

Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through Tool Kit





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Rationale and Background

How welcoming is your school?

Research has shown when schools create a welcoming atmosphere, 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 customer, and we are dependent on the public for our ultimate success.

There is a great deal of research pointing to factors that improve student learning and one of those is family involvement; but why do families get involved? Three reasons: families feel it is their role, they feel they can effect change and/or the school is an inviting place. Which one did families rate the most important? The number one reason people became 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 family involvement. It is not necessary to create new programs or workloads but focus on the customer service aspects of what we are doing.

Four components of a welcoming atmosphere have been identified. By assessing the needs in these critical areas, schools can develop plans to meet the needs of their school communities and improve their environments, thus creating a foundation for increasing family and community engagement.

Physical Environment: What is the physical appearance of your school building and grounds, including entrances, hallways, classrooms, cafeteria, gym, playgrounds, parking lots, etc.?

Practices and Policies: What are the policies and practices in place to provide information, involve families in decision-making, and create a welcoming school?

Personal Interaction: Are schools filled with inviting, friendly interaction among staff, students and visitors?

Written Materials and Communications: How do you communicate with your school communities and how effective are your communication tools?

The Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through is a tool designed to assist the building or district in identifying major components of each area. Working with others that are also invested in the success of the school, buildings can receive input that can be used towards creating a more welcoming environment.



Suggested Workshop for School Staff

Creating a Welcoming Atmosphere

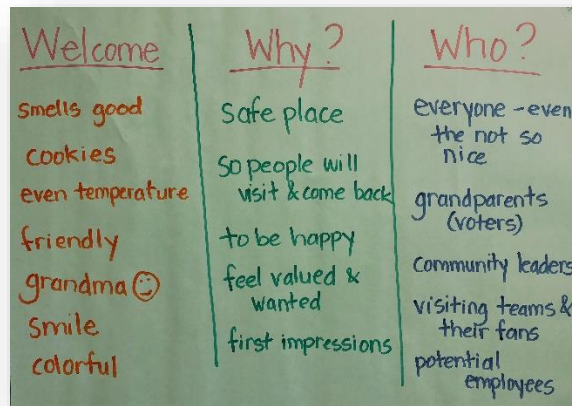
Materials needed:

Flip chart and extra chart paper

Markers

Sample Agenda:

- Break into smaller groups of 5-6 staff members.
- Provide each team a piece of chart paper
- Divide the chart paper into three equal sections.
- Brainstorm:
 - Label the first section of the chart paper “Welcome”.
 - Think about a place where you feel welcome.
 - Come up with adjectives to describe the place.
 - Record the group’s answers on chart paper.
- Brainstorm:
 - Label the second section of the chart paper “Why”.
 - Think about WHY a welcoming environment is important.
 - Record the group’s answers on chart paper.
 - A handout has been provided on page 6 to suggest possible Whys for the group.
- Brainstorm:
 - Label the third section of the chart paper “Who”.
 - Schools are made up of many different communities: new parents, non-English speaking parent, etc. As you think about the welcoming environment in your school, what school communities (stakeholders) should you keep in mind?
 - Record the group’s answers on chart paper.
 - A handout has been provided on page 7 to suggest possible Whos for the group.
- Distribute the handout that describes the four components to be considered in a welcoming atmosphere: **physical environment, practices and policies, personal interaction, and written materials and communications** found on page 8.
 - Assign each group ONE of the four components listed above
 - Label a NEW sheet of chart paper with the title of the component that your group is considering.
 - Brainstorm descriptors of what a welcoming school looks like within the component that the group has been assigned.
 - Record the group’s answers on chart paper.
 - Each small group will share out what it has written as well as insights gained about the component of welcoming atmosphere they were assigned with the large group.
 - Ask for volunteers to form a subcommittee, joining with members of other school stakeholders, to do a Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through and assist in establishing a Family and Community Engagement Team for the building or district.



The Why?

Possible answers for the Why behind creating a welcoming atmosphere to be used in the activity for school staff.

Public (city, village, local) is our middle name.

There are increasing demands for accountability.

Public support for public schools depends on understanding.

What about the 70% of the community population that does not have children in school?

Research shows strong link between parental involvement and student achievement.

Do people feel welcome in our school?

Creating a Welcoming Atmosphere

The Who?

Possible answers for the Who behind creating a welcoming atmosphere to be used in the activity for school staff.

Students

Staff

Bus drivers

Parents

Volunteers

School neighbors

Newcomers

Community Groups

Civic organizations

New staff members

Government officials

Senior citizens

Preschool parents

Parents of students that open enroll

Business people

Individuals with disabilities

Non-English speaker

Components

Physical Environment:

What is the physical appearance of your school building and grounds, including entrances, hallways, cafeteria, gym, playgrounds, parking lots, etc.?

