



# Rhode Street School Phone Home Good News Programme

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## Quotes from Family Members

*“I am really happy that my children are at this school. We really haven’t come across a school like this and I think that it’s benefited my children. I think that they have excelled being at this school and we just see the big changes in them and they’re just really positive about school. I’m definitely happy with the home calls and what goes on there.”*

*“The purpose is to get more interaction with your child’s learning but like in the moment, not after the fact.”*

*“When they do something to be proud of they want to tell everybody and they want to tell their whanau there and then.”*

*“I feel involved at the very moment, it makes me feel a part of the schooling system and everything he’s going through and I really appreciate that because when he comes home I can back-up whatever his teacher has done or put in place and explain it more thoroughly.”*

## Quotes from Students

***“My behaviour has improved with the phoning home. It helps me so I can learn.”*** (M, Y8)

***“It makes learning much more fun.”*** (M, Y5)

***“Mum said it will give me the perfect education.”***  
(M, Y5)

***“It’s great because I get a chance to learn new things and then share it with my family once I’ve got really good at it and the teacher’s so proud of me that I get to call home”*** (F, Y5)

***You get to share with your whanau what you’re doing at school and that builds up your confidence.”*** (M, Y5)

***“I think that everything that I learn and I’ve done a great job with, it just feels terrific to share it with my parents”***  
(F, Y5)

***“It actually makes you work harder so you can use your time wisely and then you get to phone home.”*** (M, Y7)

## Quotes from School Staff ✿

This programme has broken down lots of barriers as many parents were shy about coming into school because their own experiences hadn't been positive but this programme builds relationships which have helped to break down many of those barriers.

This gets whanau to come through the gate and to be part of what's happening at school.

*"Whanau build relationships with their children as some of them spend more time with their tamariki as a consequence of finding out some of the good things they've done at school and then following that up."*

You hear the comment sometimes 'that's worth phoning home about'.

Children were used to contacts with home being about negative things and they had to get used to having positive things to tell their whanau.

The students know that if they're caught being good their parents will actually get to hear about it in real time and that's powerful for them. It strengthens the students own self worth, their confidence.

It should be used instantly in real time around student progress and achievement.

It gives instant feedback in a manner that reinforces excellence in the classroom.

If parents are talking positively at home because they have got a positive call then that child is going to have a positive outlook on learning as well.

## Personal note

Researching the Phone Home Good News programme at Rhode Street School has been an absolute pleasure for me as an educator because it has been so encouraging to experience a programme that is valued by all stakeholders in such a positive manner. So many in education are challenged to build positive relationships with their community and hence it is heartening to witness a school that has taken up this challenge and is succeeding as this school is. This has come about through its innovative approach to a dilemma that has many schools searching for solutions. Evidence that building positive community relationships is such a great challenge was recently written about by ERO who found that during 2008 “nearly three quarters of the schools’ ERO reports included recommendations for improving engagement” (Education Review Office, 2008, p. 3).

Building positive relationships between schools and their communities is integral to the principles and values of the new curriculum. It is stated within this document that one of the principles guiding best practice is that “all children experience a curriculum that makes connections with their lives and engages the support of their families and communities” (p. 9). The New Zealand Ministry of Education Statement of Intent 2007-2012 (2007) confirms this stance “success in encouraging parents and whānau would include parental confidence in supporting children’s learning and effective home-school links” (Chapt. 2, Parents, Family and Whanau, para.2). The Ministry of Education requirements of schools as outlined in the National Education Guidelines also confirms that it is an expectation of schools to involve their community with their children’s education. The Phone Home Programme in place at Rhode Street School fulfils these objectives. The following two quotes pay tribute to the difference this programme has made to relationship between the school and its community and are just two examples of the positive comments made by parents:

*“Maybe it’s from my day back in the schooling but the teachers had a sense of power about them so I kind of stood back and waited for them to approach me and tell me what’s going on but now not so much, I’ll stroll up and say ‘hi, how’s things’ and then we’ll talk about how my child is going and everything.”*

*“I’ve become closer with the school. It has made me closer with to their teachers and I’m able to feel welcomed when I do go into the school.”*

Furthermore, it is the manner in which the outcomes of this programme are benefiting students that is so encouraging. The benefits go far beyond a school building better relationships with its community. Many parents commented on the improved relationships they have with their children as an outcome of the positive emphasis of the Phone Home programme. They believed that their relationship was improved through the regular contact they had with their child. Often what children do between 9am and 3pm is a mystery to family members but being kept in touch has meant that discussions at home are more informed and families feel much more a part of their child’s day and their child’s learning experiences. Parents also commented on the manner in which this programme has been self motivating to their children. They suggested that this came about through the positive emphasis integral to the implementation of this programme. It encouraged students to try harder in order to share their good news with their families as doing so meant such a great deal to them. I was brought to tears listening to parents speak about the ways in which the Phone Home programme had changed the attitude of their children and had reflected positively on the whole home environment. The following are two examples:

*“I just think it opens up more opportunities for them to lead discussions about what they’re doing like you might ask them what they did at school and they just say whatever but if you say ‘hey, you called me about that, what’s that all about’ so you’ve got more depth of knowledge about what they’re doing.”*

*“It’s made a difference to my relationship with my daughter. It’s impacted on my relationship with her in a really positive way because we seem to communicate better.”*

The programme in place in this school seems unsurpassed by anything else I have experienced. It is valued by the school and the community to such a degree that an outcry of disappointment would undoubtedly eventuate should it ever have to be discontinued. The principal is to be congratulated for his commitment and undying passion to the success of this programme.

