

Welcoming Environment

Why?

Welcoming Environment

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.

Public Support for Public Schools

Our middle name is “public” – Jeffco Public Schools. Our schools are in fact public schools. They belong to our customers, and we are dependent on public support for our ultimate success.

Research shows that too often, the public does not believe our schools are open or receptive to them. In his book “Is There a Public for Public Schools?” respected author David Mathews wrote: *“Despite a long tradition of support for public education, Americans today seem to be halfway out the school house doors ... Citizens complain that educators are preoccupied with their own agendas and don’t address public concern about discipline and teaching the basics.”*

Mathews, a strong supporter and friend of public schools, goes even further, warning that the public isn’t just being left out of its schools, for which they pay, it is being pushed out. His beliefs of voter dissatisfaction are reinforced by what we see all around us – the demand for school report cards, tying school funding to test scores, demands for increased accountability, ongoing privatizing and voucher campaigns.

Generally, most school employees believe they are making an effort to constructively involve parents. That’s good, but even if we are successful in involving every parent of every child, which we are not, we would still be reaching fewer than 30 percent of voters. If it takes 50 percent plus one vote to pass a mill levy or defeat a voucher initiative, where will that other 20 percent come from?

The “public” in our name is recognition that anyone can attend our schools, and it also means we are accountable to and dependent upon the good will of that public.

There is a great deal of research to identify factors that improve student learning, and one of those is parent involvement, which includes both direct support at school (aiding, tutoring, assistant, etc.) and indirect support (reading to a child, talking about the value of education, etc.). The research is so compelling that the National PTA and its local affiliate (the Jefferson County Council PTA) have adopted parental involvement as a top priority for their organizations.

Parent and Family Involvement Coordinating Committee

Since the mid 1990’s, the district’s Parent and Family Involvement Coordinating Committee has been studying parent involvement. The committee began its work by developing a tool kit to help parents become involved in their child’s education. **The "Parents as Partners Tool Kit" is available on the Jeffco Public Schools web site, <http://jeffcoweb.jeffco.k12.co.us>.**

"Seeing Your School As Others See It"

The committee's next step was to encourage other constructive ways to involve parents. To start, the committee asked members of the Jeffco PTA Council how well we're involving parents in our schools and what prevents parents from becoming involved in schools. The bottom line response was that people become involved in their schools only when they feel invited and welcome to do so. Volunteers and visitors to our schools feel welcomed; uninvolved individuals do not visit because they do not feel welcomed.

Depending on their own experience with schools, for some members of our community, schools are not welcoming places. As educators, we tend to think schools are comfortable, welcoming places. So, before we can encourage any kind of parent involvement, we need to welcome our school communities into our schools and at the same time reach out into those communities.

Creating welcoming environments in our schools is the number one factor for encouraging parent involvement. It's not necessarily creating new programs and workloads, but rather focusing on the customer service aspects of what we're already doing.

Jeffco Public School is embracing the concept of creating "welcoming environments" in our schools. Borrowing from a successful welcoming environment program implemented by Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia, Jeffco's program outlines four components of a welcoming environment:

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 parents 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 communications tools?

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 parent and community involvement.

The two vital steps to implementing the a Welcoming Environment in a school are included in this document.

Creating a Welcoming Environment

A Quarter One Guide for Schools

Implementation Plan:

- Quarter 1: All schools will meet with school communities to study the components of a welcoming environment.
- Quarter 2, 3: Schools will assess and evaluate the welcoming environment.
- Quarter 4: Schools will write goals and implementation plans around welcoming environment.

Suggested course of action:

- Quarter 1: Create a vision for your school by involving staff and school communities in a structured workshop (described in this packet).
- Quarter 2, 3: Conduct assessment using tools provided by Parent and Family Involvement Coordinating Committee.
- Quarter 4: Set goals and develop implementation plan.