Practices and Policies:

What are the policies and practices in place to provide information, involve parents in decision-making, and create a welcoming school?

Personal Interaction:

Are schools filled with inviting, friendly interaction among staff, students and visitors? Are you greeted as you walk through the building?

Written Materials and Communications:

How do you communicate with your school communities and how effective are your communication tools?

Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through

General Information:

What is the Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through?

- As a team, your selected staff members and school community members will take a tour of your school.
- The team will look at four components of the school that let families and community members know they are welcome there as partners in the school.
- Based on their observations, the team will complete a Welcoming Atmosphere What's Working/Recommendation Form highlighting the welcoming aspects of your school.

What is the purpose of the Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through?

Each school has different goals it hopes to achieve as a result of this walk-through but can include:

- 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.
- Increasing family engagement.
- Gathering information ultimately to set school goals for next year.

What are the components of the Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through?

- The Physical Environment: parking lots, classrooms, lobby, hallways, cafetorium, etc.
- School-wide Practices and Policies: interview with principal/administrative staff
- Personal Interaction: observations in the main office, hallways, and places open to the public; listen and look for inviting, friendly tones.
- Written Materials and Communication: 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 Walk Through?

- Select 12 people (four staff members and eight representatives of your school communities) for your teams. Consider choosing team members who represent the diversity of your families, your staff and your community. For example, you may want to include an administrator, a teacher, a custodian, a secretary, a bus driver, a cafeteria worker, a neighbor, a community leader, a special education parent, a board member, an English as a second language parent, a general education parent, and/or others who represent the various cultures in your school community.

Preparation:

Facilitator and Family and Community Engagement (FCE) Team will do the following:

- 1) Plan and schedule the procedure with a school contact person.
 - a. See Sample Agenda on page 10.
 - b. Plan for approximately 90 minutes for the walk-through.
- 2) Prepare packets for each team member.
- 3) Select the participants for the walk-through.
- 4) Send the names to the principal or superintendent.
- 5) Don't make changes to current practices or 'warn' any staff that the walk-through will be taking place. You want the walk-through to be as authentic as possible.
- 6) Divide the participants into four component teams.
- 7) Facilitate the briefing, walk-through and debriefing.
- 8) Write a summary of the teams' observations, what's working and recommendations.
- 9) Follow-up with the school to discuss next steps.

Building or district is asked to do the following before the walk-through:

- 1) Provide a meeting room large enough for your team members and space for each of the four teams to meet and talk separately. This could be the same room with teams moving to separate corners.
- 2) Provide the name of an administrator who will be interviewed.
- 3) Provide a map of the school.
- 4) Collect samples of all written material sent to parents/families from your school, i.e., a parent/student handbook, two recent newsletters, a student directory, a packet of material for new students and families, etc.
- 5) Provide website address, phone numbers, including message lines, through which families and community members can contact the school. Team members will view and call these resources during the walk-through.



Sample Agenda:

Name of School

Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through

10:00-10:10	Welcome	Principal
10:10-10:25	Introduction	Facilitator of walk-through
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ History✓ Purpose and Objectives✓ Guidelines <p>Form four teams with 2-4 staff members and 2-4 family or community members on each team</p> <p>Team 1: Physical Environment</p> <p>Team 2: Practices and Policies</p> <p>Team 3: Personal Interaction</p> <p>Team 4: Written Material and Communication</p>	
10:25-10:55	Walk-through	Teams
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Each team member should read over their checklist and make notes as they walk-through the school	
10:55-11:10	Individual team discussions and completion of forms	Teams
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ 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	
11:10-11:30	Summary report out from each team	Facilitator and Teams
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Other comments from all team members✓ Next steps	

Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through

Meeting with Your Teams:

- Thank you for being a part of your school's Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through 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 say "Welcome!" to you as you enter the 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 that will attend kindergarten in the 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 here from another area in the state.
 - You know very 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 walkthrough, you will become a member of ONE of four Welcoming Atmosphere Component Teams. These teams will examine the following elements:

The Physical Environment	Practices and Policies
Personal Interaction	Written Materials and Communication
- 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 Checklist and make notes on the following:
 - What is your school doing well?
 - What could we do to make the school more welcoming for families and visitors?
- At the conclusion of the walk-through time period, each Component Team will discuss its observations and complete the *What's Working and Recommendation Form* that has been provided to the team.
- The entire team will then gather to share each Component Team's findings and discuss.
- When all teams have shared their observations, the reports will be collected by the facilitator for compilation and set a time line for improvement goals and implementation plans for next year.

