

Building Bridges Between Home and School - A Conversation with Missy Testerman

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SPEAKERS

Speaker 1, Missy Testerman

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I think if you have that relationship built up with the family that you really care about this child, that you know what his or her strengths are, and you want to give them supports to allow them to succeed, that that's half the battle. In my opinion, it's actually way more than half the battle, that engagement with our families is just so incredibly important.

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Welcome to the parent, teacher, home visits podcast, a space where we explore the power of connection between families and schools. I'm Andrea preja, executive director of Parent Teacher home visit, and I'm thrilled to bring you conversations with educators, families and community members who are transforming futures and improving academic outcomes by fostering intentional and systemic family engagement with schools. Join us as we delve into real stories, practical strategies and the transformative impact of building trust and understanding one home visit at a time, because when families and schools work together, anything is possible. Today, we're diving deep into that very idea with an extraordinary educator who embodies the power of connection, we're honored to have Missy testament, the 2024 National Teacher of the Year, join us. Missy's journey is truly inspiring. From her early days in education to her focused dedication to English as a second language, she's consistently demonstrated a deep commitment to her students and families. Today we explore the key issues she's advocating for as National Teacher of the Year and how her experiences with immigrant students and their families have shaped her teaching philosophy. We'll also delve into the critical role of family engagement, particularly in diverse communities. Missy will share her insights on bridging language and cultural barriers, the biggest challenges she's observed and the transformative power of building genuine relationships with families. Believe in touch on her own experience with home visits. So let's get started. Welcome Missy testament.

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Thank you. Andrea. I'm thrilled to be here today,

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so it's so exciting to meet you. I did not get to go last year to the first state dinner for the teacher of the year. But I did see the pictures that look so exciting. Can you just comment a little bit on that? I mean, as a teacher, it was just so exciting to see teachers warmly welcome to the White House and just celebrated. It

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was an absolutely amazing experience to be at the White House, at a state dinner that was just for teachers, the other State Teachers of the Year and I were invited to come to the White House by Dr Jill Biden. We arrived. There was literally a red carpet rolled out that we walked in on our names were announced along with the names of our guests. We had a lovely dinner with Dr Biden, Secretary of Education, Miguel Cardona was also there and addressed everyone. And we even had a surprise visit from the President of the United States, who was just turning back from an engagement, but it was wonderful to see teachers celebrated in that space. One of the really, truly touching things that Dr Biden had arranged was that when every teacher sat down at his or her seat, there was a card on their chair that had been sent in by their school, and there were drawings and letters from their students. And that was a very, very emotional moment, but it was just a beautiful evening orchestrated by Dr Biden's Social Secretary and their staff, and it was just wonderful to be celebrated that way.

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Thank you so much for sharing. I think I also read that they invited students from each of your schools to come, or there were students there

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later in the fall, they actually had a White House back to school evening, and if you live close to there, you were able to bring students. And we had some teachers within our state, Teacher of the Year cohort, who did bring students. I live, you know, almost eight hours away. So that was quite a track to make. So I invited colleagues, but we did have people within our cohort who were able to bring a few students, that was another issue for me. I would have had a really hard time picking just three students. I didn't want to unleash any mutiny within my students, so I picked three colleagues instead. I

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think it is so important, as we think about, you know, the next generation of teachers. Is of engaging students to think about teaching as a career that they see. You know, this very highest branches of our government really celebrating teachers and educators and the work we do. So congratulations on being National Teacher of the Year. It's amazing. Thank you so much. So we thought we would might take a little bit of time for you to tell us about your journey of becoming a teacher. What did you know about family engagement in those early days and what made you shift your focus to looking at English as a second language? ESL, Oh, I'd love to tell you about that.