## Background

The Phone Home Good News Programme came about following a Hui based at Mount Taupiri in 2005. At that Hui there were discussions with regard to the manner by which the school could build better relationships with whanau. Staff believed that all stakeholders would benefit from a programme that allowed both personal and real time contact between school personnel, students and their families. Communication by mobile phone was suggested as an option as it addressed all these aims and it enabled instant contact with over 90% of families. However, this was an innovative option and one that required a reasonable amount of consideration regarding its possibilities. To begin this process, the principal followed up by seeking support from sponsors. When **Vodafone** confirmed their assistance, the aims and outcomes of the programme had then to be considered. Again these were addressed at various staff discussions and within a very short period of time, the school was able to begin its Phone Home Good News programme with its agreed emphasis on facilitating positive dialogue and communication around student achievement.

The use of phones enables teachers and families flexibility in their choice of communication. Teachers can use voice, text or photo imaging in order to make immediate contact with students' families. Families are able to contact school personnel using the same means although text is the option most frequently adopted for communications being received by the school. There is a policy statement that details the acceptable use of the phones in order to maintain consistency and continuation of the programme within acceptable limitations. This policy statement includes guidelines such as that staff are to aim towards making at least one positive phone call per child per week plus some 'at the moment' calls. This adds to a suggestion of 40 contacts per teacher per week. All contacts are to be recorded on software called ETap and extensive data is available regarding the content and outcomes of communication made.

Since its introduction in 2006, the programme continues to grow with some support staff also being given use of phones since 2008. The continued success of the programme may be attributed to its passionate support from the principal, BOT, school staff, and ongoing sponsorship from **Vodafone** as well as regular and just as passionate encouragement from students and their families.

The aim of this research was to determine the issues that encompass the successful implementation of this programme such as its benefits, differences perceived in its purpose and any recommendations that may arise from these discussions. This project sought to interview the full range of participants involved in the Phone Home Good News programme. 48 interviews were conducted which included: 2 school leadership personnel, 10 teaching staff, 4 support staff, 19 students and 14 family members including representation from the BOT. The students ranged in age from Y1 to Y8, were from a range of ethnic groups and included 9 boys and 10 girls. It is important to note that although this research covered all school staff personnel who were involved in the programme, it was not possible to interview all students or family members. 19 students represent 8.5% of the school roll and therefore 14 family members may represent a little over 6% although this calculation may include factors that vary its percentage depending on separated families, family members sharing households etc. In saying this however, it is also interesting to note that due to the enthusiasm of these parents, it was not necessary to chase up family members in order to find any who were willing to participate as has been the case with other research I have conducted. It is also important to note that parents spoke about a range of experiences they'd had with the calls home and some referred to their children's disruptive behaviour at school and the gang influences on them at home hence the families interviewed were not all from homes where the children were of the best behaviour. The willingness of so many parents to come forward is testament to their commitment to the success of this programme.

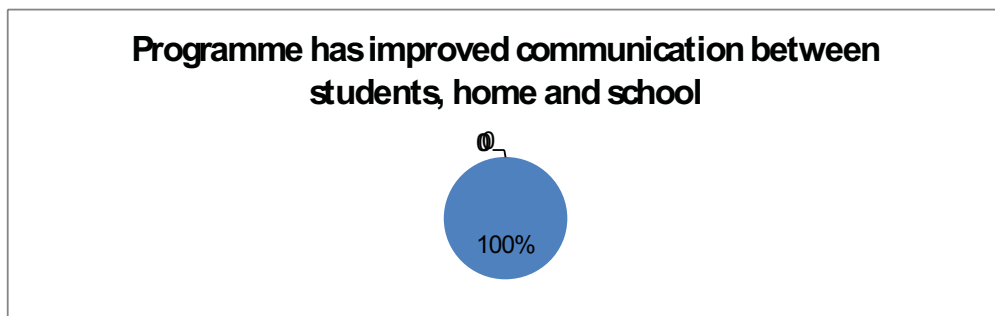
**Outcomes of research conducted into  
Phone Home Good News Programme at Rhode Street School  
August-September 2009**

Participants were asked to share their experiences with the Phone Home Good News Programme.

Participants included:

BOT, school leadership personnel, teaching staff, support staff, students and family members

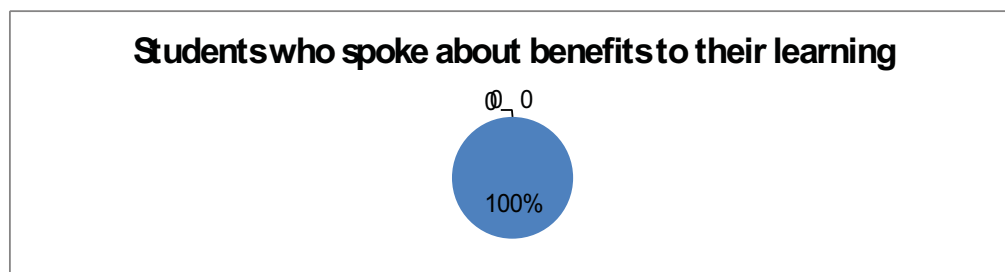
- 100% of participants had positive comments to make with regard the improvements this programme has made to communication between students, home and school



