking on doors” approach. In order to build trust and show respect, you have to make an appointment in advance, and offer a visit to everyone. It was important to our founding members that our home visits be positive. Our relational approach is already going against the grain because, in most schools, the first time a family gets a call is when something is wrong. By not targeting, we avoid stigmas and come from a positive place.

**5. Educators conduct visits in teams of two**

**Panelist: Valerie Lovato, 1st Grade Teacher, PTHV Site Coordinator, Eagleton Elementary School, Denver Public Schools, Denver, CO**

“I have been here in Denver for seven years, and I have been with the Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project for six of those years. I have been a teacher that conducts home visits, as well as the site coordinator for my school. I am the coordinator between the district, the teachers and the staff to help get visits organized and compensated. Here in Denver, this year, we have 79 schools participating. This year we trained 1,160 teachers, and we are almost at 9,000 visits for the year.

One big non-negotiable that DPS believes in is that teachers and staff do the home visits in teams of two. I personally have found this to be one of the best parts of doing home visits, aside from seeing my students and their families in their homes. I love that there is someone else that I can go with on these visits, first and foremost, going to a child’s home or any place out of your comfort zone really, is going to be a scary thing, and knowing that I have planned a visit with a colleague, probably a friend, that takes some of those nerves away.

And it’s someone I can check in with before, during and after the home visit. Before the visit, we can check our biases with each other and we can have a candid conversation about the things maybe we’re expecting to see,
some things we may not see, what we hope to gain from the visit and from the families. And then during the actual home visit, it is not only a team building and relationship-building event with the families, but also with that colleague. After the visit, whether it’s right there when we are walking out the door and going to our cars, going to the next visit or even a week later, there’s that reflection piece of the home visit. What did we see? What did we learn? What was the aha moment of the visit? And we take that back to our classrooms and we can say OK, now I know why my student doesn’t do homework, or does do homework - they have a study corner and their parents encourage them to do their homework every night.

Back to the relationship building, it’s really important for teachers to get out of their classrooms, and meet other teachers. Sometimes we are such a closed door type of thing, we get in our grooves, in our rooms, and we just want to do our own thing. Having this project encourages me to not only reach out beyond the comfort zone for the students, but to go to the art teacher, or the gym teacher, or a paraprofessional that does recess duty. Going on a home visit with someone who I may not talk to on a normal basis really makes relationships and community building in the school so much more important and exciting, really, and makes the project even better.”

Audience questions

Q: When teachers at your school didn’t want to go on home visits at first, was there something that helped them become willing to go out there and try it?

Lysette Lemay: “Well, we start with the willing, and typically what happens is those teachers who are reticent to go out on visits start to hear from their colleagues, but more importantly, they start to hear from the families themselves, about what a positive experience the home visit is. It’s the word of mouth, spread by the families and the students about what an awesome experience it is to receive a home visit from staff members that ultimately sways hesitant teachers to come on board and become home visitors. Sometimes proposing an alternative location, like a park or a library, can work for a teacher that is nervous about going into homes, but my overwhelming experience has been that it is word of mouth that ultimately sways hesitant teachers. But at the end of the day the model is voluntary and no means no. They can skip this year and maybe they will consider it next year.”

Alicia Thomas: “Here in Washoe County, I always encourage my seasoned site coordinators that if they have new staff on their team that are reluctant to do a home visit, ask them to be the second person on a visit team. At least try out one. And typically, what we have seen is that once they go on one that realize it’s not as scary as they think. My seasoned coordinators, and experienced teachers, find value in helping those new educators who may be reluctant, because they, at one point, themselves were that way once. Being able to hold a new teacher’s hand on that first visit is really crucial.”

Q: Could you go over how questions about attendance come up during the second visit? How is the second visit implemented in different projects around the country?
Alicia Thomas: In our district, our elementary schools really stick with the two-visit model. The first visit is really all about the hopes and dreams of the family, and the second visit is centered around the student’s academics, so at that visit the teacher can discuss with the family how that student is doing and can pass along any resources. In middle and high schools, it looks different for the 2nd visit. Teachers of 8th graders do transitional visits, talking with families about preparing their student for high school. I’ve had some teachers actually meet the family at the high school and they tour it together. I’ve also had some teachers just sit down just to see what they family wants for their student, whether it is a traditional or a charter high school. At the high school level, in the fall they really focus on incoming freshmen, and then in the spring, they focus on juniors and seniors and they do college readiness visits. Those typically are a meeting with the family, and of course they always discuss hopes and dreams, whether it’s the first time they are meeting the family or not, and then the second thing they discuss is what the student wants to do after high school. Some teachers help families walk through the financial aid and college application process. And they come with a multitude of other options, whether it is a trade or some kind of training besides a university, because college may not be for everyone. They also focus on testing. In our district you have to pass four specific tests to be able to graduate, so they talk about that with the families, and they give the families lots of resources and options to help their student if needed.

Collin Radix-Carter: Ideally what we would like to do for the second visit, would be having a PreK teacher go with a Kindergarten teacher: the transition from PreK to Kindergarten is a big one! I just had a home visit last week, and I knew from a home visit we did in the fall that they wanted to know about how the curriculum would be different in Kindergarten, and whether their child would continue to be challenged. So on the second visit, I was able to give them an article about a new curriculum we are piloting, and I encouraged them to go our rising PreK-Kindergarten night, where they could meet the teachers and learn more about the curriculum. Which they did. So it was a great tie-in to the academics.

