

Casual But Regular Teacher-Parent, Teacher-Student Communications Can Increase Both Engagement and Performance

Cindy Wolfe Boynton

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Students with teachers who make brief, but regular phone calls to parents are more likely to complete their homework, less likely to need to be redirected in class, and may even view the classroom as their “second home.”

Greater participation, fewer behavioral problems and stronger teacher-student relationships are also benefits that may occur when teachers increase casual, personalized communications and regularly reach out to parents and students, said Shaun Dougherty, a Neag School of Education assistant professor of Educational Leadership & Policy. His study “The Effect of Teacher-Family Communication on Student Engagement: Evidence From a Randomized Field Experiment” was recently published in the *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*.

Co-authored with Matthew Kraft, an assistant professor of Education at Brown University, the article is the result of research conducted while the two were fellows at the Harvard Graduate School of Education Center for Education Policy Research. Both are also former high school teachers who saw the increased student engagement that came from their own periodic calls to students’ home.

“The idea seems almost too easy, but at the same time can be a bit overwhelming for the teacher,” said Dougherty, who came to UConn in August as part of the University’s recent cluster hiring plan. This ambitious undertaking brought 18 new faculty members to the Neag School to not just teach, but to work in teams or “clusters” with existing faculty to perform research in areas critically important to the future of education.

With a doctorate in Quantitative Policy Analysis in Education from Harvard University, Dougherty’s interests include looking at how data can be used to create educational policies that require “small effort, but can have huge results”—particularly those that can help close the achievement gap.

“Teachers already have such full days. But just a 2- to 3-minute phone call at the start of the school year, followed by two to three more over the course of the school year, could make a huge difference. It shows parents that teachers want them to be involved; that parent participation is welcome; and that for the student to become her or his best, school and family need to work together.”

This article has been included in the Colorado Department of Education’s *Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) Family, School, and Community Partnering (FSCP) Implementation Guide*, July 2016. It is in *Step Two: USE DATA TO CREATE MULTI-TIERED FSCP ACTION PLANS, Information – Articles*.

Among other data, the study provides teachers with suggested strategies to communicate with students directly, as well as evidence of the impact a strong student-teacher relationship can have on motivation and engagement.

Conducted during a mandatory 2010 summer academy at Boston’s Match Education charter middle and high schools, the study focuses on sixth- and ninth-graders during a concentrated period when their parents received regular calls from English teachers. The teachers also periodically reached out to the students themselves, using written notes, emails or text messages to send short, encouraging messages.

“The phone calls to parents don’t have to be lengthy,” Dougherty explained. “They should be quick calls to say ‘Hello, here’s an overview of what’s going on, here are Johnny’s current strengths, here are Johnny’s current challenges, and here’s how I hope we can work together.’ Notes to the kids can also take less time, and be more effective, than keeping a child behind after class, or pulling him or her aside. The note can be as simple as ‘I really appreciated your attentiveness in class today’ or ‘I’ve noticed the way you’ve turned things around. Good job.’”

“Most kids prefer this method of communication,” Dougherty continued, “and for the teacher, it’s expedient. It doesn’t take away from class time, and it can have a huge effect.”

Indeed, according to the study, improvements seen among Match schools students—many of whom are low income and low performing—included:

- 40 percent increase in student homework completion
- 25 percent fewer instances of students needing redirection
- 15 percent increase in class participation

According to one student, receiving encouraging notes from his teacher made him feel like school “was my second home” and as if his teacher was “a sister or mother giving me support.” If there was a problem, the student said, he knew “she could help me fix it.”

Match teachers were equally pleased. “I was able to look students in the eye in class and remind them of what I spoke to them about the previous evening on the phone, or spoke to their parents about on the phone,” a ninth-grade English teacher reported. “The students knew that I noticed everything and that I was going to hold them accountable for their actions. I found students more eager to appear vulnerable in class, less reticent, and more compliant to rules and procedures.”

Dougherty said he and Kraft focused their research on the secondary level because as students get older, home-school communications typically become more infrequent. Mass emails and phone calls from principals are common, but not the kind of personalized notes and phone calls from teachers that tend to be used on a regular basis during elementary school.

“At the secondary level, parents generally only hear from the school when something has gone wrong, and that can actually create a disconnect,” Dougherty said. “But when the school calls to say ‘Hello, we’re going to regularly reach out to you about your child, and we want you to

always feel welcome to reach out to us,' that creates a connection and shows parents that their involvement is key; that they and the teacher are a team."

To strengthen and expand upon on the findings of the Match school study, Dougherty and Kraft are currently conducting a second, expanded study in a large urban district, where there are more schools in traditional educational settings. Like the Match Charter School study, it will be a randomized field experiment, but it will span an entire school year, rather than focus on a short, concentrated period.

"Quick, simple, personalized communications are a way for teachers to take a proactive approach to showing students and families the teacher really cares and both wants and expects the student to be engaged," Dougherty said. "It requires a slightly larger investment of up-front time by the teacher, but it's clear that it can pay off in the long run."

Neag School of Education, University of Connecticut

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