



## **DCPS builds teacher-parent relationships with home visits**

Although some parents were at first wary at the thought of school officials coming into their homes, the District of Columbia Public Schools and the Flamboyant Foundation worked with the community to get both teachers and families comfortable with the idea of home visits.

Besides decreasing absenteeism and increasing student achievement, Flamboyant President Kristin Ehrgood said family engagement is foremost about fostering "relationships between teachers and families that are about the child, to help the child."

Speaking during a briefing on Capitol Hill, panelists said positive teacher-parent relationships are prevented by misperceptions that teachers only call parents when their children get into some trouble in school and that parents are too busy to care.

Aquila Watson said she was skeptical at first when her daughter's teacher called about home visits, but became receptive after realizing "we both wanted the same thing."

### **Professional development**

Some teachers are also uncomfortable with family engagement, noted Danette Dicks, a kindergarten teacher at Eagle Academy Public Charter School. She explained that it involves constant communication with families beyond the normal school day "to let parents know that you are there."

But teacher training on parent engagement is limited, added Ehrgood, explaining that a survey of universities that feed into DCPS found that only one teacher preparation program had parent engagement courses and it was an elective.

Thus, Flamboyant partnered with the Parent Teacher Home Visit Project to provide teacher training for home visits, starting with four elementary schools.

Part of the training emphasizes the need to acknowledge beliefs about families and how they influence educators' interaction with them.

"You have to change how you feel about parents and how you think they feel about you," said Melissa Bryant, a fourth-grade math teacher at Stanton Elementary. "I don't care whether they graduated high school or college. What I care about is, 'Are they on board to help their child?'"

Bryant said that other parent engagement strategies she has experienced in eight years in teaching have been unsuccessful, but home visitations are working thus far. She is among approximately 500 colleagues at DCPS who will be trained to:

- Value and respect families and see them as assets in supporting student learning.

- See engaging families as part of the teacher's core role and responsibility.
- Be culturally knowledgeable and sensitive -- Kelly Young, the district's interim chief for the Office of Family and Public Engagement, added that while language can be a barrier, trust among teachers and parents can be built when both feel they can safely "use that broken English or Spanish."

The groups created a rubric for teachers to gauge themselves on how they interact with families, with the goal of moving from negative family associations, such as perceptions that "my students' families are not smart enough to help their children succeed in school," to more positive associations, such as, "all families want the best for their children."

### **Learning-focused**

Bryant said that at first some parents treated her more like a social worker and wanted to show her their children's bedrooms and living environment, but she explained that she was there to discuss student learning.

Educators are trained to work with families to set educational goals for their children and how to problem-solve together. A follow-up parent-teacher conference also provides parents with students' achievement data and an activity they can do at home.

Bryant is part of a team at Stanton that helps educators identify grade-level skills and what classroom activities that can easily be provided to parents to work on at home.

She said teachers and parents are more willing to have honest discussions once relationships are established. But educators have to take the first steps: pairs of teachers make two home visits in the summer/fall and again in the spring. Visits are voluntary and are scheduled based on families' availability. Parents have the option to select other neutral locations to meet.

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