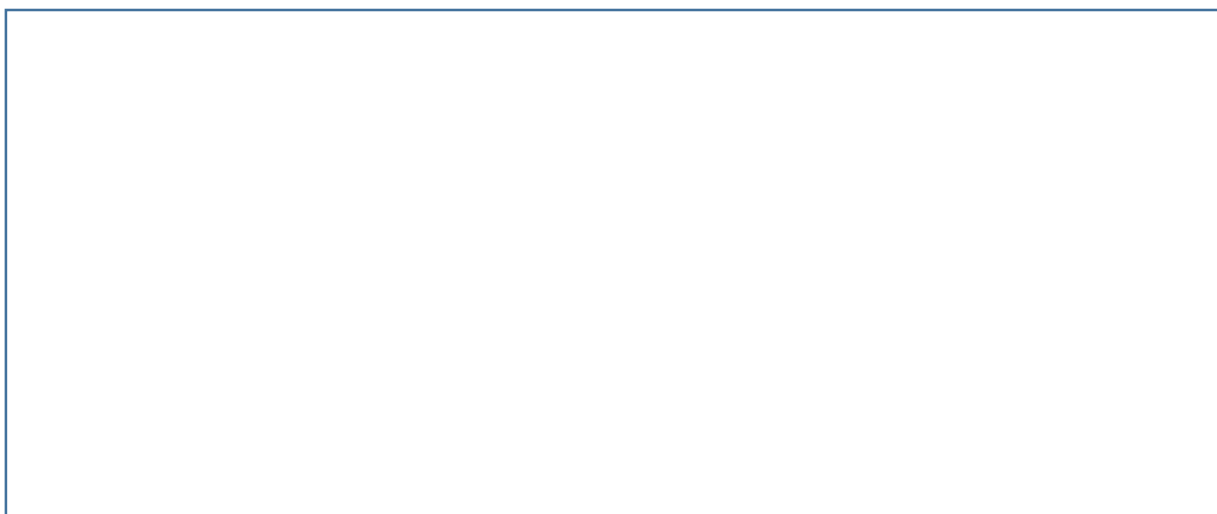
Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through

The Physical Environment

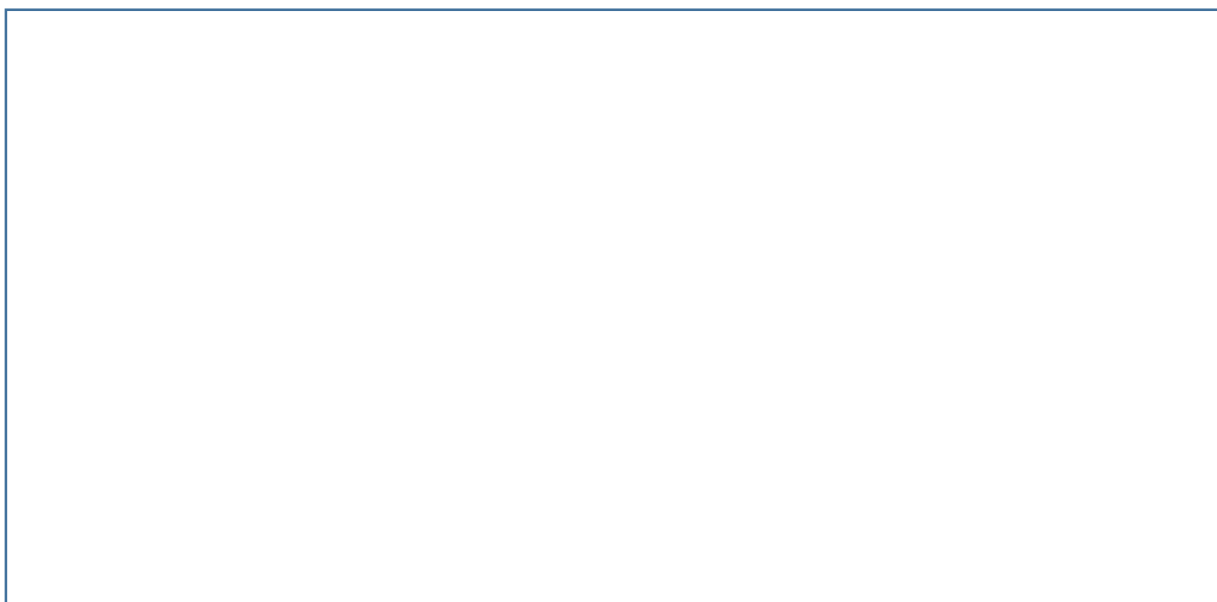
The **physical** appearance of the facility is an essential element in creating a welcoming environment. Your team will tour the school's entrances, offices, hallways, cafeteria, gym, library, clinic, work room, etc., and a sampling of classrooms.

While you and your teammates are touring the building, please consider the items listed on the back of this document. Be sure to make notes so you will be able to discuss your observations.

What's working? What are we doing well?

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin blue border, intended for handwritten notes regarding what is working well in the school's physical environment.

