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GOALS AND ROLES

Creating a Welcoming Place



A Welcoming Place

First of all, the school must be a safe place for students and teachers. It must also be an orderly place where learning can take place. So procedures are in place to direct visitors to the main office and require them to sign in. Security procedures to deal with visitors who act suspiciously or in a threatening manner are in place.

Thankfully, it is very seldom the school must deal with unpleasant visitors. For the most part, visitors are family members of students in the school or friendly members of the community. What are your procedures for dealing with friendly visitors, especially parents?

Please note that throughout this section, “parent” includes any family member or guardian acting in the parental role for a student.

Discuss each of the points below, determining if this is an area that could use attention. Then develop a plan to address areas of concern using the tools and tips in the pages that follow.

1. The school telephones are answered by staff who are pleasant, cheerful, and helpful.
2. All staff—including teachers, teachers’ aides, clerks, custodians, cooks, and others—greet visitors in the hallway in a pleasant and helpful manner to solicit their needs and to direct them to the office.
3. Office staff greet visitors promptly, cheerfully, and helpfully.
4. There are written procedures regarding visits by parents to their children’s classrooms. Procedures include:
 - ◆ a provision that advance permission is requested,
 - ◆ procedures to notify the teacher,
 - ◆ a friendly handout for visiting parents to explain their role in the classroom—where they should sit and what the teacher will expect them to do, and
 - ◆ guidelines for teachers to greet parents warmly and explain to them what is going on in the classroom.
5. The signs that greet visitors outside the doors and in the hallways are friendly while also being clear about the expectation that visitors register in the office. Helpful signs pointing to the office are placed on hallway walls.
6. The school provides special attention to welcome families that are new to the school.
7. The school has clear expectations of all school staff that they address students and parents respectfully.
8. The school makes every effort to minimize interruptions in the classrooms, including the frequency of announcements.

A Welcoming Place Plan

Outline below some specific steps to make the school a more welcoming place using the forms provided. Definitely included in the plan will be 1) a training session for support staff – clerks, secretaries, cooks, custodians, teacher aides, etc.; 2) a review of our “safe and friendly school” procedures with teachers and parents; 3) a walk-through, from the parking lot through the halls, offices, and classrooms to note signs, decorations, displays of student work, welcoming appearance, and directions; 4) a way to systematically ask families for feedback on how welcome they feel in the school and to ask them for suggestions; 5) procedures about classroom visits for teachers and parents (see section on that topic); 6) a welcome letter for parents who visit classrooms (a sample is included in the section on classroom visit procedures); and 7) ways to welcome families that are new to our school.

Welcoming Parents Training for Support Staff

Agenda:

- Discuss the importance of parents in the work of the school.
- Discuss friendly and helpful ways to answer the phone or respond to emails/messages.
- Discuss greeting visitors, listening to them, and offering help.

Role playing is a good technique to use in staff training. Practice greeting visitors, making introductions, showing interest, helping.

Here are two role-playing activities:

1. Assign participants to pairs. One member plays the role of a parent entering the school, and the second participant plays the role of a staff member greeting the parent. The staff person follows these steps in the greeting:

When greeting someone (or meeting someone for the first time):

Look into the person’s eyes and extend your hand.

Give a greeting and your name.

Listen for the person’s name.

Repeat the person’s name: “I’m happy to meet you, Sally.”

Ask a question to prompt conversation. “Do your children attend our school?”

Offer assistance. “May I direct you to the office?”

2. Assign participants to pairs. One member pays a compliment and the other person receives the compliment. Switch roles.

Giving Compliments

Look for good things about the person.

Offer a sincere and direct compliment.

Look the person in the eyes.

Receiving Compliments

Say a sincere, “Thank you.”

Look the person in the eyes.

Accept the compliment positively and happily. Don’t deny that you deserve the compliment.



Resources for A Welcoming Place

The following information is from *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships*, by Anne T. Henderson, Karen L. Mapp, Vivian R. Johnson, and Don Davies (pp. 75–79).