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I knew I wanted to be a teacher from the moment I walked into kindergarten. So this was way back in the 1900s and the 1970s and back then, parent engagement was just not a real strong topic. So I had no preschool experience. I'd never really been away from my parents a whole lot, except with family, but your parents walked you to the door of the kindergarten classroom, and you just walked in, you know, by yourself. And I was really scared. I was intimidated by the other children, the noise, the busyness, but I had the most wonderful kindergarten teacher. Her name was Mrs. Brown. She was so welcoming and loving and nurturing. And not only did I just, you know, fall in love with her as my teacher, I fell in love with the whole teaching and learning process. I was amazed that I could learn how to do things just because she showed me. And so then I took that skill home, and I started teaching my little sister now she was two, she was not a good student at all because she would not sit still, but I just really embraced the whole process that we go through when we're teaching and learning. And throughout my school career as a student, I was lucky to have really exceptional teachers who nurtured me when I needed that, and kind of forcefully pushed me when I needed that, because there came a time when I did need that. And my fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Stookesbury, was one that realized I was not working up to the potential that I could I was just coasting along, and she was the first person to ever really call me out on that, but I'm so thankful that she did, because I needed to hear that even as a 10 year old, but I went to college, graduated in three and a half years. I was lucky enough to get a job in the middle of the year, doing a maternity leave, teaching first grade, I then taught first and second grades for 30 years. I did a stint of looping for a few years where I started out with first graders, took them all the way through second grade, and then came back and restarted and and that was wonderful, because of the relationships you were able to build with your students and also their families. That second year, my families trusted me. We had already been through a year together, and it was just so incredibly productive. But I had been teaching for 30 years, and I had no plans to change anything. I wasn't ready to retire, and our school's English as a Second Language teacher was a really dear friend of mine. I had been very privileged to have almost all of the English learners who had come through our school, and over the years our population had grown. But she came to me one morning in August and told me that she would be leaving our school at the end of the school year. She'd been there 15 years, but asked me not to tell anyone. Yet her husband was taking a job in another part of the state. She wasn't ready to share that news with her ESL families, because she was more than their teacher. She was their advocate. She was their access to community services. She was the liaison between the school and these parents, and her loss, the loss of her in our school, was going to be devastating. So I was really worried about who would advocate for these students, because I live in a very conservative part of eastern Tennessee, and a lot of times it's hard for families who've not lived here a really long time to come in and adapt and be welcomed into our area. So it was something that really bothered me, not just losing her as my school ally, but losing her as an advocate for those students, and the next day, I actually received an email from the state of Tennessee that went out to every teacher's teaching in the state. And it explained that if you are already a certified teacher teaching in Tennessee, through Tennessee's grow your own program, you could add an additional endorsement to your. Lessons at no cost. The program would pay for the materials, the coursework, even an attempt to take the Praxis and become certified. And the options were special education, math and English as a second language. So I went to my director. Each school system could nominate one person. I asked that I would be that one person. He was a little shocked, because he said, we already have an ASL teacher, and you would never even use this. But I convinced him that it would be helpful for professional development, since I always taught those students to be up on the current research, which that was, that was true, because

it would have helped me, even if I'd stayed in the general classroom, that knowledge would have helped me. But over the course of the year, I completed the coursework. By the end of the school year, I had passed my first ever practice. I was 52 years old, so a little bit older than the average practice taker. And I became our schools English as a Second Language teacher, our English as a Second Language Program Director, and the title three director because my school is so small that a lot of opportunities for leadership are available to teachers who want them, because there simply aren't enough central office staff to handle all the administrative tasks that come along,

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you just talked about, you know, being an advocate and helping these families have access, and being that liaison, and you came Teacher of the Year, and that meant leaving the classroom for a year. So talk to us a little bit about becoming Teacher of the Year, and what do you think that's meant for your career? Well,