Q: What’s your perspective on school personnel who is not the teacher (and will not be doing the visit) making the initial phone call to schedule the visit?

Lysette Lemay: Typically it is the classroom teacher who is making the phone call and setting up the home visit. That’s a personal touch with someone that the family might have more of an immediate relationship with or be able to more readily identify. I have had the experience at the middle school level where the counselor set up home visits, and they also accompanied the teachers on the visits. That worked well at that particular site. But I would advocate for the classroom teacher to make the call and set up the visit, again because it’s an immediate connection to the student. It’s sometimes difficult enough to explain why you are calling, so being the classroom teacher makes it easier.

Q: When you call to ask for a visit and a parent seems reluctant or suspicious on the phone, what do you find is the best way to put them at ease?

Lysette Lemay: When you have a family on the phone and you’re trying to set up a home visit, if they are hesitant or suspicious or whatever it may be, sometimes its just simply reiterating, and really keeping it simple: you want to
get to know them, you want to get to know the student, its going to help you be a better educator for their child because you will able to make a more meaningful connection, you can make sure that what is happening in the classroom is something that the student can relate to on a personal level... Ultimately it is voluntary, so if a family is saying no or is hesitant about it, and you’ve offered an alternative location that isn’t their home, and they are still saying no, we don’t want to be stalkers, we don’t want to pressure anybody. A no is a no and that’s fine. You can circle back with a family, especially as home visits become more ingrained in a school’s culture and they start to hear positive feedback about it, you can check back in later in the school year, and maybe that no will become a yes.

Q: Do you usually pair up educators in teams that always make visits together, or do you mix it up? What are some pros and cons of these two approaches?

Valerie Lovato: For the most part, the natural pairs that form, the easiest, are usually a classroom teacher and a paraprofessional or support staff that also works in the same classroom. Parents are comfortable to know that the people coming to the home are the two teachers who work with their child most of the day. The second pairing, especially at my school, is with a classroom teacher and a student teacher or intern. At DPS, they get trained. They do not get paid, unfortunately, to attend visits, but they love that they get to put it on their resume. And we have had the case where a student teacher that worked at Eagleton, got trained in home visits, and got hired the next year, and was able to get paid. So she just jumped right in to home visits, she was a pro. Other combinations that I have seen have been specials teachers, our music teacher one year partnered up with a paraprofessional, and they did their visits together. We have another dynamic duo, a Kindergarten teacher and a first grade teacher. I personally as a site coordinator have always offered myself as someone to go with, last minute, whenever you need somebody.

I do recommend that classroom teachers do ask other people to go on visits with them, and not just stick with their room’s paraprofessional, because that is not the only person that works with their student. Specials teachers, administration, recess duty teachers, they all need to be included as well, in training and visits. What I like to do every year is send out a list of the trained staff members with their email addresses and cell phone numbers, so that if you get to the point where you have a visit and your go to person isn’t available, you have a list of everybody who is trained who you can contact and ask to go.

Q: Do any of you have a standard reflection process, that provides educators the opportunity to share their assumptions and what they learned from their home visits?

Miesha Sanders: In St. Paul, we have debrief sessions, where all the teacher who have done home visits can get together and share their experiences, share the assumptions that they originally had about families, as well as their change and how they’ve broken down barriers, things maybe they thought were true about a student but then they go to their home and find out that wasn’t true. We hold two debrief sessions in the fall, for those teacher who have done home visits in the summer. And then we hold two sessions in the spring, we actually have one this evening. The teachers here have been really receptive to sharing those experiences and connecting with other teachers who have done visits. And that’s also the way that we verify that they’ve done home visits, and this
is a part of how their compensated as well. So it’s a part of their agreement with us that they come to a debrief session in order to get compensated.

**Alicia Thomas:** Here in Reno we do debriefs at our school sites, at the end of the semester. And that’s really a time for our teachers and support staff to be reflecting on their home visits and any bias they may have had before coming into the home visit, and how those have changed, and then also any struggles that they feel like they are facing or struggles that they feel like their school is facing regarding home visits. So debriefs are really big.

**Lysette Lemay:** I’ll just add, similar to what’s already been said, teachers and staff who go out together spend time reflecting sometime after the visit, with these questions: What did we assume, what did we learn, and how can we leverage that back in the classroom? In addition, some administrators have reflection as a standing item on their staff meeting agenda. Anyone who has been out on a home visit that week can share that experience and it leads to some really great staff discussion about assumptions and bias and culture.

**Conclusion**

**Carrie Rose:** I want to thank everybody so much for being part of this. The reason these absolutes developed over time has been that we wanted to be able to distill the learnings of the home visit experience that parents and teachers had had from the beginning, and to still leave room for local folks to be able to adapt it. So you’ve heard some examples of that today. I know there are more questions. We will answer those and put them on our website. And I really want to encourage folks who have questions that come up either after this, or if you think of one following today, please feel free to email us and we are happy to answer those questions. All three of our partners, unions, districts and community groups, have been involved in the development of these core practices, and we are always evolving and moving our model forward. So we look forward to hearing from you guys in the future.

Thank you to our panelists from around the country for coming together to coordinate this webinar, and to Francisca Garcia who planned and moderated it. Thank you to our friends at Attendance Works and SVP for their advice as we ventured into this new media. Thank you to all of the educators and families who care so much about our students: we are all connected and we’re all in this together! We want to invite everyone to our National Gathering, our conference in Washington, DC from Oct. 20-22, 2016. Save the date – registration will be available on our website August 1.