Welcoming Environment

1. Friendly signs inside and out welcome families and visitors and explain how to get around the building.
 - Already doing this* *Could do this easily* *This will take time* *This will be hard.*
2. The school has standards of welcoming behavior that apply to all staff, including bus drivers, security guards, custodians, and cafeteria workers.
 - Already doing this* *Could do this easily* *This will take time* *This will be hard.*
3. Front office staff are friendly—recognize visitors right away, provide information easily, and answer the phone in a way that makes people glad they have called.
 - Already doing this* *Could do this easily* *This will take time* *This will be hard.*
4. There is a comfortable family resource room stocked with books, games, and educational information that families can borrow and where parents can meet.
 - Already doing this* *Could do this easily* *This will take time* *This will be hard.*

Programs and Activities to Engage Families in Improving Student Achievement

5. Current student work is displayed throughout the building. Exhibits clearly explain the purpose of the work and the high standards it is to meet.
 - Already doing this* *Could do this easily* *This will take time* *This will be hard.*
6. All programs and activities for families focus on student achievement—they help families understand what their children are learning and promote high standards.
 - Already doing this* *Could do this easily* *This will take time* *This will be hard.*
7. Special workshops, learning kits, and other activities show families how to help their children at home—and respond to what families say they want to know about.
 - Already doing this* *Could do this easily* *This will take time* *This will be hard.*
8. The school reports to families about student progress and how teachers, parents, and community members can work together to make improvements.
 - Already doing this* *Could do this easily* *This will take time* *This will be hard.*

Strong Relationships Between Teachers and Families

9. A “joining process” welcomes families to the school, offers tours, makes bilingual speakers available, and introduces them to staff and other families.

Already doing this *Could do this easily* *This will take time* *This will be hard.*

10. Teachers and families have frequent opportunities to meet face-to-face and get to know each other—class meetings, breakfasts, home visits, class observations.

Already doing this *Could do this easily* *This will take time* *This will be hard.*

11. Teachers or advisors make personal contact with each family at least once a month.

Already doing this *Could do this easily* *This will take time* *This will be hard.*

12. A family liaison helps teachers connect to families and bridge barriers of language and culture.

Already doing this *Could do this easily* *This will take time* *This will be hard.*

Developing Families’ Self-confidence and Power

13. Families are involved in planning how they would like to be involved at the school.

Already doing this *Could do this easily* *This will take time* *This will be hard.*

14. School committees and the PTA/PTO reflect the diversity of the school community and actively recruit and welcome families from all backgrounds.

Already doing this *Could do this easily* *This will take time* *This will be hard.*

15. The school is open and accessible—it is easy for parents to meet with the principal, talk to teachers and counselors, and bring up issues and concerns.

Already doing this *Could do this easily* *This will take time* *This will be hard.*

16. Parents develop school improvement projects and do action research—survey other families, observe in classrooms, review materials, and visit other schools and programs.

Already doing this *Could do this easily* *This will take time* *This will be hard.*

Professional Development for Families and Staff

17. Families learn how the school system works and how to be an effective advocate for their child.

Already doing this *Could do this easily* *This will take time* *This will be hard.*

18. Teachers learn about effective approaches to working with families of diverse cultural backgrounds.

Already doing this *Could do this easily* *This will take time* *This will be hard.*

19. Families and staff have opportunities to learn together how to collaborate to improve student achievement.

Already doing this *Could do this easily* *This will take time* *This will be hard.*

20. The school reaches out to identify and draw in local community resources that can assist staff and families.

Already doing this *Could do this easily* *This will take time* *This will be hard.*

Which areas are you doing well in? Which ones will need more work?

How are families involved in making the school open, welcoming, and collaborative?

What are your concerns?

Reflection: What steps could you take to help your school become more family-friendly?

Right away:

Over the long term:

Henderson, Anne T., Mapp, Karen L., Johnson, Vivian, R., & Davies, Don. (2007). *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships*. New York, NY: The New Press.



More Resources for A Welcoming Place

The following information is from *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships*, by Anne T. Henderson, Karen L. Mapp, Vivian R. Johnson, and Don Davies (pp. 302–303).

Family Welcome Questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed to help school staff learn more about their students' families. We recommend that the questions below be asked face-to-face, rather than in a written survey. This can be done in several steps and places, such as when students enroll in the school, at the school open house, at parent-teacher conferences, and at parent activities. The family-school coordinator or parent liaison can do this and community groups can help. (It is important to emphasize that this information will be kept strictly confidential.)