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I can honestly say becoming Tennessee Teacher of the Year or National Teacher of the Year was never on my teacher bingo card. My school did not even participate in the Tennessee Teacher of the Year program. So in Tennessee, your school district nominates Teachers of the Year. That's the only pathway. You cannot be recommended by anyone. You can't have a student or a parent or colleague say, hey, this person would be great. In Tennessee, you can only get on the path to becoming a State Teacher of the Year if you are your district Teacher of the Year. Well, my school didn't even participate. So the first year that we participate, we I had a colleague who's a dear friend, who became our district Teacher of the Year, and she ended up being a semifinalist. So the very first year, she's one of the 27 semifinals across the state. Well, then the next year I was Teacher of the Year, and ended up being a semi finalist, a finalist in Tennessee Teacher of the Year. So it has been quite a shock. It has been the honor of a lifetime. I never saw it coming. Honestly, I feel like I did a lot of the steps along the way because my superintendent wanted me to and then when I became Tennessee Teacher of the Year. I did the application because I wanted to participate in the cohort that all State Teachers of the Year are eligible to participate in. But you must, you know, complete the the application. But it's just been the honor of of a lifetime. I was very torn leaving the classroom for a year because this is what I've done for for 33 years. You know, it's hard to to adapt at times, but I I have just had an amazing experience. I've had incredible support from my students, their families, my colleagues, you know, everyone within my community and and my town, and just to have this ability to advocate for a profession that has really helped my life feel complete is just an immense honor that's amazing.

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Thanks for sharing. So during this past year, what have been the key issues that you've been advocating for when I

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started and it's still a key issue, is that I want teachers to understand that they are the experts in the classroom. All of the policies that affect everything that we do in our classrooms, whether it's how many minutes a day we teach language arts, how many minutes a day our students are allowed to have play time. Those types of things are all policies that are crafted and created by people who are not in the

classroom, so they don't have the lens of expertise that our teachers do. They don't necessarily understand automatically that a policy is going to be really awful for students and families, or they don't understand what policies would be beneficial for students. And it isn't, you know, a matter of they don't care. It's not that, it's just that this is not their area of expertise. So I want teachers to see that they are the experts and that their input at every level is so important. Whether that's going to your principal and saying, listen, 10 minutes of play time for my first graders is not enough for them or me, or, you know, going to your district and saying, I feel strongly we need to adopt this curriculum because it has really good results. That's advocacy at, you know, the base level. But it's also okay to offer your opinion and other situations to legislators, to leaders who are helping craft and create these policies that affect our students throughout the year. I feel like I've advocated for a lot of things. English is a second language. Students, our immigrant population, will always be near and dear to my heart. I will always advocate for all students to receive an equitable education and to experience inclusivity in the classroom and within just the school community. All of those things will always be very, very important to me, as is the issue of making sure that every teacher has a teacher that they deserve, and ensuring that we have enough new teachers who are highly qualified coming down the pipeline to relieve the burden of systems who are seeing teachers leave or retire or or move on to other careers.

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Thanks. I especially appreciate your speaking to teacher leadership, to teachers, understanding that they can take the initiative, that they are the expert, and that all the policies that sometimes as teachers, we think, does that really affect me, every policy probably affects everything you're doing in the classroom. So really appreciate all of that. I wonder a little bit about teaching and learning and how your advocacy around immigrant students, how that impacted or how it might have changed your ideas around teaching and learning, or how you interacted in the classroom with students,

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I will say my own personal experience has been that I've never had a group of students work any harder than my immigrant students or my first generation Americans who are learning the language. They work incredibly hard just to learn the language, much less to, you know, perform academically, but the the parent support, the parental support and the family support that they have is amazing. The family support that they offer teachers is absolutely incredible. I joke that I work with students that if I told their parents to tell them to stand on their heads every night for half an hour, they would figure out a way to do that because they trust us. They they actually see us as experts. And there's this incredible level of of respect that you see within this population. But the biggest thing that it's shown me is that our families have the same desires for their students. They love their students, they want their students to do well so they can go out in the world and create a successful future for themselves, and they're so appreciative of the efforts that teachers make and helping create the the conditions for that.

