

# Home Visits Toolkit

Conducting a home visit involves educators going to a student's home to get to know her/his family. Although "home visits" are generally conducted in students' homes, the visit can take place anywhere that is convenient for everyone involved. Educators should maintain the flexibility to meet in community settings when visiting the home isn't possible. Making the effort to meet with families outside of a school setting will strongly communicate the educators' dedication to doing whatever is necessary to support students and their families.

## Why conduct home visits?

Home visits are an effective strategy of engaging students and families on a personal level to strengthen relationships and support academic progress. In addition to building a stronger sense of belonging and respect between homes and schools, home visits have been shown to contribute to academic achievement and improved classroom management. Not only does learning about families and communities broaden educators' perspectives on their students' true abilities, experiencing this through home visits helps teachers scaffold classroom topics more easily and contour lessons around the students' individual learning needs. Initial home visits should never be done for remediation purposes. Home visits are meant to enhance communication between parents and educators and should not be initiated around a negative context. In fact, if a student is struggling at school (academically or behaviorally), a home visit based on non-academic topics will often cause the student to be more engaged at school following the visit.

## How are home visits conducted?

Home visits are often easier to conduct when conceptualized in terms of three distinct phases: before, during, and after the visit. Listed below are suggested techniques that can help guide the process during each phase:

### Phase 1: Before the Visit

- Inquire about administrative policy on home visits.
- Find school or community assistance with translation of documents or phone calls.
- Send letters home with all students describing purpose of home visits.
- Talk to students and parents about home visits in person when informal occasions arise.
- Set up visit according to appropriate days/time for the family.
- Research culturally appropriate etiquette for visits.
- Collect home visit props (work samples, photographs, games, food, etc.).
- Find a home visit partner/volunteer (friend, spouse, colleague). Check with district on requirement for background check for volunteers.



- Ask other faculty and administrators for history of visits with the participating families so that you are aware of any previous interactions (positive or negative).
- Compile a list of community resources that might be useful to the family.
- Dress casually, though conservatively.

## **Phase 2: During the Visit**

- When introducing yourself, provide a school business card and let the family know what name they can use with you (e.g., Ms./Mr. Xyz or by first name).
- Greet everyone present, including young children.
- Accept refreshments, though provide information about allergies if you cannot consume something being offered.
- Discuss topics that aren't related to school, if possible. Use props as a prompt for conversation.
- Avoid "teaching" and focus on "learning" about the family's home, customs, children, etc.
- Take pictures if appropriate. Start by asking if it is okay to get a photo of you and your student (include siblings, pets, and friends).
- Mention to parents that you enjoy having parents visit your class-extend an invitation if they seem interested.
- Ask if the parents have any questions about the school or your class.
- Make sure the family has your contact information (as well as information for district interpreters/home visitors and school counselors).

## **Phase 3: After the Visit**

- Record details of visit (time, place, discussion topics, etc.) in a home visit log.
- Develop an inventory of the student's/family's "funds of knowledge."
- Send a "thank you" note home with the student, include photographs of the visit.
- Share your experiences with faculty and administrators.
- Post photographs in classroom (on a home visit wall) for other students and faculty to see.
- Contact other parents about visits, especially those who know the families you have visited.
- Invite multiple families to your classroom for a parent day.
- Maintain informal communication: e.g., send a personal note home to one family per week, or drop by the families' homes periodically to say hi.
- Compile a home visit photo album-which you can share during subsequent visits.
- Invite an administrator and/or colleague to accompany you on a visit-especially to a home that you have already visited.
- Offer to accompany a colleague on a home visit.
- Develop an ongoing checklist of procedures and logistics that you can share with colleagues.

## How do I set up home visits?

Sending a letter home to the family is a great first step in setting up a home visit. Below are some suggested points to consider when writing a letter to a student's family to explain your purpose for conducting a home visit.

