Parent Homework Bridges the Teacher-Student Gap

By Mary Buckelew

I teach students who are identified as being at-risk of school failure or of dropping out—a rather disenfranchised group—so I am constantly looking for ways to personally connect with my students and their families and to help them connect with school. Of course, getting to know my students as individuals with distinct stories, tastes, goals, struggles and learning styles, is critical to this connection. But sheer numbers can make this goal difficult to achieve. While I instantly connect with some of my more outgoing students, it can be months before I really get to know others—and by then the school year is half over. Five years ago, my colleague Terry Cole shared with me a strategy he uses to bridge the information gap: he assigns “parent homework” that helps him connect with every student and every family right at the beginning of the school year. I knew right away this would be a powerful tool for helping me establish these invaluable relationships. I began assigning parent homework then and, based on enthusiastic parent response, have continued this practice every year since.

Parent Homework Assignment

Although I call this assignment “parent homework,” a title my students love, it is more an invitation, one nearly every parent is delighted to receive:

Dear Parents and Guardians,
I assign a variety of projects at the beginning of the semester that give me the opportunity to get to know your sons and daughters, but I would like to know more. I would like to ask for your help. Please tell me about your son or daughter. Is there something about your child that you would like me to know? Something that, if I knew, would help me reach him/her sooner or more effectively?
Is there a way for me to see the “real” person?
What are your concerns, fears and dreams for your child? I value your response in any form—list, letter, poem, story, pictorial—you decide.
Thank you for taking the time to answer this letter.
Your son or daughter will receive extra credit for your efforts.
Sincerely,
Mary Buckelew

The responses to my invitation are overwhelming and provide a welcome connection between home, writing and my students. Parents amaze me with their creativity and insight; they have a lot to say regarding a subject they know well, a subject that allows them to write from the heart—their child. The parent responses are invaluable to me; they allow me to see another side of my students that I might otherwise miss and therefore work more effectively with my students.

One father wrote: “You have a very special person in your class, my daughter Jessica. I am grateful that you are taking the time to get to know my daughter. I am a single parent and I welcome your interest in my only daughter.”

Jessica’s father went on to write about Jessica’s brothers and some of the difficulties he was experiencing as a single parent. Apparently the divorce between Jessica’s father and mother was still a very painful issue for Jessica; knowing this provided me with an important insight into Jessica’s moods.

Another parent created a pictorial biography of her daughter, Samantha, from birth to present; each picture was accompanied by captions, poems and songs, as well as other insightful memorabilia regarding her daughter’s life. In addition to presenting the milestones of Samantha’s life, her mother also shared her desire for Samantha to finish school. Samantha, who had dropped out of school the year before, kept this album with her for the entire first

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Letters from parents of Mary Buckelew’s 9th and 10th graders:

Jennifer the Princess

Once upon a time there was a little girl named Jennifer. She was the apple of her Mother’s eye. Jennifer had a beautiful smile and could always make her Mother laugh even when she was in a bad mood.

Jennifer was a very smart girl but she hated school. She thought that everything was boring so she didn’t always try to do her best. She would rush through whatever she had to do, thus making silly mistakes, not to mention being, well... not so neat. When these mistakes were pointed out to the Princess she would pout, cross her arms, and put her nose in the air then she would begin making excuses blaming everyone but herself. When this didn’t work she would say that she just didn’t understand it and no one explained it to her. The Queen tried to help her but she only made things worse. You see, the Queen would get impatient and frustrated and she would start to yell.

The Queen knew her daughter could do the work and she also knew that the Princess knew exactly what to do but rather than keep punishing herself and the Princess she just decided to let Princess Jennifer get away with not doing her school work. One day the Princess discovered that she might have to repeat the eighth grade while all her friends went on to high school! All of a sudden she was able to understand everything that had been so confusing to her before. Math and English became so clear to her that she was able to do 18 weeks worth of work in only nine. And she was able to go on to high school with the rest of her classmates.