In this packet are tools provided by Parent and Family Involvement Coordinating Committee:

- Suggested format for workshop with staff and community to create vision of welcoming environment
- Rationale for this work in narrative and overhead formats
- Descriptions of the four components of a welcoming environment
- Sample vision statement and advice on how to create a vision statement
- A sample list of school communities
- Sample assessment tool (Walk through)

Creating a Welcoming Environment

The First Step

Suggested activities for Quarter One:

- Take one hour during a staff meeting to conduct a workshop about a vision for welcoming environment. (See suggested workshop outline below.)
- Hold the same workshop with your parent groups and School Based Decision Making (SBDM) and/or accountability committee.
- Ask for volunteers from each group to form a subcommittee.
- Take the ideas from each group and create a common vision statement.
- Test the vision with the original groups and get feedback and buy-in.

Suggested workshop on welcoming environment

Supplies needed:

Flip chart and extra chart paper
Markers
Strategic Plan handout
Optional: Overhead projector

Sample Agenda:

- Handout
and discuss: Distribute copies of the Strategic Plan and review school's responsibilities
- Brainstorm: Think about a place where you feel welcome
 Come up with adjectives to describe the place
 Record on chart paper
- Brainstorm: Why is a welcoming environment important?
 Record on chart paper
 Share (*Use overhead or narrative provided* about rationale for welcoming environment to complement the discussion.)
- Brainstorm: Schools are made up of many different communities: new parents, non-English speaking parents, etc. As you think about the welcoming

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environment in your school, what school communities (stakeholders) should you keep in mind.

Record on chart paper. (*See handout for groups that should be included.*)

Small group work: 1) Distribute the handout (enclosed) that describes the four components to be considered in a welcoming environment: **physical environment; practices and policies; welcoming staff; written materials.**

2) Break into groups of 5-6. Each group should address one of the four components and come up with descriptors of what a welcoming school looks like. Record the group ideas on chart paper.

3) Report small group work: Each small group shares what it has written, as well as insights gained, with the large group.

Create a subcommittee: Ask for volunteers to form a subcommittee, joining with members of the other school communities (stakeholder) to develop a vision statement for a welcoming environment. *See enclosed handout about vision statements.*

Next steps: Describe the process you will follow to develop the vision and bring it back for feedback.

Creating a

Welcoming ***E***nvironment:

Why W.E.?

- Public is our middle name.
- There are increasing demands for accountability.
- Public support for public schools depends on understanding.
- What about the 70 percent who don't have children in school?
- Research shows strong link between parental involvement and student achievement.
- Do people feel welcome in our schools?

Creating a

***W**elcoming **E**nvironment:*

School Communities (Customers)

Students

School staff

Bus drivers

Traveling staff (SERS, specials)

Parents

Volunteers

School Neighbors

Newcomers

Community groups

Civic organizations

New staff members

Government officials

Senior citizens

Preschool parents

Parents of students in feeder schools

Business people

Disabled

Non-English speaker

Creating a

Welcoming ***E***nvironment:

Components

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 parents 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 communications tools?

Creating a

Welcoming Environment:

Vision Statements

Visions provide direction and motivation for change.

The vision statement is:

realistic

credible

easily understood

inspiring, motivating

actionable

Sample Vision on Curriculum

An exemplary school district provides a diverse and balanced curriculum that includes a core that specifies the knowledge and skills that all students are to attain.

In such a school district: Curriculum and instruction are guided by specific, clearly stated, challenging goals for each grade level and course. The scope and sequence of the curriculum are aligned from grade to grade. The academic progress of each student is closely monitored. Instructional strategies recognize individual learning styles.

“Seeing your school as others see it”

Welcoming Environment Walk Through

Step Two

What is the Welcoming Environment 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 parents and community members know they are welcome there as partners in the school.
- Based on their observations, the team will complete a Welcoming Environment Commendation/Recommendation Form highlighting the welcoming aspects of your school.

What is the purpose of the Welcoming Environment Walk Through?

- 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 parent involvement.
- Gathering information ultimately to set school goals for next year.

What are the components of the Welcoming Environment Walk Through?