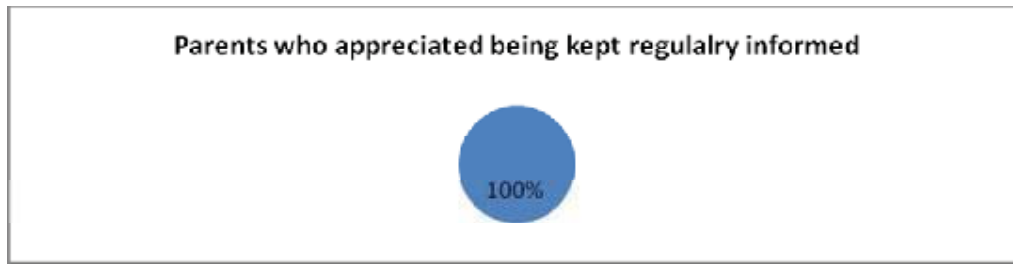
- 100% of participants considered that this programme offered benefits to students that helped to improve their attitudes towards learning and/or behaviour



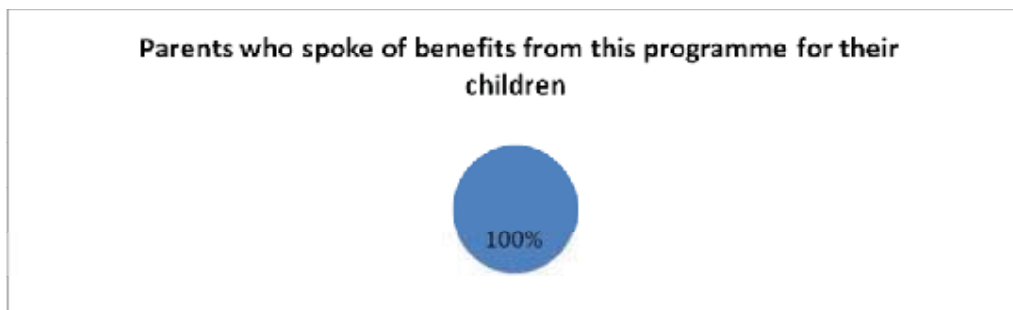
- 100% of students believed that this programme brought about benefits to their learning



- 100% of parents spoke about their appreciation of this programme for keeping them more regularly informed about their children



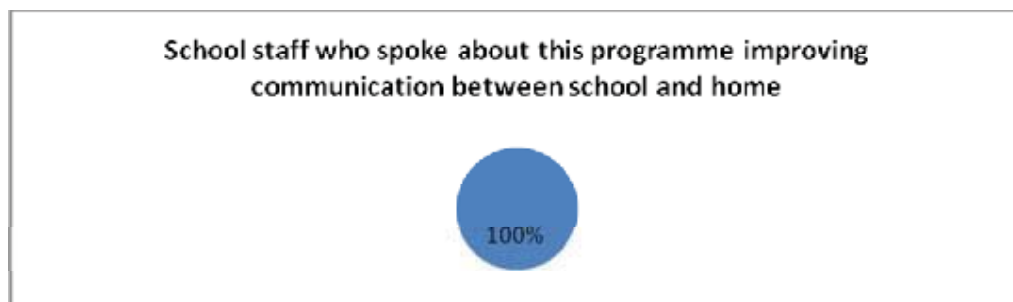
- 100% of parents spoke about the benefits they have witnessed arising from this programme for their children



- 100% of the staff interviewed made reference to the additional feedback from home making some positive differences to student outcomes



- 100% of school staff commented that this programme has helped to improve communication between school and home



## Discussion

### Students' perspective

#### *Learning*

The students were asked if they believed this programme helped them in any way with their learning. This question underlies the key purpose of this programme and coming from the perspective of the students, is critical to determining the success or otherwise of the Phone Home Good News initiative.

100% believed that this programme helped them with their learning. Some also spoke about their behaviour but often related their improved behaviour to bringing about improved learning outcomes.

- It actually makes you work harder to get it so you can use your time wisely and then you get to phone home.
- Lots of kids are starting to act better so they can phone home.
- It makes me try harder
- I write better so I can phone home
- It helps with your learning so that you can get to share it with your whanau what you are doing at school and that builds up your confidence. It makes learning so much more fun. Mum said it will give me the perfect education.
- You know what you're going to say on the phone to your mum and dad
- Helps our learning because if our parents don't know things, we can tell them and we're smarter than them
- Phone helps me to learn how to be good
- We try harder so that we can phone home more often
- I'm good now because I don't want to keep getting in trouble and doing the dishes. I try harder.
- I learn to work better with other people
- It helps me to learn because if I've been good I'll learn more about stuff. Behaviour is better at this school because of phoning home
- It makes me work harder
- It helps me with my learning because I move up and I do different things every time I move up
- It's great because I get a chance to learn new things and then share it with my family once I've got really good at it and the teacher's proud of me so I get to call my family. I think that everything I learn I've done a great job with and it just feels terrific to share it with my parents.
- It helps me so I learn and I focus and know not to talk and stuff so I can phone home for positives

#### *Purpose*

When asked what they thought the purpose of the programme was the majority of the students 64% spoke about letting their parents know about behaviour issues. 36% made comments that related to their work or their achievement and 36% made comments that were more general around what they'd been up to at school (some students made comments in more than one category).