Dear Families,

Our school wants to know more about its families and their rich and interesting cultural heritage. With this information, the Family and Community Involvement Action Team can plan better programs to build on our students' home cultures. We also want to learn more about how families would like to help.

First, tell us about your cultural background:

- What languages are spoken in your home?
- In what country (or state) were you born?
- Tell us about your family's beliefs about the importance of education.
- What does your family do to help your children learn?
- What are your family's traditions? What activities do you do as a family? How do you celebrate birthdays and other important family events?
- Who is in your extended family (grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, close friends)?

Second, tell us how you would like to be involved at home and at school, and what would help you be more involved?

- What are some ways you would like to be involved?
- What could the school do to help you be more involved?
- What are your working hours?
- When are the most convenient times for activities and meetings at school?
- What are your transportation needs?
- What are your hobbies, skills, talents, and interests?

Finally, tell us about your concerns, perspectives, and ideas:

- What would you like us to know about your child? What are his/her interests?
- What is working well for your child at school? What isn't?
- What are some ways you would like the school to recognize and teach about your child's culture?
- Are there any ways that you feel your culture could be better respected at the school?
- Do you have some things that reflect your culture and background that you could share with us (for example, pictures, weavings, carvings, stories, musical instruments, songs, traditions, naming ceremonies)?
- How could you help the school reach out to other families in your community?

Many questions suggested here appear in Sabrina Hope King and A. Lin Goodwin's *Culturally Responsive Parent Involvement* (Washington, DC: American Association of College of Teacher Education, 2003).

Henderson, Anne T., Mapp, Karen L., Johnson, Vivian, R., & Davies, Don. (2007). *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships*. New York, NY: The New Press.

A Welcoming Place Walk-Through

The next few pages provide a Welcoming Place Walk-Through Checklist, a Next Steps and Priorities Worksheet, and a Welcoming Place Action Plan Worksheet.

Welcoming Place Walk-Through Checklist

The School Community Council (or other school team that includes parents/family members of currently enrolled students) may schedule a certain week to complete a walk-through, following the suggestions on the first page of the checklist. Copies of the checklist should be made for each member of the team to complete individually during or directly after the walk-through. It is highly recommended that the walk-through be completed alone or in pairs at various times throughout the designated week.

Next Steps and Priorities Worksheet

At the next School Community Council (SCC) meeting following the designated week, all members should bring their completed checklists (see above). The SCC will then discuss and come to consensus on whether each checklist item is a strength or needs attention, marking the consensus decisions down on the Next Steps and Priorities Worksheet. Then the SCC can determine which items are the highest priority and check these in the designated column on the worksheet. These priorities can then be used to complete the Welcoming Place Action Plan Worksheet.

Welcoming Place Action Plan Worksheet

The SCC can use this worksheet to break down into tasks the priority items in need of improvement. Each task should then be assigned to a council member who will be responsible for monitoring progress on that task and reporting back to the SCC. Target dates for task completion should also be noted on the worksheet.

Welcoming Place Walk-Through Checklist

School Community Council (SCC)/School Team Members

Suggested Walk-Through Guidelines:

- Take the walk-through with the perspective of a family member or visitor that is new to your school.
- Complete the walk-through by yourself or in pairs rather than touring as a whole group. That way, members can interact with staff, teachers, and students in more typical ways and see the school at different times.
- All walk-throughs should be conducted during the designated **one-week** time period.
- Each team member must complete his or her own checklist.
- All walk-through team members are invited to the next SCC meeting to discuss the walk-through results.

The next meeting is at _____ (time) on _____ (date) at
 _____ (location).

School: _____ Date Span for Walk-Through: _____

Name of Team Leader: _____

Name of Team Member: _____

Check all that apply. Observer is:

_____ SCC Member _____ Parent/Family Member _____ Administrator _____ Teacher
 _____ Other School Staff _____ Community Member _____ Other

Instructions

- Use the checklist items to guide your walk-through observations.
- Use the rating scale numbers to score each item.
- Use the comment and notes sections to record your experiences.