- **The physical environment:** parking areas, classrooms, lobby, hallways, 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; listening and looking for inviting, friendly tones.
- **Written materials and communications:** newsletters, parent handbook, fliers, and other materials distributed by the school. Web sites and telephone message lines are also included, if applicable.

Who will do the Welcoming Environment 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 parents, 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 PTA 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.

What is the Welcoming Environment Walk Through procedure?

- Select walk-through team members who are representative of your school community. Schools may wish to schedule evening walk throughs for “schoolwide practices and policies” and “written materials and communications” components to accommodate those who cannot meet during the day.

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- 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.
- Provide the name of the administrator(s) who will be interviewed.
- Provide a map of the school.
- Provide samples of all written material sent to school communities from your school, i.e., a parent/student handbook, two recent newsletters, a student directory, and a packet of materials for new students and families, etc.

Welcoming Environment Walk Through

Meeting with Your Teams

- Thank you for being a part of your school’s Welcoming Environment 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 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 the day’s walk-through, you will become a member of *one* of four Welcoming Environment Component Teams. These teams will examine the following elements:
 - The physical environment
 - School-wide practices and policies
 - Personal interaction
 - Written materials and communications
- In order to remember your thoughts during the walk-through process, please put your name at the top of your individual Welcoming Environment Walk-Through Commendations and Recommendations Form and make notes about the following:
 - What is the school doing well?
 - What could the school do to make the school more welcoming for parents and visitors?
- At the conclusion of the walk-through time period, each team will discuss its observations and complete the Commendation and Recommendation Form that has been provided for the team.
- The teams will then gather to share each of their findings.
- When all teams have shared their observations, we’ll create a summary report and set the timeline for outlining improvement goals and implementation plans for next year.

Welcoming Environment 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 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.

- Parking lots, landscaped areas, playground areas and sports fields are clean.
- 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.
- Signs giving clear 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.
- When entering the school, visitors can pick up a badge that says "Parent," "Volunteer," or "Visitor," indicating that the school considers them to be especially important.
- A guest book is kept in the main office for guests to sign when they come into the school.
- Hallways are well lit.
- Bulletin boards thank volunteers, the PTA, and community members for their contributions.
- 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.
- There is a place where district and school publications are displayed and easily accessible to visitors.
- Restrooms are clean and orderly.

Welcoming Environment Walk Through

The Physical Environment

Commendations: What's working.

Recommendations: How to make your school more welcoming.

	Can be done with few resources	Needs resources	Needs further planning

Welcoming Environment Walk Through

School Wide Practices & Policies

School wide practices and policies can enhance or undermine a welcoming atmosphere. Your 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 the answers and complete the Commendations and Recommendations Form with your teammates at the conclusion of the interview.

- Is a back-to-school program provided for families?
- Are school emergency procedures and rules from the student conduct code outlined for families at the beginning of each year?
- Does the school provide information packets for new families?
- Do teachers call each student's family early in the school year to invite them to an event or report something positive?
- Are parent-teacher conferences offered at convenient times of the day?
- Are school office hours convenient?
- Does the principal have regular office hours when parents and students can stop in?
- Do school staff and families have informal occasions when they can get to know each other during the 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?
- Does the school assist parents in choosing appropriate educational programs for their children? Describe.
- Is special attention paid to pronouncing parents' names correctly?
- 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?
- 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 principal involve parents in making decisions? Describe.
- Are volunteer opportunities available to parents and others in the school community?

Welcoming Environment Walk Through

School wide Practices & Policies

Commendations: What's working?

Recommendations: How to make your school more welcoming

	Can be done with few resources	Needs resources	Needs further planning

Welcoming Environment 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 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 6 staff members passed a parent in the hall, 2 asked if s/he could be helped, 3 did not acknowledge the parent at all, and 1 looked at the parent and smiled.

- ❑ The office staff greets visitors quickly with a smile and in a friendly, courteous way.
- ❑ People who answer the telephone are 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.
- ❑ There is a suggestion box where parents and other visitors can contribute ideas.
- ❑ 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.

Welcoming Environment Walk Through

Personal Interaction

Commendations: What's working?