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So I think it's interesting that that resonates so much with us at Parent Teacher home visit, because when our teachers educators visit families, they go in with the question of, What are your hopes and dreams for your child, and how are we going to work together to make sure those come true. So, so what you said really resonates with us. You know, it's clear that your teaching philosophy is deeply rooted in empathy and a commitment to understanding the whole child. I love the comment to your

principal, as you tried to say to them, get me into this program, because whether or not I am the ESL teacher. It's going to make me better in my classroom. And we've talked a little bit about families and how engaged they are, especially in your case with immigrant. Can you tell us a little bit about any preparation, like as you were learning to become a teacher? Was there preparation on how to work with families in your program, and then, if not, what suggestions might you give to our colleagues in higher ed that are working so hard to prepare teachers? That's a

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great question. Andrea, when I came out of college, it was still in the 1900s in the late night in the early 1990s but a lot had changed from the time I was a student. I feel like when I came out of college, I was just on the very beginning and of us beginning to real. When I say us, I mean the education field, beginning to understand how important parent engagement was at. At that time, there were some schools that were fully embracing it. There were some schools that were, you know, kind of a little bit has an hesitant and my particular school was, was on the path to embracing it, but we were not there yet. And that it, luckily, has shifted through the years, because we understand that our families need to be our partners. Our families love their students. They want their students to to do well, and that is a really, really important part of the whole the whole piece. So I was very fortunate to be placed with a teacher who was a master already, even before anyone was masterfully doing this, she was and she really, really managed to invoke parents in the process, particularly around disciplinary issues. You know, when I first began teaching, a lot of times parents were informed of disciplinary issues by note. The teacher sent a note, and we all know any written can you know communication, whether it's an email, a text, a letter, can be construed based on the mindset of the person reading it. And so a lot of times that would cause a real angry reaction when those notes were sent home. Well, she was already meeting parents at pickup time at the door, and she would be like, Listen, can we talk? And she always took them in discreetly. And was like, you know, we had a couple of things go on today. I just want you to to know about them, because I know that you don't want him or her doing these things and interrupting the class. And so I was able to watch her lead and pick up those skills automatically. She was also having parent volunteers come in and help in the classroom at a time when that was not a common practice. So I was lucky enough to start those things in my career, and it was really the only way that I knew to operate, if that makes sense, because those parents, those families, are so important to their students success. We all want to be on the side of the child, but we need to be a team when we're doing so.

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And just that, that comment just makes me think and feel the need to say how important you know mentoring is for young teachers that and you were lucky enough to have someone to help you with that, and that is something we want for all young teachers. So you know, building relationships between home and school comes with its own set of unique challenges. And in your recent work with immigrant families, what have you found to be the biggest challenges to family engagement.

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For me, the biggest challenge sometimes is the the language barrier. Luckily, we live in an age of technology, when there are a lot of solutions to that. When I had my very first ever non native speaker in my classroom back in the 1990s we didn't have access to Google Translate or to apps that would do

that, so there were some communication issues back then. Luckily, we live in the age where there are solutions to that, but that can still be a barrier. Luckily, most of my parents want to be involved so much that they're willing to use whichever form of communication assistance that best helps them stay involved in their child's education, whether that's translated copies, whether it's an app that you know translates. As we're talking to each other, but within my population, I feel like I've been really, really successful communicating with families. Now the apps are not perfect. The funniest story for me illustrating that is when I was named National Teacher of the Year. I got the sweetest, sweetest text from one of my mothers, and she was thanking me for everything I'd done for her children, and telling me that she was proud of me, but it's the text started out and said, Congratulations for nothing.

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And I

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think that's what she meant. That was just the way it translated it. It. But those things do have some flaws. So obviously, if it's a really important meeting involving academics or a student's placement into a special program, there needs to be a translator, a speaker who can translate to the parent and advocate for the parent in their own language. But for the day to day communications, I've been very successful using those top adaptations. Thanks.

