

# **WELCOMING ATMOSPHERE WALK-THROUGH Tool Kit**

## **GENERAL INFORMATION**

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

### **What is the Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through?**

- 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 Atmosphere Commendation/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. 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 Walk-Through?**

- The Physical Environment: parking areas, classrooms, lobby, hallways, etc.
- School-wide Practices & Policies: interview with principal/administrative staff.
- 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, if applicable.

### **Who will do the Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through?**

- 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, if possible.

## **WELCOMING ATMOSPHERE WALK-THROUGH PROCEDURE**

### **Facilitator and Action Team will do the following:**

1. Plan and schedule the walk-through with a school contact person.
2. Prepare walk-through 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 walk-through 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 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.
3. Provide the name of the administrator who will be interviewed.
4. Provide a map of the school.
5. 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 materials for new students and families.
6. 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.
7. Provide any information needed to access your web site, if available.
- 8. 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 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 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
- 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 Commendations and Recommendations Form 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.

### **Walk-Through Timeline Proposal**

Depending on the starting time for your school, the following is a time schedule for the activity. It is generally recommended to conduct the walk-through at the start of the school day.

8:30 – 8:35	Welcome – Principal
8:35-8:45	Purpose and Objectives Description and Directions for Walk-Through
8:45 – 8:50	Component Teams meet for Directions
8:50 – 9:15	Walk-Through
9:15 – 9:30	Component Team Discussions Complete Commendation Forms
9:30 – 9:55	Reporting to the Large Group
9:55 – 10:00	Wrap-up and Next Steps

## **Component **A**:           **The Physical Environment****

The physical appearance of the facility is an essential element in creating a welcoming atmosphere. Your Component Team will tour the school's entrances, offices, hallways, cafeteria, gym, library, clinic, work rooms, computer labs, and a sampling of classrooms.

## **Component A: The Physical Environment**

The physical appearance of the facility is an essential element in creating a welcoming atmosphere. Your Component Team will tour the school's entrances, offices, hallways, cafeteria, gym, library, clinic, work room, computer lab, and a sampling of classrooms.

*While you and your teammates are touring the building, please consider the items listed below. Be sure to make notes so you will be able to discuss your observations and complete the Commendations and Recommendations Form with your teammates at the conclusion of your tour.*

There are clear directions from all entrances to the main door.

The hours that the building and office are open are clearly noted on the front door.

Signs giving clear directions to the main office are posted near the front entrance and at other entrances.

A welcome sign is displayed near the entrance in more than one language

There are friendly, clear instructions for all visitors to sign in at the office and obtain a building pass.

A guest book is kept in the main office for guests to sign when they come into the school.

When entering the school, visitors can pick up a badge that says "Parent" or "Volunteer".

Rather than visitor, indicating that the school considers them to be especially important.

There is a school directory near the front entrance

A school map is displayed near the entrance that highlights frequently requested locations.

There is a bulletin board on which parents can post and receive news and announcements.

Other bulletin boards thank volunteers, the PTA, and community members for their contributions.

Pictures, photos, 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.

Bulletin Boards and displays throughout the building are student-oriented, colorful, and well-maintained.

There is a place where visitors can comfortably sit to chat, read available resources, prepare materials for teachers, etc.

## Component **A**: The Physical Environment

**Commendations: What is working**

**Recommendations: How to make your school more welcoming**

	Can be done with few resources	Needs resources	Needs further planning

## Commendations and Recommendations Sample Summary Report

### Component **A**: The Physical Environment

#### Commendations: What is working

- Murals in the cafeteria
- Signs in different languages

#### Recommendations: How to make the school more welcoming

	Can be done with few resources	Needs resources	Needs further planning
Signs – You may want to consider adding directional signs inside all entrances to direct visitors to the main office. (Signs that say, “Visitors please report to the office” not just directions.) You may also wish to place a large sign, with nice landscaping, outside the school directing people to the main door. The current sign above the main entrance is too high to see but could be moved lower. Also, a sign with the school’s name outside the building would assure parents and visitors they are in the right place.	Little needed except landscaping and outside sign	For sign and landscaping	
A welcome banner in different languages would be nice particularly near the main office.	Could be made by art teacher		
Post office hours at the different entrances.	XX		
Place school maps with <u>you are here</u> notations in visible locations through out the school.	XX		
Create a parent bulletin board.	XX		
Create different badges – parent, volunteer, etc.	XX		
Reserve some parking spaces for parents and visitors.	XX		

## Component **B**: School-wide Practices and Policies

School-wide practices and policies can enhance or undermine a welcoming atmosphere. Your Component Team will interview the school's headmaster.