- The letter should be brief and personal (avoid including this information on a widely distributed letter about a school event).
- The letter should have a warm tone and include at least two positive examples of the students' work and/or behavior.
- Introduce yourself by including a bit of personal information such as where you grew up, a hobby, or your favorite sports team.
- Explain that you enjoy meeting parents outside of school and are willing to meet them at their home or somewhere in the community.
- At the end, allot space for parent signature and additional space for correspondence.
- Send the letter home with the student AND mail a copy.
- Include a self-addressed stamped envelope with the mailed copy.

[Translated template letters](#) can assist in the development of a home visit letter. The template contains space for educators to include the personalized information about themselves and the student in English (unless they can write it in the home language). The second part of the letter includes a uniform message about the purpose of conducting home visits in the family's home language.

## What do I talk about?

The point of a home visit is to create a positive atmosphere. Most educators will be inclined to discuss their student's performance in school. Avoid mentioning challenges or problems. If possible, try to shape the conversation around other topics so that you can get to know the family (and vice versa). In most cases, conversations will naturally develop around topics like family, pets, food, language, and travel experiences.

If the conversation isn't flowing, a good topic to begin bridging school content and personal experiences is the process of getting into college, especially if the parents come from an immigrant background and/or have not attended college themselves. School systems in other countries are often organized very differently than in the U.S. Explaining the different levels of school (e.g., elementary, middle, and high school) is a good starting point. Other related points include:

- Transitioning between grade levels, especially the difference between elementary-middle school, middle-high school, and high school-college.
- Grading systems in American schools (e.g., satisfactory/unsatisfactory, letter grades, percentages, grade point average), and the importance of grades in high school.

- State mandated standardized tests vs. college entrance exams (e.g., SAT, ACT).
- Applying to college.
- Tuition costs, financial aid, grants, loans, and scholarships.
- Community college vs. university.
- State universities vs. private universities (vs. online for-profit private university programs).
- University majors and minors.
- Courses that meet general university requirements vs. coursework in a major.
- Internships and career development resources in college.

Discussing this information not only empowers parents with the knowledge to support their children, but it also shows the parents that you see academic potential in their child. In addition to providing this type of information, describing university programs opens the door for educators to talk about their own experiences (e.g., where you are from, why you chose teaching as a career, family support).

Additionally, it is important to be sensitive to the family's immigration status. If the topic of immigration is mentioned, you can explain that Washington has multiple government sanctioned resources to support students without authorized immigration documents. For example, students in this situation might be eligible for the federal [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals \(DACA\)](#).

In Washington specifically, undocumented students:

- can attend college at the same tuition rate as other WA residents.
- can apply for state Financial Aid to pay for college using the [WASFA](#).
- are eligible for the [College Bound Scholarship](#).

If parents have further questions, you can help them by finding contact information for local college admissions offices.

## How do I communicate if the parents don't speak English?

It is common for educators to perceive language differences as an obstacle to conducting a home visit. That said, confronting language differences demonstrates to parents that teachers are willing to do whatever it takes to communicate (think of how the parents feel when they come to school for parent-teacher conferences). Many districts have staff who can accompany you to help interpret. These types of district employees are usually well connected within the community and can help ease any anxiety teachers might have during the visit. Although these individuals are a great resource, not having them on the visit can keep the conversation more focused on the objective of the visit: to strengthen relationships between the family and the teacher. Some teachers prefer to have a bilingual staff member accompany them on the first visit only, or just until they get used to the process.

When conducting a visit without an interpreter, teachers can use the students and other family members to help communicate with the parents. Having the student help interpret is especially powerful when discussing positive aspects of her/his academic performance. In these cases, teachers should not put the student in a position where s/he is interpreting negative information to the parents. It is never appropriate for students to serve as interpreters for vital information to which parents must have access through a qualified interpreter.

With the proliferation of translating technology, many teachers have found it useful to use interpretation apps on their telephones to help communicate. It is important to note that these types of programs do not always produce accurate translations, so educators should be careful when using this informal strategy.