Recommendations: Ideas to make our school more welcoming.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin blue border, intended for handwritten notes regarding recommendations to make the school more welcoming.

Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through

The Physical Environment Checklist

OUTSIDE THE BUILDING

- ☐ Street signage is clear to direct new visitors to the school.
- ☐ Parking lots, landscaped areas, playground areas and sports fields are clean and well-maintained.
- ☐ Handicap parking is available, well-marked and close to an entrance.
- ☐ Sidewalks and curb ramps are maintained, free of cracks and accessible.
- ☐ Visitor and staff parking are marked. Visitor parking is closer to the main entrance than staff parking.
- ☐ There is signage to direct visitors from parking lots to the main entrance.
- ☐ A welcome sign is displayed near the entrance in more than one language.
- ☐
- ☐

ENTRANCE TO THE BUILDING

- ☐ Doors are handicap accessible.
- ☐ Signs giving directions from the main entrance to the office are clearly posted near the main entrance.
- ☐ There is a school directory near the main entrance that highlights frequently requested locations.
- ☐ The school day hours and office hours are clearly noted near the main entrance.
- ☐ There are friendly, clear instructions for all visitors to sign in at the office and obtain a building badge/pass.
- ☐
- ☐

THE MAIN OFFICE

- ☐ When entering the school, visitors can pick up a badge that says "Parent," "Volunteer," or "Visitor," indicating that the school considers them to be equally important.
- ☐ A guest book is kept in the main office for guests to sign in when they come into the school.
- ☐ The office is colorful, organized and welcoming.
- ☐ There is a place where district and school publications are displayed and easily accessible to visitors.
- ☐
- ☐

THE REST OF THE BUILDING

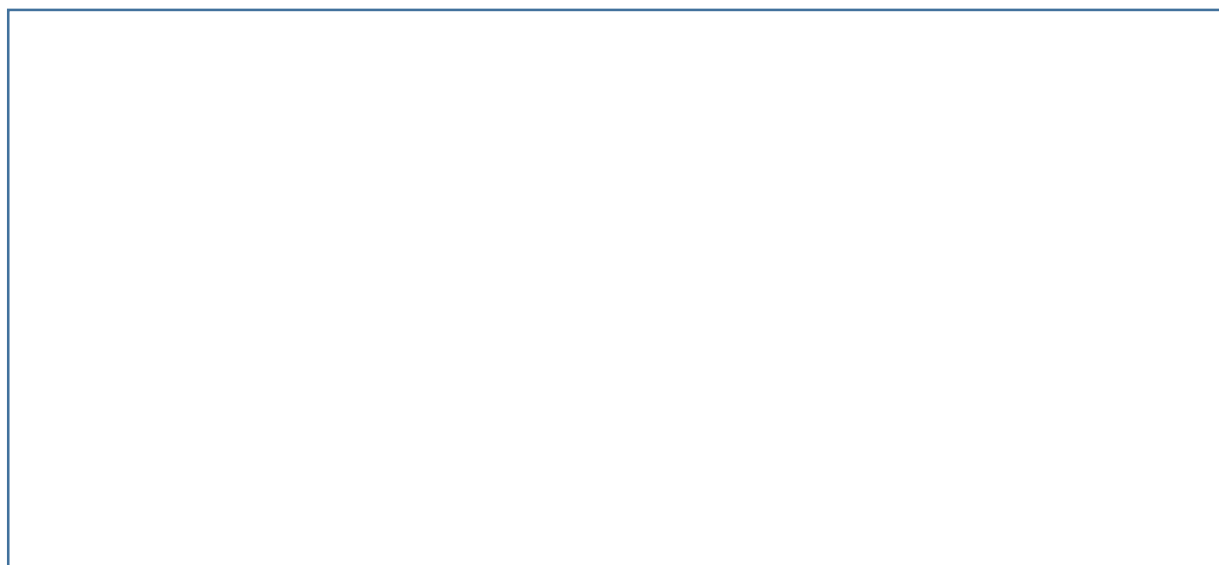
- ☐ Hallways are well lit.
- ☐ Bulletin boards are present that thank volunteers, the PTA, and community members for their contribution.
- ☐ Bulletin boards and displays throughout the building are student-oriented, colorful, and well maintained.
- ☐ Pictures, photographs, bulletin boards, showcases, and displays reflect the faces of the school's children and their families, including cultural, racial, and linguistic diversity and a variety of family structures.
- ☐ Restrooms are clean and orderly.
- ☐ Classroom signs identify the name of the teacher, room number, grade level, and safety procedures.
- ☐ Classrooms have appropriate space, lighting, temperature and organization.
- ☐
- ☐

Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through

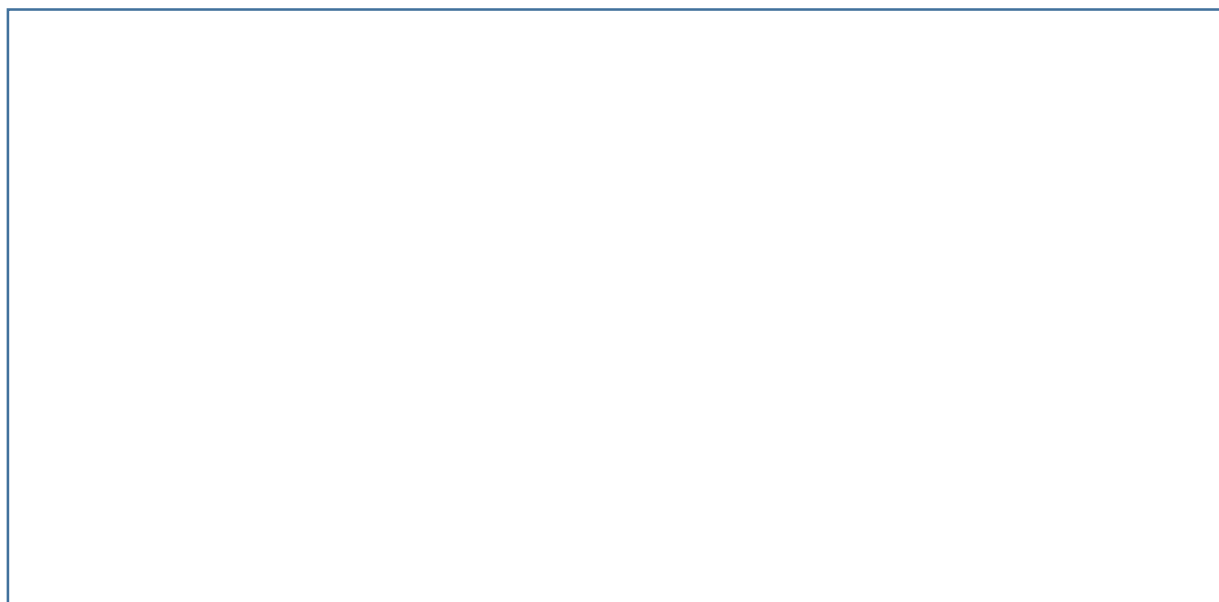
Practices and Policies

School wide practices and policies can enhance or undermine a welcoming atmosphere. Your team will interview the school's principal/chief administrator and ask questions similar to those listed on the back of this document. Please take notes so you will be able to discuss the answers at the conclusion of the interview.

What's working? What are we doing well?

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Recommendations: Ideas to make our school more welcoming.

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Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through

Potential Practices and Policies Interview Questions

MAIN OFFICE

- Are school office hours convenient?
- Does the principal have regular office hours when parents and students can stop in?
- Does the school provide information packets for new families?
- How do visitors sign into the building? What is the procedure?
- Are the school policies and procedures posted in the main office?

SCHOOL POLICIES

- Are school emergency procedures and rules from the student conduct code outlined for families at the beginning of each year?
- Are parent leaders kept informed about important school matters and encouraged to form a parent network to pass the word?
- Are parents and others in the school community invited to use the school for planned events?
- Does the school assist parents in choosing appropriate educational programs for their children? Explain.
- Does the principal involve parents in making decisions? Describe.
- How does the building share community resources to support families?

COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILIES

- Do teachers call each student's family early in the school year to invite them to an event or report something positive?
- Is special attention paid to pronouncing parents' names correctly?

- How often are teachers required to talk to the families of their students?

SPECIAL EDUCATION

- Are IEP meetings held at convenient times of the day?
- How are your safety procedures adapted to meet the needs of your students with special needs?
- What does the district do to meet their obligation of Child Find?

SCHOOL EVENTS

- Are parent-teacher conferences offered at convenient times of the day?
- Do school staff and families have informal occasions when the can get to know each other during the year?
- Is a back to school program provided for your families?
- Are volunteer opportunities available to parents and others in the school community?
- How are volunteers approved for the building?
- How are volunteer opportunities shared with the community?

DIVERSITY

- What alternative communication methods are used with parents speaking limited English in order for them to understand the curriculum and participate in activities?
- Is information about school and classroom policies, school rules, parent-teacher conferences, and bus and lunch schedules available to parents in their languages? How is this information provided?
- Does the school have a resource file of bilingual speakers in the school who can be called upon to translate or become a "buddy family" if needed?

