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Try parent visits, not parent takeovers of schools

By [Jay Mathews](#), Published: May 30

A modest program in Missouri — similar to one in the District — has found a way to help parents improve their children's education. But nobody is paying much attention.

Instead, something called [the parent trigger](#), the hottest parent program going, has gotten laws passed in four states even though it has had zero effect on achievement.

The Missouri program, the Teacher Home Visit Program or HOME WORKS!, trains and organizes teachers to visit parents in their homes. It is quiet, steady, small and non-political.

The parent trigger, [begun in California](#) by a well-meaning group called Parent Revolution, is also authorized in Mississippi, Texas and Louisiana and is deep into electoral politics. Both the Obama and Romney presidential campaigns have embraced it.

The trigger allows parents to make drastic changes in a school's leadership and policies — such as replacing the principal or turning the school into an independent charter — if a majority of them sign a petition to do so. It sounds great. But so did classrooms without walls and teaching through work sheets. Those ideas proved to be terrible wastes of time and energy. The parent trigger is heading in the same direction.

Few parents have the free time or experience to take charge of a school and figure out which of the many competing ideas for change are best. They are at the mercy of school promoters and local school bureaucrats and unions. It is hard for them to agree among themselves what they want. Their good intentions get them nowhere.

The first two attempts to use the trigger in California have been stymied by lawsuits and political quarrels. Anyone who understands the dynamics of public schools in a democracy knows the trigger is never going to get parents what they want.

Home visits are different. They don't require that parents figure out how to fix an entire school. Their only responsibility is to help teachers improve the learning of their own children, something they are uniquely qualified to do.

The nonprofit Concentric Educational Solutions Inc. START PROGRAM [has been knocking on parent doors in the District for two years and has](#) started to do the same in Delaware and Detroit. The group says it has reduced truancy by as much as 78 percent. Teachers naturally wonder whether they have time for after-school visits, but the group's executive director, David L. Heiber, says what they learn from parents can save many hours in class. With full staff participation, the most visits they might have to do in a year is 15, producing better attendance and more attention.

The Missouri HOME WORKS! program operates in 15 schools in the St. Louis area. Teachers, paid for their extra time, are trained at the end of the school year and beginning of the summer. The first round of summer visits allows teachers and parents to get to know each other and share what they know about students' interests and needs. A family dinner for all wraps up the summer.

The second round of training sessions and visits comes in the first semester before the end of daylight saving time. The teachers explain to the parents where their child is academically and provide tools to increase their capacity to help their child. There is another family dinner, and sometimes there is a third round of visits in the spring.

A study by the St. Louis public school system last year of 616 home visits found that the third- to sixth-grade students involved had an increase in average math grades and that the grades of students not involved declined. A study of 586 home visits in the Maplewood Richmond Heights School District showed students involved had better attendance.

The Maplewood Richmond Heights superintendent said discipline incidents fell 45 percent and parent attendance at the annual open house rose 20 percent.

Unlike the parent trigger efforts in California, there were no battles among parents and teachers. Reporters wrote little about the program. No states adopted parent visit laws. But children learned more.

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