## Component B: School-wide Practices and Policies

School-wide practices and policies can enhance or undermine a welcoming atmosphere. Your Component Team will interview the school's principal/chief administrator.

*You and your teammates will interview the principal and ask the questions listed below. Please take notes so you will be able to discuss his/her answers and complete the Commendations and Recommendations Form with your teammates at the conclusion of the interview.*

Is an orientation program provided for families?

Do you provide information packets for new families?

Do teachers call each student's family early in the school year to report something positive?

Does your school provide informal/social occasions when parents and staff can get to know each other during the school year?

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?

Do you assist parents in choosing appropriate educational programs for their children? Describe.

What resources do you have available for parents to gain access to information about events and curricula?

Voice mailboxes

Homework hotline

Teacher message boxes

Event line

Videos

Other

Is special attention paid to pronouncing parents' names correctly?

Do you have a resource file of bilingual speakers in the school who can be called upon to translate or become a "buddy family" if needed?

Are parent leaders kept informed about important school matters and encouraged to form a parent network to pass the word?

Do you have a way to communicate regularly with non-custodial parents?

Does the community use the school for planned events? How?

Do you invite the community to participate in the school in specific ways? How?

**Component B: School-wide Practices and Policies**

**Commendations: What is working**

**Recommendations: How to make your school more welcoming**

	Can be done with few resources	Needs resources	Needs further planning
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# Commendations and Recommendations Sample Summary Report

## Component **B**: School-wide Practices and Policies

### Commendations: What is working

- Social events for families are well-attended
- Outreach to multicultural families: International Back to School Night and formation of a multicultural committee of parents who outreach to others
- Diverse faculty: available to translate and enrich the curriculum and strong awareness of diversity issues.
- Effective partnerships with several community groups

### Recommendations: How to make the school more welcoming

	Can be done with few resources	Needs resources	Needs further information
Translate welcome packets for school five major languages.	Send to Lang. Office		
Hold monthly orientations for new families, with interpreters as needed.	Could use certified translators		
Invite businesses in the area to contribute to welcome packets for orientations.	XX		
Include parents and community members when planning for improved phone system	XX		
Recruit additional community groups to serve as partners for mentoring.	XX		

## **Component C: Welcoming School Staff**

The attitudes of the staff members, including teachers, aides, office staff, etc. are an essential element in creating a welcoming atmosphere. Your Component Team will quietly observe the school staff, watch their behavior, and listen to their interactions with the adults who call or visit the building.

## Component C: Welcoming School Staff

The attitudes of the staff members are an essential element in creating a welcoming atmosphere. Your Component Team will quietly observe, the school staff, watch their behavior, and listen to their interactions with the adults who call or visit the building.

*While you and your teammates are touring the building please, consider the items listed below. Be sure to take notes so you will be able to discuss your observations and complete the Commendations and Recommendations Form with your teammates at the conclusion of your tour.*

*You may want to use tally marks to indicate the number of staff members observed and the number of times you observed a particular behavior. For example, when six staff members passed a parent in the hall, two asked if s/he could be helped, three did not acknowledge the parent at all, and one looked at the parent and smiled.*

The office staff greets visitors *quickly* with a smile and in a friendly, courteous way. Staff, teachers, and students answer the telephone 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, 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, the staff member answering the phone remains calm, listens attentively and attempts to solve the problem or find someone who can.

There is a suggestion box where parents and other visitors can contribute ideas.

Staff members passing in the hall acknowledge visitors with a smile, a nod or a hello.

When a Component C Team members walks 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.

One Component C Team member asks a staff member this question: "Will you please tell me where to find an adult bathroom I can use?"

## Component **C**: Welcoming School Staff

**Commendations: What is working**

**Recommendations: How to make your school more welcoming**

	Can be done with few resources	Needs resources	Needs further planning

## Commendations and Recommendations Sample Summary Report

### Component **C**: Welcoming School Staff

#### Commendations: What is working

- Some staff members passing visitors in the hall acknowledge them with a nod, smile, or hello.
- Visitors are given clear directions to adult bathrooms.