- To let your parents know about behaviour
- To let your parents know when you're good
- Being good, doing good reading, good work
- Because I write well, being good in class
- To contact home if they're sick or they've been doing good deeds

- So people can share about their learning with their parents and tell them how good they've been
- To let parents know if we've been good or bad so they know what we've been doing during school time
- So the parents can know how they've been doing in class
- To tell our parents what we've been up to, if we've been bad or good in our classes
- To tell your parents what good work you've been doing
- If you be good you get a phone home
- So you're not writing notes and letters, you're just ringing home to say what's happened
- So they want to share with the parents about what they've been doing and their good achievements with the school
- So the parents know what you've been doing at school

### *Family*

When the students were asked what they thought their parents thought of the phone home programme, 100% had a positive comment to make. Many made reference to their parents appreciating being kept informed about what they were doing at school and their parents being keen to be kept up with news about their behaviour, most saying that their parents were keen to hear that they'd been good at school.

It is important to add that some of the younger students had little to say and didn't elaborate on their comments

A comment from each of the students has been recorded:

1. Mum and dad think it's really good. My mum's overjoyed when she gets a call
2. Mum likes it
3. Good
4. Good, because it tells her all the things we've been doing at school.
5. Likes it because she gets to know what we're doing at school. She likes to know about compatible numbers.
6. Yes, they like it
7. They think it's good the more we ring home
8. Mum likes it because she likes it when I'm good
9. My mum thinks it's good so she knows if I've been good or bad and so they know what I've been up to during school time
10. Mum likes the good calls
11. My mum thinks it's good so she knows if I've been up to mischief at school
12. They're proud of me. They like the programme. They tell nanny and poppa.
13. My parents think it's a really good school because they can tell you what's happening and whether you've been good or not.
14. A good idea
15. They like it
16. Real neat. She likes us phoning all the time
17. My mum thinks it's quite cool because she likes to hear that I've been doing good stuff at school
18. They think it's great and they said that they might try to get some of our other cousins into our school because they love hearing everything and they're really proud of hearing their kid telling them what they've been doing.
19. They think it's so good so they know what we've been doing at school and how we've been behaving

## Parents' perspective

The response from the families regarding the Phone Home Good News Programme was particularly interesting as it was so unanimously 100% positive. The following is a brief quote from each of the family members interviewed regarding their impressions of the programme:

1. *Very impressed*
2. *A really great thing*
3. *It's a really cool idea*
4. *I'm quite happy*
5. *It's been good*
6. *I think it's brilliant*
7. *It's really good*
8. *It was the best idea we ever came up with (BOT member)*
9. *I wish all schools had this*
10. *I've only had positive experiences*
11. *I find it extremely handy*
12. *I don't worry so much*
13. *It's cool*
14. *I look forward to those phone calls*

The reasons for speaking so positively about the programme were varied and each will be covered in this discussion but it is interesting to note that all parents particularly touched on the following two topics:

- They appreciated being kept regularly informed
- They saw great benefits in this programme for their children

### *Being kept informed*

100% of the parents were grateful to the programme for keeping them informed about what their children were doing at school.

They appreciated this for the following reasons:

- They like to share positive experiences with their children
- They wanted to discuss issues that their children were having in order to seek solutions as soon as possible
- It helped the children to strive for better outcomes as they could share their experiences with their families
- It helped the students to take more responsibility for themselves as they were the ones who made the phone calls
- It helped the parents to support their children with their learning
- Parents were keen to know that their children were 'doing the right thing' at school, particularly with regard to their behaviour
- Parents appreciated reminders about forthcoming school events, homework and class activities

*"In a lot of homes that's always been a problem that there's that lack of communication between school and home and so with this it allows that involvement from parents and input also into their lives while they're spending six hours there."*

## Benefits for their children ☐

100% of parents saw great benefits in this programme for their children.

The best way to describe the comments the parents made about the benefits of this programme is to include quotes from the interviews. I include a quote from each one of the parents spoken to as each of them had something to say on this topic:

1. *It's mainly for the kids*
2. *It helps to settle them for learning*
3. *I think the kids strive to achieve more*
4. *It helps her to feel good about herself*
5. *It's good for the kids to know that if they do something good their parents are told about it*
6. *(My son) has to take more responsibility for his actions when he has to admit to them*
7. *I think he thinks it's a great thing and it is*
8. *Trying to make them take more ownership*
9. *My relations ask me about how they could go about getting this into their kids' schools*
10. *The kids get really excited when they ring when they've done something really amazing at school*
11. *He gets a reward or he gets praised and it does make him want to work harder*
12. *My son has to tell me what he's done good or not well, that's the whole purpose of this*
13. *It encourages the children to do better because they get to feel better about themselves when they do ring home and tell the parents how they're doing and I think that's really important because it helps them to build up their self esteem and confidence*
14. *It gives me a boost just knowing that my kids are doing so well at school*

## Home-school relationship

This was a topic spoken about or alluded to by all parents. Many commented that they felt less anxious about coming into school through having the regular communication with the phone home programme.

*"Maybe it's from my day back in the schooling but the teachers had a sense of power about them so I kind of stood back and waited for them to approach me and tell me what's going on but now not so much, I'll stroll up and say 'hi, how's things' and then we'll talk about how my child is going and everything."*

*"I've become closer with the school. It has made me closer to their teachers and I'm able to feel welcomed when I do go into the school."*

*"It's keeping us together, like in a partnership."*

*"You feel more of a person than just a parent."*

*I'm not an extremely forward person so I kind of linger at the back and because of this I find it a lot easier to just stroll up and yarn like she's a friend not like she's the teacher."*

## Instant messaging

One of the main advantages of this programme is its ability to communicate in 'real time, real place'. This was viewed by many of the parents as being of great significance. If they were to be kept informed, they didn't want it to be at a later time as they wanted to praise their child or discuss issues with them at the time that it had the greatest relevance.

