

The Welcoming Atmosphere Tool Kit

How welcoming is your school?

Welcoming Environment

Research has shown when schools create a welcoming environment, they become inviting places where students want to learn, school employees want to work and every citizen feels respected and valued. The schools belong to our customers, and we are dependent on public support for our ultimate success.

There is a great deal of research pointing to factors that improve student learning and one of those is parent involvement; but why do parents get involved? Three reasons: parents feel it is their role, they feel they can effect change and/or the school is an inviting place. Which one did parents rate as the most important? The number one reason people become involved in their schools is when they feel invited and welcomed to do so (adapted from Hoover-Dempsey (1997) and Lanthier, Wright-Cunningham, Edmonds (2003)). For some members of our community, depending on their experiences, schools may not have been a welcoming, trusting, comfortable place.

Creating welcoming environments is the number one factor in encouraging parent involvement. It is not necessary to create new programs or workloads but focus on the customer service aspects of what we are doing.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Approximate time from start to finish: 1 1/2 hours

What is the Welcoming Atmosphere Tool Kit?

- The action team will coordinate a tour of your school.
- The team will look at the elements of the school that let parents and community members know they are welcomed partners in the school
- Based on their observations, the team will complete a Welcoming Environment Commendation/Recommendation checklist highlighting the welcoming aspects of your school.

What is the purpose of the Welcoming Atmosphere Tool Kit?

- Each school has different goals it hopes to achieve as a result of this walk-through. Purposes could include the following: examining how inviting the school appears to its diverse community, looking at strategies that can be employed to make the school more inviting to the families and community, and trying to increase parent involvement.

What are the components of the Welcoming Atmosphere Tool Kit?

- The Physical Environment: parking areas, classrooms, lobby, hallways, etc.
- School-wide Practices & Policies: interview with principal/administrative staff.
- Public Relations/Welcoming School Staff: observations in the main office, hallways, and places open to the public; listen and look for inviting friendly tones.
- Written Materials: newsletters, parent handbook, flyers, and other materials distributed by the school. Web sites and telephone message lines are also included.

Who will do the Welcoming Atmosphere Process?

- Use the services of a facilitator to assist in the coordination of the team.
- To complement the action team, you may want to consider a custodian, a secretary, a bus driver, a cafeteria worker, a neighbor, a community leader, an English as a second language parent, and/or others who represent the various cultures in your school community. Twelve people is the suggested size of the walk-through team: four staff members, eight parents and or community members, if possible.

WELCOMING ATMOSPHERE PROCEDURE

Facilitator and Action Team will do the following:

1. Plan and schedule the procedure with a school contact person.
2. Prepare tool kit packets for each team member.
3. Select the participants for the walk-through.
4. Send the names to the principal/headmaster.
5. Divide the participants into component teams.
6. Facilitate the briefing, walk-through, and debriefing.
7. Write a summary of the team's observations, commendations, and recommendations.
8. Send the recommendation report summary to the school headmaster.
9. Follow-up with the school to discuss next steps. (Part of the action team-training model.)

School is asked to do the following before the Walk-Through:

1. Provide a meeting room large enough for your team members.
2. Provide refreshments for the walk through team.
3. Provide a space for each of the four component teams to meet and talk separately. This could be the same room as #1 with teams moving to separate corners.
4. Provide the name of the administrator who will be interviewed.
5. Provide a map of the school.
6. Collect samples of all written material sent to parents/families from your school, i.e., a parent/student handbook, two recent newsletters, a student directly, a packet of materials for new students and families.
7. Provide all telephone numbers, including message lines, through which families and community members can contact the school. A team member will call those numbers before the actual walk-through.
8. Provide any information needed to access your web site, if available.
9. **In order to expedite the walk-through process, please send the information listed above to the action team contact person at least one week prior to your walk-through.**

General Instructions and Guidelines for all Components

Thank you for being apart of your school's Welcoming Atmosphere Team. Your input will be helpful in making future visitors to the building feel a welcomed part of the school. As you participate in the walk-through today, please think about the things that way "Welcome!" to you when you enter a school.

Try to assume a role as a visitor new to the school. Look at your school from any or all of the following perspectives:

- You are a parent of a child who will go to kindergarten next fall.
- You are thinking about moving into the area.
- You are a first-time volunteer.
- You just moved here from another state.
- You just moved from another area within this state.
- You know a little English.
- You are a father.
- You just moved to the USA.
- You have difficulty walking.
- You have difficulty seeing.
- You are a neighbor of the school.

During today's walk-through, you will become a member of *one* of four Welcoming Atmosphere Component Teams. These teams will examine the following elements:

- The Physical Environment
- School-wide Practices and Policies
- Public Relations/Welcoming School Staff
- Written Materials

In order to remember your thoughts during the walk-through process, please put your name at the top of your individual Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through Check List and make notes about the following:

- What is your school doing well?
- What could your school do to make the school more welcoming for parents and visitors?

At the conclusion of the walk-through time period, each Component Team will discuss its observations and complete the Commendation and Recommendation Form that has been provided for the team.

The entire team will then gather to share each Component Team's findings.

When all Component Teams have shared their observations, the reports will be collect by the facilitator for compilation. The facilitator will send a summary report of the observations to the action team (if this is part of an action research project) and to the school administration within one week of the observation.