## Where can I find information about different cultural groups?

Your district home visitors, counselors, and the students themselves are usually great resources for talking about different customs and habits. For those who are interested in reading more about cultural patterns of diverse families, the following resources provide ethnographic descriptions of common experiences across a variety of cultural groups. It should be noted that all families have their own diverse range of background experiences and cultural groups should not be seen as homogenous. That said, these resources can provide a platform for starting to think about diverse behaviors, values, and attitudes before conducting a home visit.

A crucial part of engaging families from different cultural, ethnic, and/or socioeconomic status backgrounds involves understanding how one's own cultural identity can affect how we view the practices and beliefs of others. By understanding your own cultural biases, you can move beyond seeing yourself as "normal" and realize that everyone's cultural practices should be understood as appropriate in terms of their individual cultural contexts. Being open, friendly, and interested in other people's practices and beliefs is an important component of family engagement activities.

### Asian Families

- Yao, E.L. (1988). Working effectively with Asian immigrant parents. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 70, 223-225.

### Chinese Families

- Chang, J. (2004). Language and literacy in Chinese American communities. In B. Pérez (Ed.), *Sociocultural contexts of language and literacy* (pp. 179-206). Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

### Hmong Families

- Kang, H-W., Kuehn, P., & Herrell, A. (1994). The Hmong literacy project: A study of Hmong classroom behavior. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 18(3/4), 63-84.

### **Korean Families**

- Sarcella, R., & Chin, K. (1993). Literacy practices of two Korean-American communities (Report No. 8). Santa Cruz, CA: The National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Language Learning.

### **Latino Families**

- Suárez-Orozco, C., & Todorova, I. (2003). The social world of immigrant youth. In C. Suárez-Orozco & I. Todorova (Issue Eds.), *Understanding the social world of immigrant youth, Issue 100: New directions for youth development: Theory, practice, and research* (pp. 15-24). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Torres-Guzmán, M. (1991). Recasting frames: Latino parent involvement. In M. McGroarty & C. Faltis (Eds.), *Languages in schools and society: Policy and Pedagogy* (pp. 529-552). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Valdés, G. (1996). *Con respeto: Bridging the distances between culturally diverse families and schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Zentella, A.C. (2005). *Building on strength: Language and literacy in Latino families and communities*. New York: Teachers College Press.

### **Native American Families**

- McCarty, T.L., & Watahomigie, L. (2004). Language and literacy in American Indian and Alaska native communities. In B. Pérez (Ed.), *Sociocultural contexts of language and literacy* (pp. 79-110). Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

### **Russian Families**

- Delgado-Gaitán, C. (1994). Russian refugee families: Accommodating aspirations through education. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 25(2), 137-155.

### **Vietnamese Families**

- Dien, T. (2004). Language and literacy in Vietnamese American communities. In B. Pérez (Ed.), *Sociocultural contexts of language and literacy* (pp. 137-178). Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

## **How can I learn more about students' "funds of knowledge"?**

Developing a "Funds of Knowledge Inventory" involves noting specific examples of the student's and family's patterns of daily interaction and the skills and knowledge necessary during those activities. Detailed information on how to recognize funds of knowledge and apply them to academic contexts to enhance the classroom experiences of your students is provided in the [Funds of Knowledge Toolkit](#).

Read the following journal article for a detailed description of the home visit process through the eyes of practicing teachers:

- [Johnson, E.J. \(2014\). From the classroom to the living room: Eroding academic inequities through home visits.](#) Journal of School Leadership, 24(2), 357-385.

## Can conducting home visits be a school policy?

How a district or school designs and implements policies around family engagement is based on the philosophy of the administration and teachers. Although OSPI supports efforts like home visits, the ultimate decision is up to individual educators. One successful example of how a grade-level team organized efforts to visit every kindergarten student is described by teachers at Westgate Elementary School in the Kennewick School District. [Learn how they planned out their home visit program](#), the benefits of conducting the visits, and ideas for modifying their approach in the following school year.