Welcoming Place Walk-Through Checklist

Rating Scale: 2 = Yes 1 = Developing 0 = No

If rating is not applicable please explain in the comment section.

| Welcoming Place Walk-Through Checklist | Score | Comment |
|--|-------|---------|
| 1. Signs in the community direct families and visitors to the school. | | |
| 2. Parking areas are assigned and convenient for families and visitors. | | |
| 3. Friendly signs direct families and visitors to the “front door.” | | |
| 4. Signage is in English and in languages that reflect the diversity of the school community. | | |
| 5. Signs use symbols and words to make meanings clear. | | |
| 6. The school has a marquee or sign to welcome its community and announce events that is kept current. | | |
| 7. The school grounds, including play and recreation areas, are inviting and well maintained. | | |
| 8. Student gardening and outdoor education areas are proudly identified. | | |
| 9. The building’s exterior is in good repair, clean, and attractive. | | |
| 10. Student drop off and pick up areas appear safe and are clearly marked. | | |
| 11. Administrators, teachers, and staff greet families at curbside during drop off and pick up times. | | |

| Welcoming Place Walk-Through Checklist | Score | Comment |
|---|-------|---------|
| 12. Signs at all school entrances clearly welcome and guide families and visitors to the main office to sign in. | | |
| 13. Security notices are posted and regulations explained but do not negate the school's welcome messages. | | |
| 14. The school mission statement is displayed and includes families as partners in students' learning. | | |
| 15. Expectations for positive student behavior and social development are displayed. | | |
| 16. The office staff greet family members and visitors promptly with a smile. | | |
| 17. The office staff or resource personnel are available to assist parents who have limited English. | | |
| 18. Directions for the visitor sign-in sheet are in English and other relevant languages. | | |
| 19. The office staff provide families and visitors with a friendly letter of greeting that explains the school visit procedures. | | |
| 20. The office staff "walk" families and visitors through the information letter to explain visit procedures and offer to answer questions. | | |
| 21. All visitors – parents, family members, community members, and volunteers – are given "VIP" badges to wear. | | |
| 22. Comfortable chairs are available for waiting parents and visitors. | | |

| Welcoming Place Walk-Through Checklist | Score | Comment |
|---|-------|---------|
| 23. A suggestion box is prominent and invites ideas for making the school welcoming. | | |
| 24. The office staff answer the telephone promptly, with a friendly greeting. | | |
| 25. The office staff offer to provide a guide to the visitor's destination. | | |
| 26. Signs in the hallways are friendly, clear, and designate key areas such as the administrators' offices, family resource room, auditorium, cafeteria, guidance office, gymnasium, and adult restrooms. | | |
| 27. The hallways are well-lit, clean, and orderly. | | |
| 28. There are signs outside each classroom door designating the room number, grade level or subject department, and teacher and instructional staff names and pictures. | | |
| 29. Student work, accompanied by easy to understand learning standards, is proudly displayed for all grades and subject areas, such as reading, math, science, and social studies. | | |
| 30. School personnel met in the hallways are friendly and offer assistance. | | |
| 31. Students met in the hallways are polite and responsive. | | |
| 32. School personnel model respectful language in their interactions with students. | | |
| 33. School personnel approach visitors without name badges politely and escort them to the office to sign in. | | |

| Welcoming Place Walk-Through Checklist | Score | Comment |
|--|-------|---------|
| <p>Additional Notes:</p> | | |

Next Steps and Priorities from Welcoming Place Walk-Through

To be completed as a group by the School Community Council/School Team

| Welcoming Place Walk-Through Checklist Items | Strength or Needs Attention Circle One | Check if a High Priority |
|--|--|-----------------------------|
| 1. Signs in the community direct families and visitors to the school. | S NA | |
| 2. Parking areas are assigned and convenient for families and visitors. | S NA | |
| 3. Friendly signs direct families and visitors to the “front door.” | S NA | |
| 4. Signage is in English and in languages that reflect the diversity of the school community. | S NA | |
| 5. Signs use symbols and words to make meanings clear. | S NA | |
| 6. The school has a marquee or sign to welcome its community and announce events that is kept current. | S NA | |
| 7. The school grounds, including play and recreation areas, are inviting and well maintained. | S NA | |
| 8. Student gardening and outdoor education areas are proudly identified. | S NA | |
| 9. The building’s exterior is in good repair, clean, and attractive. | S NA | |
| 10. Student drop off and pick up areas appear safe and are clearly marked. | S NA | |
| 11. Administrators, teachers, and staff greet families at curbside during drop off and pick up times. | S NA | |
| 12. Signs at all school entrances clearly welcome and guide families and visitors to the main office to sign in. | S NA | |
| 13. Security notices are posted and regulations explained but do not negate the school’s welcome messages. | S NA | |
| 14. The school mission statement is displayed and includes families as partners in students’ learning. | S NA | |
| 15. Expectations for positive student behavior and social development are displayed. | S NA | |
| 16. The office staff greet family members and visitors promptly with a smile. | S NA | |
| 17. The office staff or resource personnel are available to assist parents who have limited English. | S NA | |
| 18. Directions for the visitor sign-in sheet are in English and other relevant languages. | S NA | |
| 19. The office staff provide families and visitors with a friendly letter of greeting that explains the school visit procedures. | S NA | |

