



# NCPIE Update

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## **Fairfax County Public Schools: Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through**

**D**uring the June NCPIE meeting a team of presenters led by Karen Willoughby, Coordinator of the Fairfax County Public School's Family Services and Involvement Section (FSIS) gave a presentation on how the county is working to infuse the concept of creating welcoming environments in schools using a program known as a "Welcoming Atmosphere Walk Through: Seeing Your School as Others See It."

The Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through is a process of looking at individual schools as others may see them. It is an opportunity for schools to examine how welcoming and family-friendly they are and allows them to explore strategies that can be developed to make them more inviting to families and the community. The overriding objective of this program is to ultimately increase parent involvement; and to help parents, visitors and members of the community feel more comfortable coming to school. However, this process is one piece of a larger program and mission by FSIS.

### **A Look at the Family Services and Involvement Section**

The Family Services and Involvement Section (FSIS) is part of the Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) Office of Early Childhood and Family Services in the Instructional Services Department. FSIS has a culturally diverse staff with many years of personal and professional expertise in education and parenting. It serves as a catalyst and resource to schools, businesses, and communities to support and involve families in the development and education of their children.

### **The History of the Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through**

The Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through was developed by FSIS to address schools' desire to increase family involvement. As FSIS staff members listened to the concerns of schools, talked

with parents, and analyzed some of the problems surrounding poor parent and family involvement, it discovered that adults simply did not find some schools to be welcoming places where they could feel valued. Because a visitor's first impression of a school often determines their future interactions, FSIS staff began working with school principals, teachers, and community members to help them understand the changes they could make to help their schools become more welcoming. The first walk-through was implemented in the 1997-1998 school year, and the process has evolved significantly. It now includes a team of parents, community members, and school personnel who look at each school in a walk-through from a unique and individual perspective. To date, 66 walk-throughs have taken place and the program has been duplicated in other schools across the country.

### **Components of the Walk-Through**

On the day of the walk-through, a team comprised of parents, community representatives, school staff members, and FSIS personnel gather at the selected site to look at features of the school that help parents and community members know they are welcomed as partners in their students' education. Team demographics usually consist of 16 people: 4 school staff members and 8 parents/community representatives, and 4 facilitators from FSIS. The goal is to have in place a team that represents the diversity of the school's parents, staff, programs, and community. From start to finish each walk-through at an elementary school lasts 1 ½ hours and 2 hours for secondary schools.

Once the walk-through is finished and based on the observations of the team, a Welcoming Atmosphere Commendation/ Recommendation Form is completed. This form highlights the positive and negative welcoming aspects of a school and then offers suggestions for school personnel to review and consider. There are four topic areas or components highlighted during the walk-through. They include:

- Physical Environment
- School-wide practices and policies
- Personal Interaction
- Written Materials and Communications

By assessing 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.

### **Component One: The Physical Environment**

The physical appearance of a school facility is an essential element in creating a welcoming environment. This component seeks to evaluate the physical appearance of a school building and grounds, including entrances, hallways, classrooms, the cafeteria, the gym, playgrounds, parking lots, etc. Walk-through team members are looking for things like:

- Signage to direct visitors from parking lots to the main entrance.
- Welcome signs displayed near the entrance in more than one language, when appropriate.
- Signs giving clear directions from the main entrance to the office are clearly posted near the main entrance.
- A school directory near the main entrance that highlights frequently requested locations.

- The school day hours and office hours clearly noted near the main entrance.
- Friendly, clear instructions for all visitors to sign in at the office and obtain a building badge/pass.
- Bulletin boards that thank volunteers, the PTA, and community members for their contributions.
- Displays throughout the building that are student-oriented, colorful, and well maintained.
- Well lit hallways.
- Pictures, photographs, bulletin boards, showcases, and displays that reflect the faces of the school's children and their families, including cultural, racial, and linguistic diversity and a variety of family structures.
- A place where district and school publications are displayed and easily accessible to visitors.
- Clean and orderly restrooms.