*"It's the there and then, it's being able to deal with it."*

*“I think that it’s probably better that we hear more about what’s going on instead of waiting till it gets to that point where it’s serious and you’re coming in and it’s trying to get to it early.”*

*“When she feels that she’s done well she can ring home straight away and let me know and that helps her feel good about herself.”*

*“Sometimes they send newsletters out and then you forget but the children ring up that day so it’s really good.”*

### ***Improved relationships between parent and child***

A heart warming outcome of this study has been the comments from parents that indicate that not only has their home-school relationship improved but so too has their parent-child relationship. This has come about through the families being kept better and more regularly updated on their child’s progress, attitudes, well being and activities.

*“I just think it opens up more opportunities for them to lead discussions about what they’re doing like you might ask them what they did at school and they just say whatever but if you say ‘hey, you called me about that, what’s that all about’ so you’ve got more depth of knowledge about what they’re doing.”*

*“It’s made a difference to my relationship with my daughter. It’s impacted on my relationship with her in a really positive way because we seem to communicate better.”*

*“I think it gives the kids a bit of back-up and a bit of support.”*

### ***Student involvement***

Many parents commented that it was of great importance to them that it was their child who was phoning them. Many believed that this helped the child to take improved ownership of their actions and for their child to be more inclined to initiate discussions around their activities at school.

*“He tends to take more responsibility for his actions when he has to admit to them.”*

*“Ownership of their behaviour, regardless of what it is.”*

### ***Reciprocal***

In its extensive synthesis of the literature associated with home-school programmes in New Zealand, the 2003 Best Evidence Synthesis *The Complexity of Community and Family Influences on Children’s Achievement in New Zealand*. (Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003) included the recommendations that home-school programmes must be respectful to all involved and must be reciprocal. The synthesis, however, found that few programmes had a reciprocal nature to them and that this issue must be addressed in order for programmes to be effective. This Phone Home Good News Programme achieves this aim as the following quotes demonstrate very effectively:

*“If I’ve got any issues I can text her (the teacher) and she answers and I feel like I’m being heard as a parent.”*

*“If parents have concerns we can text to the teacher ‘can you ring’ and they ring us and we are able to sort things out.”*

*“I may also text the teacher back and say ‘hey, you’re doing a great job’.”*

### *Positive focus*

Many parents have had previous experiences with negative phone calls, both from their own schooling experiences and from earlier calls regarding their children. The positive focus of this programme has come as a very refreshing change for many families and one that is fully embraced and appreciated. Rather than being apprehensive about a call from school, they look forward to receiving the calls and consider ways in which they can back up the phone calls in order to support their children. Some give rewards at home, others encourage their children and some like to discuss the calls further when their children get home. The information they are receiving from school means that there is a much greater likelihood that these student-whanau discussions will actually take place. They may be initiated by excited children when they come home or by proud parents who want to share the good news with their children and to encourage them to keep trying their best.

*“It’s good for the kids to know that if they do something good then their parents will be told about it. It used to be that you’d only get a phone call home if you were naughty.”*

*“He gets to show that there are positive things at school that’s he’s involved in, ownership really.”*

*“It’s nice because its positive and it reinforces things for them.”*

*“I know when it did first start a lot of parents were probably thinking ‘oh no, what’s happened’ because usually that’s the only time they were contacted. They always thought the negatives and I think it’s slowly changed, I think we’ve done three years and its changed their way of thinking and it’s like ‘hey, it’s not always negative that they’re ringing for, its mostly positive’.”*

### *Flexibility of voice, text or video contact*

The programme in place allows for flexibility that is beneficial for all involved.

Voice calls offer family members the opportunity to praise or reinforce their child in real time. Voice calls are also the option adopted when making teacher to parent contact as it is stated in The Rhode Street School Procedures Document that voice contact only may made when communicating issues that require a teacher to parent discussion.

Texting is a good option when the parents are not available by phone or do not wish to be disturbed while they are at work. Texting is also useful for communicating the same message with a number of families such as for reminders or to contact all the families of students involved in some group work.

While videoing or photo imaging are not options regularly adopted, they are a powerful means by which family members may share real images of their child’s efforts.

In terms of reciprocal contact, the ability to text opens the way for communication to be received from home in a manner that would not otherwise be an option as many families do not have enough funds on their phone to be able to make a call.

*“It’s a bit hard for them to get hold of me but even just receiving the text saying that your daughter’s doing really well with this today is really nice to know.”*

### *Backed up by student led conferences*

The important relationship between this programme and student led conferences is a subject that will be covered further in the interpretation section of this review but it is part of the key to the success of this programme and was touched on by many parents, therefore adding weight to the important relationship between the two programmes.

*“We go to every single one of them.” (student conferences)*

It was significant to the parents that both the phone programme and the student led conferences involved the students. Ensuring this level of student involvement in both programmes helps each programme to support the other further.

*“It’s good because they have what they call the student led conferences where the children put you through what they’re doing rather than the parent-teacher interviews. The teachers are there but I find it good having the student there doing it rather than just the teacher.”*

*“It’s good because the kids do it all and you know the teachers are there if need be.”*

### **Approach the school with concerns**

Although the relationship between the phone calls and Student Led Conferences is significant, it is just as important to note that many parents felt more comfortable about coming into school on an informal basis. They liked the fact that their relationship with the teacher had grown to the point that they felt more comfortable about speaking with the teacher at times when it had the greatest relevance to them.