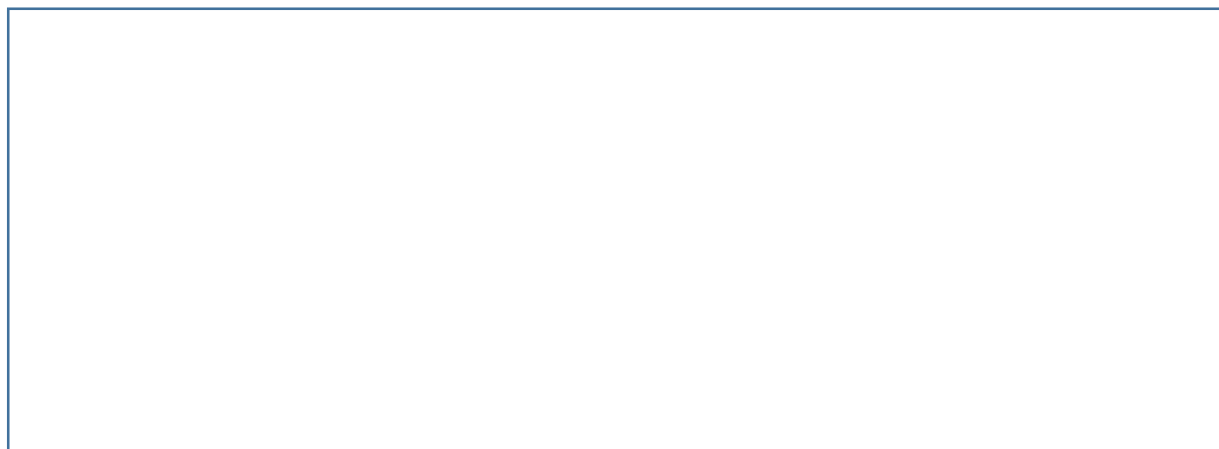
Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through

Personal Interaction

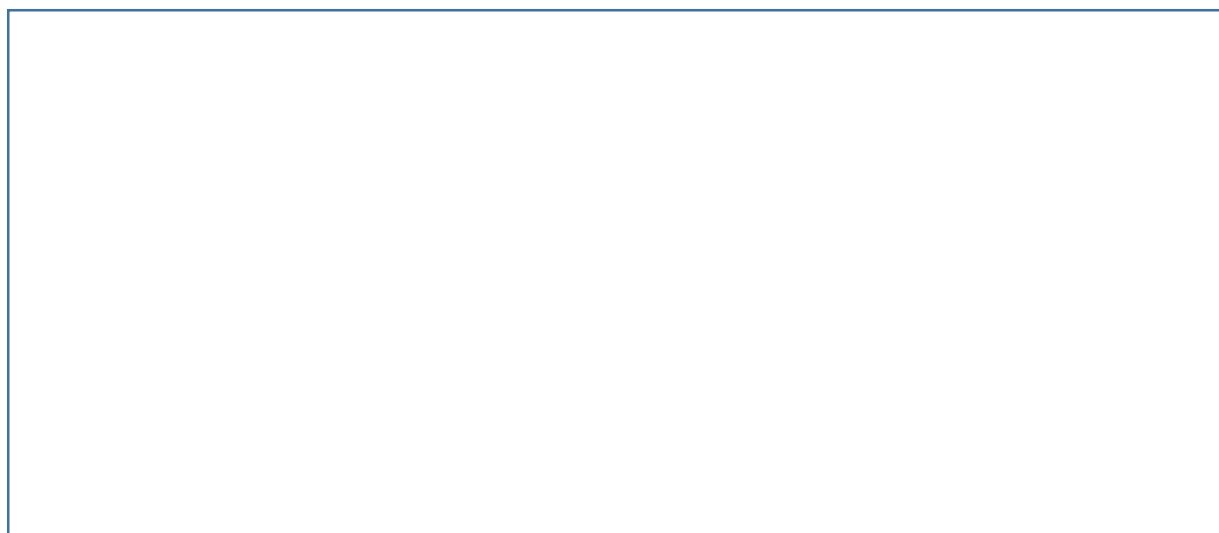
The interaction between school staff members and the public is an essential element of a welcoming atmosphere. Your team will quietly observe the school staff and visitors, watch their behavior, and listen to interactions between staff and adults who call or visit the building. This assessment isn't intended to be an evaluation tool for individual staff members, but rather is intended to evaluate the climate and culture of the building.

While you and your teammates are touring the building, please consider the items listed on the back of this document. Be sure to make notes so you will be able to discuss your observations. You may want to make tally marks to indicate the number of staff members observed and the number of times you observed a particular behavior.

What's working? What are we doing well?

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin blue border, intended for handwritten notes regarding what is working well in the school's welcoming atmosphere.

Recommendations: Ideas to make our school more welcoming.