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I mean, that really highlights the complexities of family engagement, especially within immigrant communities. But it is so exciting to see the technology being used in a way that can facilitate those kinds of conversations. Conversations and communication. Thank you for being so thoughtful and intentional about our approach to something that we support here at parent, teacher home visit. And I'm just wondering, are there any other stories you would share about really building a strong relationship with a student and the impact it had on either that student, the family, both on you colleagues, I think

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so there are a lot of those, those cases that come to mind, because within the past couple of years, I had several newcomers, students who were brand new to our country, brand new to the language, and they're my favorite type, I'll be honest, just because there is that newness of you know, they're learning everything for the first time, so it's a level of incredible excitement. They're so motivated. But there are, there are challenges, and one of those challenges is earning the trust of not only the student, but also the family. And I had a young girl last year, when I say young, she was a second grader who came in and the mom did not have a positive school experience in their home country herself, so she was a little fearful of the entire school situation, but immediately, when she came into our school office, I handled the enrollment process. I always like to do that so that they see a friendly face, and they know that someone is glad that that they're there. I think it just makes the whole process easier. But I'd signed her up for the communication app, and even though we weren't able to communicate a lot face to face without each of us using our phones and translating it that way, she would text me, and pretty soon, she was texting me daily, you know, just making sure they were doing homework assignments the correct way or our so forth. And she was just incredibly supportive. They ended up leaving our community and moving to another state, but even when they moved, she would continue to text me

questions and ask either about assignments or, you know, I need to pick up the daughter for a dentist appointment. How do you do that? Because, you know, my students don't miss school very often, and their parents, the idea to their parents that you come and pick the kid up from school in the middle of the day is just crazy. They're like, No, they have school. They can't but, and that's what her message said, the dentist wants me to bring her at one o'clock. And I told him, You know, I don't think she can get out of school and and so I just explained the process to her. But that was a success story, because in the beginning, I know she was fearful. She was fearful of a new setting. She wasn't sure to trust us, but she did end up trusting me. And I had a similar situation with an older student who was that way. He actually had not been enrolled in public school because they had been in the country for three years, but the mom did not realize that he could attend public school because he did not have the proper documentation. Luckily, someone had told her that in another community he was enrolled a short time, and then she enrolled him when they moved into our community, but I was able actually to go to a doctor's appointment with them. She asked me to go to help with the language barrier, because it was a really serious situation. He had a chronic condition that needed medical care, so I was able to make him an appointment, actually go to the appointment. I know she was fearful in the beginning about trusting me, because there was a lot of secrecy on his part. He was older, and it was what he had learned, but we were able to forge a really good relationship and have that bond of trust. And she even started coming to school and attending events. She came to awards night, where he received several awards for his hard work. He started playing soccer, which helped him make more friends within our school community, and she actually attended the game. So that was a real success story that just really is really close to my heart.

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You know, thanks for sharing both of those powerful stories. I think they really illustrate that schools and teachers and educators principals like we're the center of those communities and can be the bridge to so many things that are happening with our family. So really appreciate both of those. I wonder a little bit about if there are other practical because we will have a lot of teachers listening to this podcast, and so we always want to leave them with, you know, what are the the sort of practical strategies you might have used, like your classroom, for engaging families, you know, for encouraging them to come to after school activities or or even just ask a question. I just think so many parents are scared to ask the question of. Of a teacher. What did you really mean by that? So anything you can share with the audience, I think, would be much appreciated Absolutely.