*“I suppose I need to get involved in both but I find the phone calls actually help.”*

*“Maybe it’s from my day back in the schooling but the teachers had a sense of power about them so I kind of stood back and waited for them to approach me and tell me what’s going on but now not so much, I’ll stroll up and say ‘hi, how’s things’ and then we’ll talk about how my child is going and everything.”*

*“I’ve become closer with the school. It has made me closer with to their teachers and I’m able to feel welcomed when I do go into the school.”*

### **Improves learning opportunities**

It was encouraging to hear the manner in which many of the parents spoke of the difference this programme has made to their child’s attitude to learning.

*“I think the kids strive to achieve more because they know they’re going to be able to ring home.”*

*“It gives them a goal, encouragement.”*

*“Since they’ve had this system in my kids have been totally focused on their education.”*

### **Behaviour**

A number of parents spoke about liking to be kept up with behaviour issues in order to support the school to make improvements to children’s learning attitudes and hence reduce behavioural issues.

*“With the boys it’s been quite extreme (their behaviour) but having this in place I’ve been able to get on top of whatever mischief they’ve been getting up to.”*

### **Builds child’s self esteem**

Many parents referred to the benefits for their children on at a personal level such as building their confidence and self esteem.

*“To encourage the children to do better because they feel better about themselves when they do ring home and tell their parents how they’re doing. I think that’s really important because it helps them to build up their self-esteem and confidence.”*

### *Builds parents' self esteem*

Some parents spoke of personal gain from the calls home that had benefits for their own self-esteem.

*“It’s hard to explain for me personally but it means a lot, it really means a lot to me.”*

*“It gives me a boost for the day just knowing that my kids are doing well at school.”*

*“Sometimes I feel that I’m not doing my job properly as a mother but when you get phone calls like that you know that you must be doing something right for your child.”*

## School staff perspective ✿

The school staff interviewed included leadership personnel, teaching staff and support staff members who were directly involved with the Phone Home Good News programme. This included: office staff, the caretaker, librarian and support staff personnel. All school staff believed that being able to share their learning with their whanau brought about benefits to their students. They spoke about the difference this made to the students' enthusiasm for learning when they were able to receive positive feedback from home to encourage them. Teachers were also grateful for the ability to be more involved with the well being of their students as they believed that this also helped to strengthen relationships between home and school. Most liked to be able to send reminders to parents regarding forthcoming events, homework and personal messages of support or encouragement. Staff were generally supportive of the fact that the phones offered a valuable means through which they could communicate messages regarding health or care giving concerns (such as changing arrangements for after school care) while building better relationships with their families in the process of conveying these messages.

- 100% of staff interviewed made reference to the programme improving communication and building stronger links with the school community.
- 100% of the staff interviewed made reference to the additional feedback from home making a positive difference to student outcomes.

## Purpose

When asked what they perceived the main purpose of the programme to be, answers were varied but mainly related to the theme of building better relationships. Some examples of responses include:

- To get whanau to come through the gate and to be part of what is happening at school
- To have a partnership to reinforce what's happening in the classroom
- For building relationships
- A positive means of building relationships with parents
- Sharing learning
- Parents are more informed about learning programmes
- Keeping up communication links with parents
- Connection with home and school
- Getting parents involved with their children's learning
- Communication with parents regarding what their children are doing in class
- Letting whanau know about their awesome students
- Strengthened liaison between home and school
- To give instant feedback in a way that reinforces behaviour and excellence in the classroom
- For students to understand that parents and teachers talk to each other

## Whanau response

When asked how they thought whanau were responding to the programme, 100% of staff made positive comments. Most staff said that they can call all but 2 or 3 class members and those who don't have a phone at home are able to call a member of the leadership team.

- Positive response from parents
- Parents appreciate the opportunity to communicate with the school
- More willing to come into school

- Very positive response
- Very little negative response from parents
- Very positive
- Reciprocal opportunities
- Will contact teacher with messages
- A lot of parents text back and initiate texts
- Much easier to get to know parents
- Positive about programme
- Parents are very positive
- Lots of positive feedback
- They enjoy the opportunity to be involved

### *Student response*

Again there were 100% positive comments to be made around student response. Many teachers were very enthusiastic about the manner in which the students had responded to the programme.

- Get excited and love the follow up with home
- 99% of students seem to like the contact
- Helps students to stay on task because they now understand that they are accountable to their whanau as well
- They love it, always ask to phone
- Very positive
- Student responses make the programme worthwhile
- Students love it
- See children talking on the phone and witness pride on their faces
- Children look for opportunities to phone home

### *Behaviour*

Of particular interest were the comments from school staff that had been at the school since before this programme was introduced. They unanimously commented that the programme had made a huge difference to the behaviour of the students.

*Attitudes of parents have definitely changed*

*Has made a huge difference to the school whanau*

Some of the teachers who have come here from other schools also commented that the behaviour of the students at this school is much better than at their previous school and they suggest that the difference lies in the phone home programme.

*Has found it much easier to get to know parents at this school compared to previous experiences*

### *Learning*

Teachers not only commented that they believed the programme had improved behaviour but there were moving comments made about the manner in which it made a difference to learning opportunities.

