

The Power of the Positive Phone Call Home

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When I first started teaching and was overwhelmed by the demands and complexity of the job, my survival strategy was simply to take all the advice that came my way and implement it. So when my wise mentor suggested that after the first day of school I call all of my second grader's parents, I did so.

In spite of my exhaustion, I called each family and introduced myself. I asked a few questions about their child. I said that their kid had had a good first day. I said I looked forward to working together.

Throughout that year, and the years that followed, I continued this practice -- I had an intuitive feeling that it was key: The positive phone call home. After the first days, as soon as I'd identified the kids who might be challenging, I made it a goal to call home with positive news every week. I'd share this goal with my students, greeting them at the door with something like: "I'm so excited to see you this morning, Oscar! I am going to be watching you really closely today to find some good news to share with your mom this evening. I can't wait to call her and tell her what a good day you had!"

When I taught middle school, this strategy made the difference between an unmanageable group of kids and an easy group. You'd be surprised, perhaps, how desperately an eighth grade boy wants his mom (or dad or grandma or pastor) to get a positive call home. On the first day of school I'd give students a survey that included this question, "Who would you like me to call when I have good news to share about how you're doing in my class? You're welcome to list up to five people. And please let them know I might call -- even tonight or tomorrow!"

First I'd call parents of the kids who I knew would be challenging, those I suspected rarely got positive calls. When an adult answered the phone, I'd say, all in one long breath, "Hi Mrs. ____? I'm calling from ____ middle school with great news about your son, _____. Can I share this news?" If I didn't immediately blurt out the "great news" pieces, sometimes they'd hang up on me or I'd hear a long anxious silence.

Some of these kids were difficult, extremely difficult. However, I was always able to find something sincerely positive about what he or she had done. As the days followed, I kept calling -- "I just wanted to share that today when ____ came into my class he said 'good morning' to me and opened his notebook right away. I knew we'd have a good day!" Sometimes I'd stop in the middle of class and in front of all the students I'd call a parent. The kids *loved* that. They started begging for me to call their parent too. It was the first choice of reward for good behavior -- "just call my mama and tell her I did good today."

What shocked and saddened me were the parents who would say, "I don't think anyone has ever called me from school with anything positive about my child." I occasionally heard soft sobbing during these calls.

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.

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 Three: ADAPT MULTI-TIERED FSCP TOOLS, INCLUDING SPECIFIC SPECIAL EDUCATION SUPPORTS, Information – Articles*.

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. In the long list of priorities for teachers, communicating good news is usually not at the top. But try it -- just for a week -- try calling a few kid's parents (and maybe not *just* the challenging ones -- they all need and deserve these calls) and see what happens. The ripple effects for the kid, the class, and the teacher might be transformational.

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