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Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through

Personal Interaction Checklist

THE MAIN OFFICE

- ☐ The office staff greets visitors quickly with a smile and in a friendly, courteous way.
- ☐ Visitors are treated equally as important.
- ☐ A real, live person answers the phone.
- ☐ People who answer the telephone are consistently doing so in a friendly, professional way.
- ☐ Prompt attention is given to telephone calls and messages, inviting two-way communication.
- ☐ When a person with limited English proficiency calls (perhaps simulated by a phone call from a team member who fluently speaks another language), the staff member answering the phone is very patient and attempts to find someone who can speak his/her language or refers him/her to a phone number or person who can help.
- ☐ When an irate parent calls (perhaps simulated by a phone call from a team member), the staff member answering the phone remains calm, listens attentively and attempts to solve the problem or find someone who can help.
- ☐ There is a suggestion box where parents and other visitors can contribute ideas.
- ☐ Information about students and staff members is handled discreetly by the office staff.
- ☐
- ☐

THE REST OF THE BUILDING

- ☐ Staff members passing in the hall ask visitors if they may be of assistance.
- ☐ When a team member attempts to walk through the hallway without a badge or pass, staff members approach him/her politely and cordially, but firmly invite/escort him/her to the office to sign in.
- ☐ There are parent and community volunteers in the building.
- ☐ Interaction observed between staff members is friendly and positive.
- ☐ Interaction observed between staff members and students is friendly and positive.
- ☐ Staff members greet you by making eye contact, smiling and speaking to you.
- ☐ Custodians, cafeteria staff and resource officers interact with you at the same level as the teachers and administration.
- ☐ Are families and students greeted at pick-up and drop-off times by administrators and/or teachers?
- ☐ Are students welcomed as they enter the classrooms by their teachers?
- ☐
- ☐

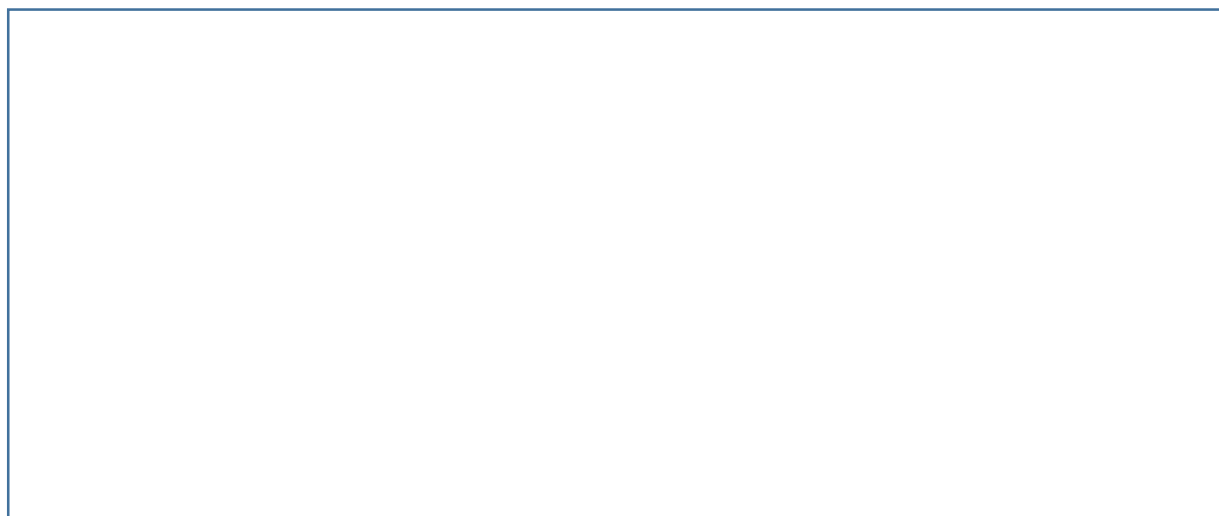
Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through