*“Definitely helps as talking through their learning helps to reinforce and reaffirm what they have learnt”*

*“The children are engaged in their learning because they have a relationship with their teacher that they respect and value.”*

*“They know that by getting on with their learning they’re going to be intrinsically in their way rewarded by their family and that’s a powerful motivator for any child.”*

### *Improved relationships between whanau and their children*

As with the parents, teachers saw that there were benefits not only in home-school relationships but also in parent-child relationships.

*“Whanau build relationships with their children as some of them spend more time with their tamariki as a consequence of finding out some of the good things they’ve done at school and then following that up.”*

## Results

This research sought to examine further what differences and similarities there were between participants and the manner in which gaps that may appear impact on the effectiveness of this programme.

### Purpose

While all participants had positive comments to make regarding the impact this programme had on improving communication at some stage during their interview, when asked specifically about its purpose, there were both differences and similarities between the participants as the table below demonstrates. Note that many participants commented on a variety of purposes hence the numbers do not add up to the number of respondents.

Perspective of the Purpose of the Programme												
	Achievement Related	Behaviour Related	Being Kept Informed	Share Good News	Support for their child	Child Ownership	Student Well Being	Provides Immediate Contact	Builds Relationships	Builds Child Self-Esteem	Goal Setting	Parent Responsibility
Parents	1	5	5	3	2	2	1	1	3	1	1	
Students	4	5	7	3			1					
School	7	5		3	1		5	2	11			1

Parents and students weren't always specific about the purpose saying 'to let us know what they're up to' or to 'tell our parents what we're up to'. It's difficult to know whether such a comment relates to behaviour or achievement so it was placed in the 'Being Kept Informed' column.

School staff were much more specific about the purpose with the vast majority viewing relationship building as being its main aim. While more school staff commented on the programme being related to achievement than students or parents did, this may be viewed as a less immediate outcome for non teaching participants but it is an issue that the school has already addressed by backing this programme up with other initiatives such as Student Led Conferences.

There were consistencies in the number of parents, students and school staff who spoke about behaviour issues and sharing good news as being part of the main purpose.

### Participants views of other participants responses to this programme

#### Parents

Parents' views of other participants responses to this programme			
<i>Students</i>	+ve	OK	-ve
	10	2	0
<i>Teachers</i>	+ve	OK	-ve
	8	1	2

All parents had positive comments to make about the way their children were responding to this programme, some more so than others. While most parents had positive comments to make about the teachers communication with them, some parents were concerned about the lack of consistency between teachers and the lack of response at times.

“With the last teacher it was great but I haven’t heard much at all from the teacher she’s got now and there’s been no phone calls so far.”

“Speaking on behalf of my three, there’s only one teacher that seems to keep in contact all the time where as the other two, you send them a message and you’re wondering if they’ve got it or what’s happening.”

### School Staff\*

School staff views of other participants responses to this programme			
<i>Students</i>	+ve	OK	-ve
	15	1	0
<i>Parents</i>	+ve	OK	-ve
	14	2	0

Most members of the school staff believed that both parents and students were very positive about this programme, however, two staff members found that parents weren’t often responding to their texts and they didn’t have such positive comments to make about their parents.

### Students

Students’ views of other participants responses to this programme			
<i>Parents</i>	+ve	Limited response	-ve
	15	4	0

100% of students believed that their families liked the programme although some of the younger students gave a limited response, they did comment positively at other stages of their interview.

### Achievement

Referring back to the stated purpose of this programme being to facilitate dialogue, connection and communication around student achievement, it may again be confirmed that this aim is being addressed by this programme.

When asked if they believed this programme improved learning outcomes for the students in any way, all participants referred to the benefits to the students when they were able to share their experiences with another audience, particularly their families. However, there were some differences in the focus of the benefits: parents spoke more about improving attitudes to learning; students focused on liking to share their learning experiences with their families which helped to improve their behaviour and their attitudes; school staff spoke about the advantages additional feedback offered when students could share their learning with their whanau.

### Issues

The success of the programme depends on some essential elements that are much appreciated by the students and their parents but that cause the teachers some concerns. These include:

#### *Instant messaging*

The students like to be able to communicate at the time that they have been caught being good and most parents like to hear from their excited children at that time. The teachers, however, can find this a challenge within a busy classroom environment. While this can be a difficult undertaking at times, many saw it as a

challenge rather than an obstacle to the success of the programme. Some teachers had put systems in place that helped them to address this situation and sharing of these systems is always appreciated. It can be difficult for teachers in the junior classes at times as their students are less independent but again many of these teachers had procedures that meant that they were able to address their concerns. They also found that the eagerness of their students to make a call helped them to respect the need of others to be calling home.

#### *Number of calls*

The regularity and consistency of contact is essential to its success. Students may become discouraged if they move from one class to another and become limited in their participation in this programme. Unless calls are made regularly, the programme loses its momentum and purpose. The rules regarding the number of calls being made requires further agreement and support from all involved.

#### *Recording of calls*

This is another issue that most teachers commented adds to their workload. Discussions have been held regarding software that may enable messages to transfer from phone to Etap and this may help but the cost of the software must be balanced against its need. Further discussion may be required around this topic. Again, some teachers have systems in place that assist with this; such as notes in their day book regarding calls which helps them with their writing up each afternoon. The workload of this programme in comparison to others being adopted in various schools must also be considered. Examples include individual notebooks for children to take home or staff home visits. It is also essential to note that the benefits being suggested by the participants involved are leading to improved student learning outcomes, attitudes and relationship and therefore it would be hard to argue that the efforts aren't well worthwhile. Personal ised feedback on how school staff are coping with the recording of calls is appreciated by those involved

#### *Updating information*

A school wide database is necessary to maintain up to date changes of phone numbers that may be accessed by all staff members, particularly support staff who may not have regular contact with students and could be using the programme more effectively if they had current information.