Welcoming Atmosphere Walk Through

Sample agenda with times and details:

School Name Welcoming Walk Through

- 10:00 - 10:10 Welcome Principal
- 10:10 - 10:25 Introduction Facilitator of the Walk Through
- History
 - Purpose & Objectives
 - Guidelines
 - Form 4 teams with 2 to 4 staff members and 2 to 4 parents and/or community members on each team.
 - Team 1: Physical Environment
 - Team 2: Public Relations
 - Team 3: School Wide Practices and Policies
 - Team 4: Review of Written Materials and School Web Site
 - Team members complete their own checklist.
- 10:25 – 10:55 Walk Through
- Each team member should first read over his or her checklist.
 - Rate each question as follows:
1 = FALSE 2 = somewhat true 3 = mostly true 4 = true
 - Team 1 will walk through the school using the Team 1 checklist on Physical Environment
 - Team 2 will walk through the school using the Team 2 checklist on Public Relations
 - Team 3 will interview the Principal using the Team 3 checklist on School Wide Practices and Policies
 - Team 4 will review Written Materials and School Web Site using the Team 4 checklist
- 10:15 – 10:30 Individual Team discussions and completion of forms
- Choose a Note-Taker; one master checklist should be submitted to the Facilitator as well as all participants' notes.
 - Choose a Reporter for the Summary Report Out
- 10:30 – 11:00 Summary Report Out from Each Team
Other Comments from all Team Members
Next Steps
- Set Date to review Facilitators Report as well as future meeting dates for implementation of the recommendations.

Welcoming Atmosphere Walk Through

RECOMMENDATIONS

(Sample Report)

Team 1: The Physical Environment

Commendations: What is working examples:

- Fish tank is a great addition.
- Welcome sign directing visitors to the Office.
- bulletin boards show student's work & the diverse community

Recommendations: How to make your school more welcoming

Recommendation some examples	Can be done with few resources	Needs resources	Needs Planning
Better signs to direct traffic to the office, pool, café, gym etc.			
Enforcing the NO PARKING in the circle by the flag pole.			
Using graphics on the signs to allow for all to understand directions.			
Entrance signs over the gym doors and the entrance to the pool.			
Better signs to show the entrance to the office from the café side of the school where the parking is.			
Half door at the "back entrance" to the office to not allow easy access but, allow a visual to the doors.			
Larger map of the school to assist parents and visitors.			
Some foliage (real or fake) to make the front foyer more welcoming.			
Need a place where visitors can comfortably sit to chat, read available resources, prepare materials for teachers			

Team 2: Public Relations

Commendations: What is working examples

- bulletin boards looked great. Students work along with pictures.
- The bulletin boards in the stairwells look great and the students see the great things that are going on.

Recommendations: How to make your school more welcoming

Recommendation: examples	Can be done with few resources	Needs resources	Needs Planning
Have more staff interact with visitors with a hello when passing in the hallway. 50% interacted on the day of walk thorough.			
More staff aware of strangers in building without visitors passes. No one notice the visitor without a name tag			
More student bulletin boards in hallways.			
Wall in café near teachers lounge neater. Long-term items laminated.			
More bulletin boards in the stairwells. The ones that are there look great and the students see the great things that are going on.			
A “students only” calendar in the front foyer. This will show field trips, days off, upcoming student council activities and anything that would be of interest to the students. This would also be informative to the parents.			

Team 3: School-wide Practices and Policies

Commendations: What is working: examples

- Spring Orientation
- Email communication with staff as well as voice mail available
- Web Site district and school quite informative
- Some teams/teachers contact parents for “Good News”
- Girls Night Out over 100 in attendance, invited elementary students, CONGRATULATIONS!
- Cultural Dinner, well attended, planned - great to include sending school since these are our future families
- Building is open and frequently used by the community for many events
- partnerships with University – 40 student tutors
- partnerships with community agencies, business and city offices outstanding!

Recommendations: How to make your school more welcoming

Recommendation examples	Can be done with few resources	Needs resources	Needs Planning
Open House; Have event before school starts			
Spring Orientation for sending school not well attended look into ways to increase this attendance			
Positive phone calls home to families			
Inform/involve parents of students Levels/Placement before school starts Use Course selection sheets similar to ones used for high school			
Put handbook on the Web also			
More consistency between teams/teachers			
Invite parents to faculty student games, talent show			
Would like more teachers to post homework on their web site			X

Team 4: Written Materials

Commendations: What is working examples

- Open House flyer very clear and attendance has been good
- Handbook can be used easily for reference
- Newsletter is very well done with team reports and student's work, easy to read and find pertinent information
- Curriculum Outlines available and passed out by each teacher at Open House
- Do have translated report cards and special education forms in Spanish

Recommendations: How to make your school more welcoming

Recommendation examples	Can be done with few resources	Needs resources	Needs Planning
Translation of printed materials to different languages May use local church for polish			
Enlarge Report card print/font Put numerical explanation on card as well as criteria for honors			
Put handbook on the Web also			
More consistency between teams in Rampages newsletter			
Mail home flyers information whenever possible, i.e. The school's educational and extra-curricular programs			
Curriculum Parent Survey – Should parents be asked to “bubble?”			
Would like more teachers to post homework on their web site			