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So I make it really, really clear to families that I I'm more than glad to be their communication. Point to the school. I can talk to their students, teachers, I can talk to the guidance counselor, I can talk to the basketball coach. I can do that for you. I think a lot of times it's difficult for our immigrant families to want to or to feel comfortable making contact with multiple people within the school system if they only have one person they trust. That's okay. Once you establish that trust, that person can become the liaison. Whenever I mentioned the language apps earlier, one thing that I do our school uses one of those portals that calls parents and so forth. And we also use a message, a text messaging service I had the capability of going in and selecting my students home language, so that those texts came into their family from every teacher in their home language, they were then able to reply back using their home language, and it would be translated in English to the teacher. And that's just a really small thing

that makes it easier, but one thing I always try to do is that I sent out my own reminders in students home languages about events that were coming up at school, whether it was conferences, if it was conferences, those are so important, I would actually go to teachers and say, if you need to meet with those parents, I want to be there number one, that will make them more comfortable. It will help you with language and discussions, but let me know, and I'll work out a time and so that takes it off that general ed teacher. The general ed teacher is already covered up with so much anything that in my role, I can do to make life easier for that general education teacher is going to be a positive for her, his or her students, because they're going to be able to focus on students. But one of the things that I do, in addition to making sure that I'm the point of contact during enrollment, is that if we have a special event at school, now I'm on leave during my year of service this year, obviously, but whenever I'm at school, I meet my parents at the office or in the lobby, so that if they're coming to math, not or reading, not the first person they see there, hopefully is me. I'm happy to see them. I'll walk them to the classroom or the area, help them get acclimated, help them feel comfortable there, and that has been huge, I feel like, because they're not so intimidated coming into the building, especially in those events where something at night and maybe the student has to be there at 430 so the student already comes in, well, that means the parent has to walk in alone. And that doesn't sound scary to most of us, but if you don't have a lot of English proficiency, and you're going to have to come into that situation, that's very scary. So one of the things I do to alleviate that burden is that I meet them at the door, take them to where we need to be. And I think that's just a very small thing that teachers, in my role, can do to help families feel more comfortable, just to

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comment on your making the effort to say to general ed teachers, I'm happy to sit in on the conference. I want to be supportive of you, what an important role and what a great thing to do as a colleague, I wonder, are there other supports that we might want to put in place for general education teachers? Are there strategies you might suggest to district leaders as we do have district leaders who who listen to our podcast as well suggestions you might have for principals on how to support general ed teachers if they support and work with immigrant families and children of immigrant families,

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absolutely. So the most important thing that our district leadership can do, and our school level leadership, like our principals and assistant principals can do, is to make sure that our families feel welcome, that they feel welcome, that they understand all students are welcome in our school setting and and that all students are safe. That's very, very important that we have an inclusive school environment. And a lot of times that's uncomfortable, because that means, if something happens that damages that idea of having an inclusive environment, that we react in a way that shows that we're serious about this, if we have students who are facing unsavory remarks, that we deal with the students who are making the unsavory remarks, and that we communicate with their families to let them know that's not acceptable. So that's a real, real difficult. Bridge for for school administrators to be on. I understand that, because it sounds unpleasant, even as I'm saying this in this very pleasant conversation, I understand it sounds uncomfortable, but everything that we can do to make every single student feel welcome is going to contribute to a better school climate, a better school culture, but also, if you're a district leader or a principal, the best thing that you can do to support your teachers is to take away any unnecessary task that don't necessarily benefit students so teachers could get by without

doing so that your teachers can concentrate on those students who are sitting in his or her classroom every single day. That, to me, that is the most supportive thing that you can do is to make sure that the focus for teachers is always on his or her students. And the weird thing that happens with that, when the focus is on students, teacher morale begins to rise. Very seldom do you hear teacher morale issues get traced back to students? They're traced back to all of the extra things that teachers are having to do in addition to actually teaching students in their classroom. Yeah,

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I follow a lot of teachers on Instagram, and there's the board teachers. I think it's yeah on Instagram and it is so true that they are normally, they're not complaining about kids. They're not complaining about families. It's, it's all that extra stuff that takes away time from the opportunity to really focus on, on why you're there to begin with, right, and why you wanted to be there. So I really appreciate your talking about how essential those supports are. Let's look just a little bit at home visits. And I wonder, did you have you had experience with home visits? Have you had opportunities to maybe participate in them or observe them? And what are your thoughts if you did on their potential impact?