## **Conclusion**

The main purpose of this programme as stated in the Rhode Street School *School Cell Phone Acceptable Use Procedures* document (2008) is to **facilitate positive dialogue, connection and communication around student achievement.**

- It is the overall finding of this research that this purpose is being achieved as all participants commented positively on the impact of this programme on: facilitating positive dialogue, connecting with whanau, improving communication and 100% of students believed that this programme brought about benefits to their learning
- Supporting learning through opportunities to share experiences in real time is empowering for all participants
- It was the finding of this study that all parents interviewed cared about the achievement, behaviour and well being of their children and wanted to support them.

This research has shown that this programme unquestionably builds positive relationships as all participants made reference to this outcome. Although there were some differences in perceived purpose, the forming of better relationships helps to lead towards a common goal. If more parents are willing to come through the gate and take part in the other initiatives that support the Phone Home Good News Programme such as the

quarterly Student Led Conferences or the 'open door' policy then this programme achieves its aims in both a direct and a less direct manner. Not only will more parents be willing to enter the school through the building of improved relationships but there is evidence from the comments made by both the students and their parents that communication with the school will be a lot more meaningful to them as it has more relevance being more regular and at the time when it matters the most. They also feel more comfortable about backing up phone communication with personal visits. Furthermore, evidence from the parents' comments suggests that follow up will be positive and supportive at home which leads towards the students coming to school with positive attitudes towards their learning.

While it is agreed that relationships are enhanced, in terms of the purpose being related to achievement some further analysis was required. Over 60% of positive calls had an attitude to learning or behaviour focus (a good role model, helped others) and around 40% had a general learning focus (working well in maths today, tried hard with his writing today). Less than 15% of positive calls give specific details of the student's actual achievement such as that the child is now reading at their expected age level or can count backwards from 10 etc. However, it is difficult to distinguish between achievement being enhanced by communication 'around' learning rather than 'about' learning outcomes. The former (around learning) is important for relationship building and as explained above, it is backed up by other programmes that have a more specific learning focus while the latter (about learning) may help to inform more meaningful family discussions around achievement. The combination of the two, however, would seem the preferable option as is the case now although further discussions may examine the weight given to each option. As all participants believed that the purpose of this programme was to build better relationships, the current weighting is addressing this aim although the stated purpose looked more at achievement and therefore there may be room for some further thinking around this weighting.

Acknowledgment from the parents that they care about supporting their children is also critical as it is the ability to follow up achievements and good behaviour that all agree makes a significant difference to outcomes. Hattie (2009) writes in his recent book that the one factor that makes the most difference to student achievement is feedback. Receiving feedback from the people who care about you the most must be such an empowering experience for the students of Rhode Street School.

### **What are the critical elements that make this programme successful?**

The school can feel very proud of its efforts with regard to this programme because the critical elements that make this programme successful are already being addressed but to reinforce them:

- Positive emphasis
  - To date during 2009, 86% of calls and 92% of texts home have been positive
  - The positive emphasis is very much appreciated by the parents and the students alike and helps the students in so many ways; such as building confidence, self esteem and ownership of their actions
- Regular contact (confirm the number of calls per week)
  - Parents like to see consistency between classes
  - Students look forward to making the calls
  - Parents look forward to receiving the calls
  - Programme relies on regularity of contact for its continued effectiveness
  - Parents appreciate teachers responding to their communication
  - Target per teacher per week helps to establish consistent guidelines throughout the school
- Sharing learning

- All participants spoke of the benefits to the students in having opportunities to share their experiences with their families as these were the people who cared about them the most. This empowered the students and made positive differences to their attitudes more than any other programme many have experienced
- Achievement focus
  - Calls are focused directly or indirectly on achievement (building better relationships helps to improve attitudes to learning)
  - Programme is backed up by other initiatives such as student led conferences and open door policy
- Reaches most families
  - It is often difficult to contact the majority of families at the time that contact means the most. The use of phones for this purpose is effective because over 90% of families have access to a mobile phone
- Instant messaging
  - This is critical to the ongoing success of this programme in terms of the students responding better to the 'moment' of the action rather than being delayed by waiting for Friday assembly or such
- Reciprocal
  - The programme allows for both school to contact home and home to contact school
- Flexibility of use
  - The availability of contact through the use of voice, text or video contact means different options may be used for different purposes and to fit with the manner in which the contact suits the participant
- Student involvement
  - Students talk on the phone therefore enhancing their ownership and personal benefits from the programme
  - Parents appreciate their child's involvement
- Recording of calls
  - Necessary in order to monitor progress of the programme and report to BOT and sponsors
  - Necessary in order to track details of individual students in order to monitor regularity and type of call and address concerns such as any students receiving few calls or students receiving a greater number of negative calls
  - A programme that may assist with making this task easier would be appreciated by teaching staff
  - Personalised feedback for teachers part of programme (may be incorporated into appraisal system or teacher requirement procedures)
- Classroom systems
  - Making of calls can be challenging during class time therefore finding a system that works for each teacher helps. Sharing of ideas around these systems may be useful at various times

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