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

Practices and policies in place in school buildings can often enhance or undermine a welcoming atmosphere. The goal of this component is to determine if the policies and practices in place provide information, involve parents in decision-making, and create a welcoming school. To determine whether or not this is the case, team members interview the school's principal/chief administrator, and ask questions similar to the ones listed below:

- Is an orientation program provided for families?
- Do you provide information packets for new families?
- 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?
- 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 by?
- 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 "family buddy" 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?

### **Component Three: Welcoming School Staff**

The interaction between school staff members and the public is an essential element of a welcoming atmosphere. During the evaluation segment of this component walk-through team members 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 of individual staff members, but rather is intended to evaluate the climate and culture of the building. Observations occur in places such as the main office, hallways, and places open to the public. Team members are listening and looking for inviting, friendly tones and things such as:

- 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 escort him/her to the office to sign in.
- There are parent and community volunteers in the building,

### **Component Four: Written Materials**

Schools can achieve a more welcoming atmosphere when the written materials and communications sent from the school are clear, understandable, and meaningful to parents and others reading them. This walk-through component asks the question: How do you communicate with your school's community and how effective are your communications tools? Team members review the school's handbooks, newsletters, directories, parent handbook, a calendar of school events, fliers, school web-sites, telephone messages and other printed materials. Then consider the items listed below:

- 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 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, other parent groups and with the community.
- Photographs and articles in 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 is up to date and its URL address is communicated.
- Hotline messages and voicemail messages are responded to in a timely manner.
- Families can get through to the office when they call and 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.
- Teachers make an effort to communicate regularly and positively with parents.

After all four components are reviewed at the school site a report is issued to the principal. It includes commendations on "what is working" in each component as observed by the team. Additionally, specific recommendations on each of the four components of how schools may become more welcoming are also provided in the report to the principal. The final step in the process involves follow-up by FSIS to discuss ways in which school staff and community members may work together to implement the stated recommendations and firmly establish a welcoming atmosphere.

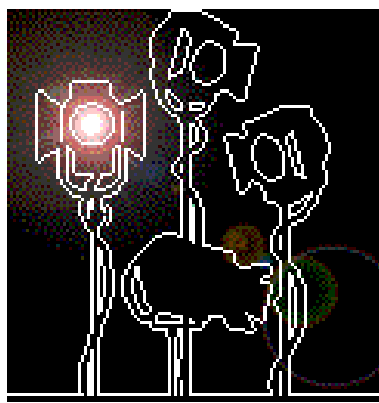
For more information on this program, please visit the Fairfax County Public Schools web-site at [www.fcps.edu/DIS/OECFS/FLI](http://www.fcps.edu/DIS/OECFS/FLI) or contact Karen Willoughby at [Karen.Willoughby@fcps.edu](mailto:Karen.Willoughby@fcps.edu).

(Other Resources: *Welcoming Environment Walk-Through Assessment Tool, Family Services and Involvement Section Web-site, Jeffco Public Schools, Denver Colorado Online Welcoming Environment Walk-Through Tool-Kit* [http://jeffcoweb.jeffco.k12.co.us/home/info/welcoming\\_environment.pdf](http://jeffcoweb.jeffco.k12.co.us/home/info/welcoming_environment.pdf))

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## **Spotlight on A New Wave of Evidence** *Is on Summer Vacation!*



*See you again in August!*

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### **NCPIE's August Meeting**

Our next NCPIE meeting will be **Wednesday, August 31<sup>st</sup>** from 9:00 to 12:00 at NEA, Conference Room B. NEA is located at 1201 16th Street NW, Washington DC. Please join us at 9:00 for coffee and conversation. The meeting will begin at 9:30. This meeting will be an opportunity for members to catch up and share the activities their organization.

### **NCPIE's September Meeting**

September 28<sup>th</sup>: Lacy Wood will present *Readiness: School, Family, and Community Connections*, the fourth and newest research synthesis from the Southwest Educational Development Lab (SEDL) focusing on family and community connections with schools. *Readiness: School, Family, and Community Connections* describes 48 research studies on the contextual factors associated with children's readiness.