

Home Visits Tip the Balance for First-Generation College Students

Privileged are the children of educated parents who can start a college fund, pile on the extracurricular activities and guide them through their applications in senior year. College graduates have a big advantage in getting and keeping jobs, and the earnings gap between those with college vs. high school diplomas is at an all-time high, according to economists. But what about students who are the first generation with a shot at higher education?

Many parents without degrees want college for their children but do not know how to go about it. Some families, due to personal, economic or cultural background, may not consider advanced education possible, or desirable, for their high school student.



To build parental resources and support for college, high school staff are using a strategy that's been right under their noses: home visits. Parent Teacher Home Visit (PTHV) has trained thousands of teachers to make voluntary, relational visits to the homes of their students, with proven results for elementary, middle schools and incoming high school freshmen. Now the method is helping high schoolers apply to and attend university.

In a low-income neighborhood in Sacramento, CA, Luther Burbank High School had implemented academic programs such as small learning communities and an International Baccalaureate program in 2006, and students were rising to the challenge of a college preparatory curriculum. But the myriad of circumstances surrounding each child meant that curriculum alone didn't ensure college enrollments, according to Parent Advisor Elisa Gonzalez.

Families, not surprisingly, are a significant factor. Parents may not seem supportive of their teen taking college placement tests or filling out applications, and don't know that there is help for test and application fees. Some refuse to sign financial aid papers, fearing it will trigger attention from immigration or social services authorities. Some families value marriage and childrearing for their daughters over higher education. And some simply need their child to get a job and help out.

Could home visits cut down these barriers? Gonzalez had already seen the power of home visits at her school; it was in Sacramento, in fact, that a local community organizing non-profit, ACT (Area Congregations Together), created the original strategy in partnership with the Sacramento City Unified School District and the local teachers' union (SCTA). This collaboration formed what became the national nonprofit Parent Teacher Home Visits (PTHV). With assistance from PTHV and SCUSD's Title I funding,

teachers and guidance counselors went out to the homes of Luther Burbank juniors and seniors who had the credits to apply to college, and broached the topic.



The response, at first, was guarded.

“I was hesitant, I wasn’t really sure what the home visit was about, because in Junior High Benito hadn’t done so well, and I thought it was about his grades or something,” said Regina Aguilera, mother of senior Benito Aguilera.

Her son, too, was nervous, even though his guidance counselor had prepped him.

“We give them plenty of advance notice when we ask for a visit. We say don’t get freaked out, we’re just going to go over basic stuff,” says counselor Emily Catlett. “There are a lot of knocks on the door that aren’t good news, so we want to make sure they think this knock on the door is a good thing.”

Benito wasn’t in trouble, his family learned, and the conversation centered on his success in high school and beyond. “I was comfortable, to know we had this communication, the counselors were there to help us and I could call, or come to them at the school, and Benito got the message...he knew I was going to use it. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to help my child along with the school,” says Mrs. Aguilera, who was one of 14 children and who did not go to college.

“Ms. Catlett told me about my requirements I would have to fulfill, and that they would help me throughout the process and keep me up to date,” says Benito. “It was kind of overwhelming and made me stressed at first, but it became the opposite, it made me less stressed. I knew I had someone to go to, it made me have more communication with the counselors, and it made me really happy in the end.”

Benito Aguilera will be a freshman at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in September. His guidance counselor, Emily Catlett, feels that the visits make the difference.

“I love to go to my students’ homes, meet grandmothers and grandfathers, talk to kids, see their gardens, hold their pet snakes and gerbils, and see a window into my students’ lives. The home visits are a platform, being welcomed into their home on their terms, and it produces a pathway to the rest of the information. It’s powerful, it’s a magic space we create that really resonates in a way that doesn’t happen at back to school night or meetings at school. It’s real, an authentic opportunity to say “Hey, I’m not lying, you call me,” says Catlett.

The family of Herman Tillman, age 17, was dealing with the aftermath of the murder of his sister and his parent's divorce when a home visit from a Luther Burbank guidance counselor helped his mother focus on her son's wellbeing.

"It was a strain to come to the school, not because of anything they did but because of what I was going through. So when they came out to my home, I was really happy with that situation," says Cheryl Ware-Tillman.

Her son was impressed with the personal attention. "They came to the house and told me a lot of stuff that had to do with me, to help me out, so I could know what I needed to do and what I could do. Before they did the home visit, I wasn't really sure if I wanted to go, or if I could go to college. It's a little bit of a wake-up call, telling you, you need to get your stuff together," says Herman Tillman, who will attend Consumnes River College in the Fall, with plans to transfer to the University of California for a four-year degree. [Link to video](#) interview with Herman Tillman.

"Now Herman wants to go to college and I'm all for it. I've had my doubts, because of my experience, but he's really pulled it off and I couldn't be more proud of him. It's really set my heart down so that I can rest now, I've got another child, that's living, that has made it," says Ware-Tillman.



Guidance counselor Leticia Gallardo relates to many of her students; she was in the first generation of her own family to earn a college degree. "I started doing home visits right away because Luther Burbank has a huge partnership with home visits. They've seen it work. I connected so much more with my students, once I started the visits. They would come straight to me if they had questions. Before the visits, students weren't coming. "

"The college readiness home visits are for explaining the options," says Gallardo. "A lot of our students are, like me, the first generation to go to college, and it's scary. Where do I go, what do I do? Money has been one of the huge issues. Explaining the scholarships, seeing them apply, and get in and go...It has been amazing," says Gallardo, who has seen a marked increase in the number of seniors accepted to college and the amount of scholarship money coming to Burbank graduates.

Even when the acceptance letters and financial aid offers are in hand, parents can have a tough time letting go. Parent Advisor Gonzalez recounts the story of a gifted student we'll call Nahla, who was not planning on applying to college until a home visit encouraged her parents to consider it. Nahla went through with her applications, and was accepted to a UC school with a full scholarship. "You can't go," her parents said, "We don't want you so far away."



Nahla asked her teacher and counselor to pay one more visit to her parents, and they talked together about the family's dreams for Nahla. Nahla accepted the scholarship and is now the first in her family to get a university education.

College is about more than earning power, says Sandy Baum, senior fellow at the George Washington University Graduate School of Education and Human Development. "People with higher levels of education are more likely to have rewarding jobs, more likely to exercise regularly, less likely to smoke, more likely to be active voters and volunteers, and more likely to engage in activities with their children," says Baum, who notes that society benefits from educated workers who pay higher taxes and depend less on social support networks.

Nou Vang, who graduated from Luther Burbank last year, was initially nervous to have school staff meet her mother and older sister at their home. "I cleaned the table, put water ready to serve." After rearranging the chairs, she found the conversation that ensued life-changing.

"I will never forget what the vice principal said to me when she came to my home visit. I said 'I don't think I can go to a UC, I won't be able to make it.' And she said to me 'You started with SDAIE classes and now look at you! You are taking IB classes and are doing great! You know you can do it!' After listening to her praise, I became more determined and confident in myself."

Vang now attends the University of California, San Diego, and plans to become a math teacher and "role model for my future students."

Parent Teacher Home Visits is a national network of grassroots partnerships using a proven model of home visits. Just last year, the Project trained 2,577 teachers, expanded to 13 states, and conducted over 13,390 home visits. For more information, please see PTHVP.org, and contact Executive Director Gina Martinez-Keddy at (562) 481-6565 and gina@pthvp.org.