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One of the advantages of being in my system is it's so small. We are a one school school system, so we're all contained in the same building, all of us, including our superintendent. But if we have a student that we're concerned about and we can't get in touch with the parents, it is not uncommon for my district leadership, particularly our attendance director, to just hop in the car and go to a student's home and not from a punitive situation. But and you know, particularly during the pandemic, we had students that we lost contact with, and my attendance supervisor was actually really great. He would call and say, Hey, I'm headed to so and so's place to see if I can talk to the parent. Do you want to go? Is there anything you would like to tell them? And those visits did get kids back to school. Number one, because I think it showed the school that it showed the parent, that the school cared our kindergarten teachers for a number of years, did a home visit with every student. They've moved away from that model within the past few years, just because of timing, some safety concerns and so forth. But I'm very, very fortunate. I have been to a lot of my immigrant students, ISL students, homes, I've been invited. I've been invited to as morbid as it sounds, funerals when they've had a death within their close family. That's always very, very hard, but I was honored to be there my families. I actually have some families who come to my house, which is a little bit different of a situation, but whenever you go to a student's home, I feel like that. It gives you an insight as to so many things, the dynamics of the home, how the student cooperates with the parents request so so many things, and culturally in some of my students cultures, it would be improper for me not to accept the invitation so and I'll always cherish being a guest in their home. And one of the highlights for me this year has been, you know, during Christmas, I had several of my families who just showed up at at my door, and I was so thrilled to see them and just get to hear updates from them. But that's something that you know has been built, not just by me, but by the teacher who was in place before me to be normal practice. So in my case, it doesn't seem odd at all.

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So Missy, you've you clearly have grasped the core value of meeting families where they are, and that understanding of context that you spoke about is just so crucial. But I wonder if we could connect a little

bit back to the broader picture of student success. I. We are at parent, teacher home visit right now, actually engaging with UCLA to start a study on how home visits impact attendance, and we feel very strongly that it's going to but it's exciting to start on some other research. But in your experience, you know, how does that strong family engagement, regardless of the specific method. We have very specific method here and your community engaged in the way that it worked for them. How does it contribute to student success?

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I feel like it contributes to student success because parents know that you care about their students, and I feel like a lot of times, if parents feel like that, you're on the same side they are, which should always be the kids side, right, should always be the student's side. I feel like that makes working together easily. In my own experience, when I was a general education classroom teacher, I felt like that communication helped make those hard conversation so much easier, whether it was a disciplinary conversation or maybe it was a conversation where a child was having difficulty learning to read and we needed to do some testing or investigation to see what was going on. You know, those things are, are very uncomfortable for parents. Obviously, you know they want this child to do well. And I think if you have that relationship built up with the family that you really care about this child, that you know what his or her strengths are, and you want to give them supports to allow them to succeed, that that's half the battle. In my opinion, it's actually way more than half the battle that engagement with our families is just so incredibly important, and it needs to start early in the school year. One of the things that I used to do with my colleagues is that we would have a back to school popsicle party at the park. It was simply called popsicles at the park, and it wasn't even at school. It was at the City Park, and you just showed up, got a popsicle, and you chatted with your child's teacher, met his or her classmates informally before the school year started. We did take like, folders of all their back to school paperwork, because we've realized if we can get parents to fill that out before school starts, you have a better chance of getting it back number one, because once the school year starts, it's so crazy busy for everyone, and it just let you have these non threatening conversations with parents, where they felt comfortable. And now my whole school does that. We have a back to school night in August where they the whole school community shows up, sees your classroom has like a frozen treat because it's so hot, you know, in Tennessee and in August, and that's something our school has actually started doing as well. But I feel like those things are really crucial to setting the tone for the year, because if the first time you engage with a parent is something that's considered negative. You've already lost so much of the battle, in my professional opinion.