The Queen was so proud. She knew all along that the Princess was smart, just a little stubborn sometimes. And she still has high hopes that Princess Jennifer’s attitude towards school will change so then they can live happily ever after.

Jake Ortiz

Dear Mary Buckelew,

Jake is the oldest of two children, his sister is 10 and her name is Angela. I am Dee, his mother. I am a single parent and have been a teacher with Head Start for several years. Jake and his sister both attended Head Start.

Jake was diagnosed with ADHD since 3rd grade. He was in Special Ed during his fourth grade year. He was then mainstreamed to regular ed, but still receives Special Ed. services.

Jake likes his space, likes to spend time in his room watching TV or playing games on the playstation. He loves basketball and football. His teams are the Chicago Bulls and the Dallas Cowboys, and he likes to go to the movies and talk on the phone.

Jake has very low self-esteem. Doesn’t hang out with anyone at home because there are no kids his age. So he’s pretty much either at home, at Auntie’s or on the phone. He does have an attitude at times. He is so under stressed that he can get very frustrated. As per his IEP, can you please allow him time to cool off? Homework that is really difficult for him can really frustrate him. He needs good explanations of what is expected from him.

He recently started seeing his father in June which is something new for him. That seems to be going okay. He hasn’t seen him since 3rd or 4th grade, but Jake was more of a man to want to take this big step than what his dad was.

Overall Jake is a good kid, never been in any trouble with the law, and doesn’t hang out with others around the neighborhood which I thank God for that. He has some fear of gang-bangers, and others that might look like them.

If you need any other info please let me know.
semester. It gave her confidence and a connection to home that was very important for her. Her mother’s response to this homework assignment was, in essence, the life preserver Samantha needed as she tested the waters of high school one more time.

Another mother had help from her daughter. Stella’s mother wrote her letter in Spanish, and I received her mother’s Spanish version and the one Stella had translated. I believe Stella took a few liberties with her mother’s letter, but even with my limited Spanish, I realize that Stella had retained the integrity and voice of her mother’s letter while letting me know that she had her own expectations for me. Stella’s mother wrote, “My daughter is a good child when she wants to study, but she talks too much. Sometimes you might even have to talk to her about it.” I believe Stella inserted the following into the translation: “You have to always be there for Stella, but when she acts up you can send her to I.S.S. (in school suspension).” I did not have to send Stella to I.S.S., but I was pleased to know that she was taking her problem seriously.

These parent letters also helped other school staff to see students in a different light. On one occasion when the high school counselor called a parent conference regarding Freddie, I took my folder of parent letters. Freddie’s mother echoed many other parents’ gratefulness for this opportunity to write about their children and also included important details about Freddie as a person: “Freddie is a great son. He helps me around the house even though he works after school. He also attends church with me. I do worry about Freddie’s studies. He doesn’t have a lot of time and doesn’t always think that school is important. I tell him it is, and I hope that you will remind him of this and talk to him about how important it is to graduate. I know you have to concentrate on teaching English, but if you can give him a pep talk from time to time that would be great. I appreciate the job you have and your interest in Freddie.” Freddie’s letter provided a much-needed insight at the teacher conference when one of the teachers said that she thought that Freddie was a lost cause. When I read her the above lines, her jaw dropped. Freddie’s mother’s words changed the teacher’s perception of Freddie the tough guy. These parent letters help us view the student and his or her family, community and personality through a much broader lens.

Most letters are quite lengthy, at least a page and a half. It seems once parents get started writing about their children, it is difficult for them to stop. Dimensional student portraits, powerful and sometimes poignant, emerge from the writing of my students’ parents. Home life, relatives, community, and the wishes and desires of parents create a contextual image of each student that is priceless.

Of course, the real beneficiaries of the parent homework are my students. The letters and pictorials offer tangible proof of the love that their parents or guardians feel for them. During the turbulent teenage years, this kind of evidence can be a lifeline.