#### Recommendations: How to make the school more welcoming

	Can be done with few resources	Needs resources	Needs further planning
Office staff could more closely reflect the language and ethnic diversity of the school.	XX		
Consider reducing the size of the counter near the outside entrance to the main office so staff can see and greet visitors as they enter.		XX	
The entire staff is encouraged to acknowledge all visitors with a nod, smile, hello, and “May I help you?”	XX		
Make office staff’s name plaques more visible to visitors.	XX		
Sign-in notebooks can be made more inviting, with clearer directions for signing, a more attractive look, and easy accessibility for signing of visitors, volunteers, and others. Many schools use separate sign-in for visitors, parents and others. Provide sign-in sheets in different languages and use symbols, in addition to words, to make information clearer.	XX		

## Component **D**: Written Materials

A more welcoming atmosphere is created when the printed materials sent home from the school are clear, understandable, and meaningful to parents and others reading them. Your Component Team will review the printed materials distributed by the school.

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A more welcoming atmosphere is created when the printed materials sent home from the school are clear, understandable, and meaningful to parents and others reading them. Your Component Team will review the printed materials distributed by the school.

*While you and your teammates review the school's handbooks, newsletters, directories, calendar of school events, web sites, flyers, and other printed materials, please consider the items listed below. Be sure to take notes so you will be able to discuss your observations and complete the Commendations and Recommendations Form with your teammates at the conclusion of your review.*

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

The printed materials are free of educational jargon.

A variety of school programs are highlighted, including special education, music programs, general education, English as a Second Language, etc.

There is obvious collaboration with the school's PTA and other parent groups.

There is obvious collaboration with the community.

Photographs and articles in the publications mirror the diversity of the student body.

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 is highlighted in the publications.

Acronyms are explained (such as PTA means parent teacher association).

The school's educational and extra-curricular programs are explained.

Translated publications are readily available and distributed to families who have been identified as needing them.

The printed materials use a font that is easy to read and are neat and clean to look at.

## Component **D**: Written Materials

**Commendations: What is working**

**Recommendations: How to make your school more welcoming**

	Can be done with few resources	Needs resources	Needs further planning

## Commendations and Recommendations Sample Summary Report

### Component **D**: Written Materials

#### Commendations: What is working

- School tries to send home materials translated into Spanish and Vietnamese whenever possible.
- The newsletter is welcoming in tone, features the diverse student population, highlights academic achievement, and mentions support available to encourage student success.
- The spirit of volunteerism is evident in the Back to School Picnic, Telephone, Numbers, Teen Center, and Attendance Line flyers.
- The student directory includes student, parent, and community information. The bright green cover is easy to locate!

#### Recommendations: How to make the school more welcoming

	Can be done with few resources	Needs resources	Needs further planning
It might be useful if materials in the first day packet were organized into two categories: "For information only" and "Please sign and return to school." A list of items to be returned clipped to those specific items would be helpful.	XX		
You might want to consider a certain color paper for PTA information to make it easily identifiable. The PTA information is excellent but could be made more inviting with an invitation to join in PTA sponsored activities.	XX		
The parent information in the student handbook might be reorganized for better parent reference. The important telephone numbers would fit on the first page.	XX		
It would be useful to include the telephone numbers of someone who speaks Spanish or Vietnamese to encourage more volunteering.	XX		
There was concern about the timeliness of translations for parents.	XX		

## **Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through History**

The Fairfax (Virginia) County Public Schools' Parenting Education Center (PEC) is part of the school system's Instructional Services Department and its Office of Early Childhood and Family Services. PEC developed the *Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through* process to address schools' desire to increase parent involvement. As PEC staff members listened to the schools' concerns, talked with parents, and analyzed the problem, PEC discovered that adults simply did not find some school welcoming, a place where they could feel values and might want to become involved. Because visitors' first impressions of the school often determine their future interactions, PEC began working with schools to help them become more welcoming. The process that evolved now includes a team of parents, community members, and school personnel who look at the schools from unique perspectives. The team develops a report that commends the school for the initiatives it has implemented and makes suggestions for improvement.

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IRE has adapted, with permission, the *Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through Tool Kit* for use in any school.