Recommendations: How to make your school more welcoming.

	Can be done with few resources	Needs resources	Needs further planning

Welcoming Environment Walk Through

Written Materials & Communications

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 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 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.
- Does the school have a way to communicate regularly with non-custodial parents?
- 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 educational and extra-curricular programs are explained.
- Translated publications are readily available and distributed to families who need them.
- The school web site address is communicated.
- The school web site is up to date.
- 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.
- Families are notified when safety issues arise.
- The school makes available to families resources on parenting and becoming involved in their child's education.

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- Teachers make an effort to communicate regularly and positively with parents.

Welcoming Environment Walk Through

Written Materials & Communications

Commendations: What’s working?

Recommendations: How to make your school more welcoming.

	Can be done with few resources	Needs resources	Needs further planning

“Seeing Your School As Others See It”



How Welcome Do You Feel in Our School?

Directions: Thank you for taking a few minutes to give us feedback on your experience with our school. Please be honest. Your responses are anonymous and will be used to improve our school.

Circle one for each question:

When I come to this school, signs help me find parking areas and the main office.	Yes	No	Do not know
This school is clean and kept in good repair.	Yes	No	Do not know
School bulletin boards and displays are up-to-date and attractive.	Yes	No	Do not know
I am satisfied with the way the school included me in programs.	Yes	No	Do not know
The school keeps me informed about school rules, classroom policies, and school schedules.	Yes	No	Do not know
The school staff actively encourages parent and community involvement.	Yes	No	Do not know
I feel welcome at this school.	Yes	No	Do not know
When I come to this school, I receive prompt and friendly attention.	Yes	No	Do not know
When I call this school, staff is courteous and helpful on the phone.	Yes	No	Do not know
This school provides useful information for parents and community members.	Yes	No	Do not know
This school does a good job of communicating to limited-English speaking parents/community members.	Yes	No	Do not know
School staff return my phone calls promptly.	Yes	No	Do not know
When I volunteer at this school, I feel appreciated.	Yes	No	Do not know

Who are you? (please check one) Student Parent Community Member

Jeffco Schools Staff Other: _____

Feel free to write any comments or suggestions about our school here:

“Seeing Your School As Others See It”



Building Bright Futures

¿Qué recibimiento le dan en su escuela?

Instrucciones: Gracias por tomarse unos momentos e informarnos que concepto tiene respecto a su escuela. Por favor sea honesto. Sus respuestas son anónimas y serán usadas para el mejoramiento de nuestras escuelas.

Circule una respuesta por cada pregunta:

Cuándo vengo a esta escuela, hay carteles que indican los estacionamientos y la oficina de la dirección escolar.	Sí	No	No se
Esta escuela está limpia y en buen estado.	Sí	No	No se
Las exhibiciones y boletines informativos escolares lucen atractivos y están al corriente.	Sí	No	No se
Me siento satisfecho con la forma que la escuela me incluye en los programas escolares.	Sí	No	No se
La escuela me mantiene informado acerca de las normas, reglamento en el salón de clases y horarios escolares.	Sí	No	No se
El personal docente/escolar incentiva activamente la participación de los padres y la comunidad.	Sí	No	No se
La escuela me brinda un buen recibimiento.	Sí	No	No se
Cuando vengo a esta escuela, recibo una pronta y amable atención.	Sí	No	No se
Cuando llamo por teléfono, el personal es atento y cortés	Sí	No	No se
Esta escuela provee información útil para los padres y miembros de la comunidad.	Sí	No	No se
Esta escuela realiza un buen trabajo comunicándose con los padres y miembros de la comunidad que no hablan inglés.	Sí	No	No se
El personal escolar regresa mis llamadas con prontitud.	Sí	No	No se
Cuando sirvo como voluntario en la escuela, me siento apreciado.	Sí	No	No se

Información provista por (marcar uno) Estudiante Padre Miembro de la comunidad
 Personal de las Escuelas de Jeffco Otro: _____

Siéntase con libertad de escribir aquí cualquier comentario o sugerencia para nuestra escuela :