Written Materials and Communication

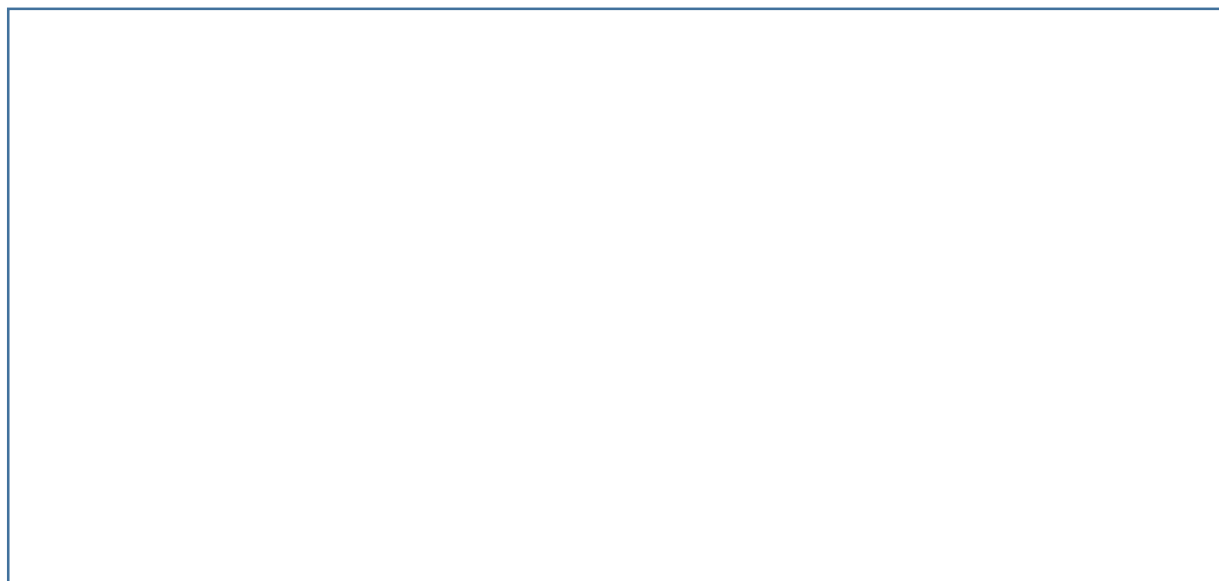
A more welcoming atmosphere is created when the written materials and communications sent from the school are clear, understandable, and meaningful to parents and others reading them.

While you and your teammates review the school's handbooks, newsletters, directories, calendar of school events, web sites, fliers, and other printed materials, consider the items listed on the back of this document. Please take notes so you will be able to discuss the answers with your teammates.

What's working? What are we doing well?

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin blue border, intended for handwritten notes regarding what is working well in the school's written materials and communication.

Recommendations: Ideas to make our school more welcoming.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin blue border, intended for handwritten notes regarding recommendations to make the school more welcoming.

Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through

Written Materials and Communication Checklist

ALL SCHOOL PUBLICATIONS

- A variety of school programs are highlighted, including special education, music programs, general education, English as a Second Language, Head Start, etc.
- There is obvious collaboration with the school's PTA and other parent groups.
- There is obvious collaboration with the community.
- The publications mirror the diversity of the student body and school community.
- Parent and community volunteers are recognized.
- New students and their families are officially welcomed.
- Articles about staff members, volunteers, students, and their families appear in the publications.
- Student work (drawings, photographs, poems, etc.) is highlighted in the publications.
- The school's extra-curricular and educational programs are explained.
- Translated publications are readily available and distributed to families who need them.
- The school makes resources on parenting and becoming involved in their child's education available to families.
- Does the school have a way to communicate regularly with non-custodial parents?
- Families are notified when safety issues arise.
-

PRINTED MATERIAL

- All printed materials are clear and understandable to someone who is new to the school.

- The school provides a regular newsletter with information for parents.
- The printed materials are free of educational jargon; acronyms are explained.
- The printed materials use a font that is easy to read and are neat and clean.
- Communications are clearly written at the sixth to eighth grade reading level.
-

WEBSITE

- The school web site address is communicated and is up to date.
- The website includes the school's address and phone numbers (including area code).
- There is a staff directory that includes email address and phone numbers. Pictures are helpful too!
- Links are checked frequently and dead links are removed or updated.
- The website is ADA compliant.
-

PHONE

- Hotline messages and voicemail messages are up to date.
- Families can get through to the office when they call.
- Phone calls are returned within 24 hours.
- Texting apps are shared with families. Families are shown how to use them and the messages that are sent are clear and concise. (Examples: Class Dojo, Remind, Schoology, Edmodo)

Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through

Compilation of Results

Compile the feedback that came out of the Walk-Through. Highlight the recommendation(s) that the team would like to pursue.

School _____

Component	What's Working	Recommendations
Physical Environment		
Practices and Policies		

Component	What's Working	Recommendations
Personal Interaction		
Written Communication and Materials		

Resources

“Creating a Welcoming Environment- A Quarter One Guide for Schools.” Kentucky Department of Education, 10 June 2013.

“Engaging Families with a Welcoming Climate.” *Family Roles Framework for Building Partnerships Among Schools, Families and Communities*, Ohio Department of Education, 28 Nov. 2017, education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Other-Resources/Family-and-Community-Engagement/Framework-for-Building-Partnerships-Among-Schools/Engaging-Families-with-a-Welcoming-Climate.pdf.aspx.

Hopkins, G. (2005). Does Your School's Atmosphere Shout "Welcome"? Retrieved September 6, 2018, from https://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin424.shtml

Samples, Dr. Joni. *Family Friendly Schools*, 28 Nov. 2017, www.familyfriendlyschools.com/.