43:10

Yeah, I agree with you, and that's true in any part of your life, right? If the first time is negative, it does not bode well for the rest of your relationship. So those are such practical and actionable steps. So I think any teacher who's listening can certainly take away some valuable insights. So you've been traveling the country for what, nine months or so as the National Teacher of the Year. So you've had really a unique opportunity to share your message with many different audiences. What's the one message about family engagement that you want to share with educators and policymakers? What's that core idea you want to leave them with? The

43:52

core idea I would love to leave with families and policy makers is that these home to school, relationships and partnerships are incredibly important. They're going to be the key to helping us stay engaged with families and making sure that families are engaged in a way that they're best able to support their students, whether that means having workshops where you explain that these are the things that you can do to help your student become a stronger reader or a stronger math student, and that that outreach is important. One thing I'd like to say to policy leaders concerning that is that, believe it or not, that that work is expensive as well. When the school hosts those evenings, those funds have to come out of somewhere. And I don't know a single school in the country that says, oh gosh, we have so much money lying around that money is coming out of somewhere that probably was designated for students. And yes, this is still a useful way to use. Use that and benefit the student. But a lot of times, there are parameters around spending monies in a certain way, but any investment in funding that we can make so that schools are able to host these things and have the funding to do so is a positive. It's going to pay off with really great dividends when, when there's better engagement between families, and when our students are more successful in the classroom.

45:25

So that's a truly powerful message. Really appreciate the comment about funding. I mean, we probably had 30 years of family engagement research that has told us that the ROI the return on investment of really engaging families pays off. So really appreciate that. You know, here at Parent Teacher home visit we, we firmly believe in so much of what you've spoken about, just the idea of professional development, you know, getting teachers prepared for how they make those visits, not targeting students. You know, this is not about picking the kid who you think is, you know, a little too talkative, and that's what you want to talk about. It's about building relationships with families. And as you've talked about, you know, teachers working together, we really promote, and it's actually one of our non negotiables when, when teachers go on the visits, they go together, yes, because you see different things depending on your perspective. So really appreciate that hearing your insights today has been so incredibly inspiring, and you've reminded us that family engagement isn't just a strategy. It's about fundamental human connection, and it's about recognizing the inherent value and expertise that families bring to the table and about working together to make sure that we have a more equitable and supportive educational landscape for all our students. So on behalf of parent, teacher home visits, and on behalf of all the educators and families who will be touched by your words, I want to thank you, missy, for all your dedication, your passion and for sharing your wisdom, and since you've done it just for like, an hour for us, where else can we follow you to get more expertise and advice? So where can we follow you?

47:12

So I'm glad you asked that. Andrea, thank you for having me on today. I've really loved the conversation. I think we're united in in our beliefs about how important family engagement is. But I am on x. I'm on LinkedIn and Instagram. If you search Missy testament, it's going to to come right up on those platforms. So I always love it. You know, when teachers reach out, you know we all live in the same world at just different places, so I appreciate you asking that question. Well, thanks

47:44

for sharing. I think I'm actually already following, but I will make sure that I am, but that's it for today's conversation. We hope you've been inspired by missy's insights and that you'll join us again for future conversations about the power of connection between families and schools, but let me leave you with a few parting thoughts. Missy's words today have underscored the transformative power of genuine connection. Her experiences, particularly with immigrant families, remind us that understanding and embracing diverse perspectives is not just a goal but a necessity. It's a journey of continuous learning, empathy and action, and it all begins with building those vital bridges between home and school. If you're an educator or policy maker, inspired by missy's insights and eager to explore how parent, teacher, home visits, training can help equip you with the tools to build those crucial partnerships, we invite you to reach out visit our website@pthvp.org to learn more about our training programs and how we can support your efforts to create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment for all Students. Thank you again for joining us, missy, until next time, let's continue to build those bridges, one Home, visit, one conversation, one connection at a time you