| Welcoming Place Walk-Through Checklist Items | Strength or Needs Attention Circle One | Check if a High Priority |
|---|--|-----------------------------|
| 20. The office staff “walk” families and visitors through the information letter to explain visit procedures and offers to answer questions. | S NA | |
| 21. All visitors – parents, family members, community members, and volunteers, are given “VIP” badges to wear. | S NA | |
| 22. Comfortable chairs are available for waiting parents and visitors. | S NA | |
| 23. A suggestion box is prominent and invites ideas for making the school welcoming. | S NA | |
| 24. The office staff answer the telephone promptly, with a friendly greeting. | S NA | |
| 25. The office staff offer to provide a guide to the visitor’s destination. | S NA | |
| 26. Signs in the hallways are friendly, clear, and designate key areas such as the administrators’ offices, family resource room, auditorium, cafeteria, guidance office, gymnasium, and adult restrooms. | S NA | |
| 27. The hallways are well-lit, clean and orderly. | S NA | |
| 28. There are signs outside each classroom door designating the room number, grade level or subject department, and teacher and instructional staff names and pictures. | S NA | |
| 29. Student work, accompanied by easy to understand learning standards, is proudly displayed for all grades and subject areas, such as reading, math, science, and social studies. | S NA | |
| 30. School personnel met in the hallways are friendly and offer assistance. | S NA | |
| 31. Students met in the hallways are polite and responsive. | S NA | |
| 32. School personnel model respectful language in their interactions with students. | S NA | |
| 33. School personnel approach visitors without name badges politely and escort them to the office to sign in. | S NA | |

Welcoming Place Action Plan Worksheet

After reviewing the Welcoming Place Walk-Through Report and Next Steps and Priorities, develop a 3-month plan to address the areas in need of improvement.

| Welcoming Place Action Plan | | |
|--|--------------------|--|
| | Target Date | Person Responsible for Monitoring Progress and Reporting Back to SCC: |
| Checklist item in need of improvement: | | |
| Task 1: | | |
| Task 2: | | |
| Task 3: | | |
| Checklist item in need of improvement: | | |
| Task 1: | | |
| Task 2: | | |
| Task 3: | | |
| Checklist item in need of improvement: | | |
| Task 1: | | |
| Task 2: | | |
| Task 3: | | |
| Checklist item in need of improvement: | | |
| Task 1: | | |
| Task 2: | | |
| Task 3: | | |
| Checklist item in need of improvement: | | |
| Task 1: | | |
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| Task 3: | | |
| Checklist item in need of improvement: | | |
| Task 1: | | |
| Task 2: | | |
| Task 3: | | |

| Welcoming Place Action Plan | | |
|--|--------------------|--|
| | Target Date | Person Responsible for Monitoring Progress and Reporting Back to SCC: |
| Checklist item in need of improvement: | | |
| Task 1: | | |
| Task 2: | | |
| Task 3: | | |
| Checklist item in need of improvement: | | |
| Task 1: | | |
| Task 2: | | |
| Task 3: | | |
| Checklist item in need of improvement: | | |
| Task 1: | | |
| Task 2: | | |
| Task 3: | | |
| Checklist item in need of improvement: | | |
| Task 1: | | |
| Task 2: | | |
| Task 3: | | |
| Checklist item in need of improvement: | | |
| Task 1: | | |
| Task 2: | | |
| Task 3: | | |

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