

Michigan Department of Education Achievement Gap
The Positive Phone Call Home Intervention: Evidence-based Implementation Brief

Teachers are the single most important factor in school success for students (Hattie, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 1998; Haycock, 1998; Sanders & Rivers, 1996). Their perceptions of their students positively or negatively influence how students view themselves (Kenyatta, 2012). If African American males are to be successful in school and as adults then teachers need to help their students “see themselves as young men with limitless opportunities and possibilities” (Kafele, 2009, p. 15).

A Discussion of the Problem or Need

Teachers’ interactions with students can produce both social and academic disparities and progression (Kenyatta, 2012). How teachers interact with their students depends in large part on their beliefs about the abilities of their students. Ferguson (2003) “found that race became a deterministic factor in teachers’ perceptions of students’ ability, with minority students being regarded as less capable despite demonstrating achievement comparable to their non-minority peers.” When students’ potential is underestimated, they can develop negative or distorted identities that lead to poor behavior and academic failure (Kafele, 2009).

Conversely, when student-teacher relationships are driven by processes and practices committed to producing student success, teachers observe more favorable academic outcomes (Kenyatta, 2012). Further, programs that enable early adolescents to experience positive interactions with teachers, who provide acceptance and supportive feedback, have been found to promote social-emotional growth and create more nurturing classrooms thereby reducing the effects of stressful environments (Becker & Luthar, 2002). During two focus group sessions of African American males in Michigan “Students cited instances where a teacher taking a personal interest in them, not giving up on them and holding them to high behavior and academic performance standards made a positive difference in their attitudes and efforts”(MDE, 2013). The research findings in *Breaking Barriers* (Toldson, 2008) verify that high-achieving African American male students perceived their teachers to be respectful people who treated them like they matter and nurturing people who build up their strengths instead of making them “feel bad” about their weaknesses.

A Description of the Intervention

One concrete way classroom teachers can foster academic growth and personal self-esteem among black males is by intentionally calling home regularly with positive comments, describing what the student is doing well, when he is trying, and when he is learning.

Baruti Kafele has included the intervention of “...teachers notify parents of both problems and successes” on his list of “50 I’s for Effective Teaching” (2009. P. 106). Kafele maintains that if teachers implement the 50 affirmations, they will increase the probability of mastery in teaching and student learning.

Positive phone calls home will also likely inform and increase parents telling their students they did a good job and that they are proud of something they did. In *Breaking Barriers* (Toldson, 2008), an analysis of family factors that improve educational outcomes for African-American males indicated that the more often parents complimented and expressed pride in their children, the better the children performed in school.

Calling home should have the added benefit of developing positive parental involvement with the child’s school which research indicates has been associated positively with school achievement with African-American males (Toldson, 2008) and across ethnic groups (Hong and Ho, 2005). What better way to develop a trusting and supportive relationship with parents, especially with those whose previous school experiences have been less than favorable, than for teachers to regularly share the strengths and accomplishments of the parent’s child in the classroom (Shindler, 2009).

Elena Aguilar (2012), teacher and Transformational Leadership Coach, describes her use of this intervention. “I’d first used this phone call thing as a strategy for managing behavior and building partnerships and it worked. However, after ten years of teaching I became a parent and my feelings shifted into some other universe. As a parent, I now can’t think of anything more I want a teacher to do -- just recognize what my boy is doing well,



when he's trying, when he's learning, when his behavior is shifting, and share those observations with me.” She goes on to say, “I know how many hours teachers work. And I also know that a phone call can take three minutes. If every teacher allocated 15 minutes a day to calling parents with good news, the impact could be tremendous.”

Actions for Implementation of the Intervention

Following are some essential considerations when making positive phone calls home (Shindler, 2009; Marshall, 2009).

- Establish a weekly schedule when you will make positive calls home so parents will know to expect your call.
- Begin the phone call by telling the parents you have some good news to share about their child so they aren't inclined to hang-up because they are expecting a negative call.
- To the degree possible, try to avoid critical calls altogether because they send the implicit message that you as the teacher are having difficulty resolving the issue in your class independently. Frequent critical calls may also be perceived as you having a negative attitude toward African American male students.
- Be specific about what you observed and then describe what you see as the benefits the student is experiencing as the result of what the student is doing.
- Be respectful and professional by showing appreciation for the parent's contribution and the complexity of raising a child. If a parent or guardian asks, be prepared to share ways they can support the positive behaviors at home.
- Remember that these calls will in many ways define how the parent views you and the school.

Read more about the ways in which Ms. Aguilar customized use of this intervention for her students over the years at <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/power-positive-phone-call-home-elena-aguilar>

Citations

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