

Does Your School's Atmosphere Shout "Welcome"?

Does your school's atmosphere shout "Welcome!" to parents, students, and staff? Ed World's "Principal Files" team shares ways in which they have created welcoming atmospheres in their schools. Most of their ideas are quite easy to duplicate.

All principals want their schools to feel warm and welcoming. That's why they go out of their way to make entryways inviting and front offices efficient. That's why they create brochures, Web sites, and newsletters. That's why they encourage special events and good-news phone calls. Principals do many things to make schools both comfortable and comforting.

But most principals will agree with Deborah Harbin: "Making a school 'welcoming' is *much* more than a list of things we can do. Creating a welcoming atmosphere is more an *attitude* than anything else -- an attitude that starts right at the top."

Harbin, principal at Duryea Elementary School in Houston, began the current school year by suggesting to her school's staff that "there isn't enough nice in this world" and that their school might choose to change that.

One way Harbin and her staff have created a "nice," welcoming atmosphere is to start every day with a handshake. "We shake hands in the morning with everyone who enters the building. When we shake hands, we say things like 'I'm so glad you're here today' or 'Welcome back' or 'Have a great day'. The students love this ritual, which makes everyone feel welcomed to school."

Dr. Layne Hunt agrees that creating a welcoming environment is "more than developing a special place for visitors to gather and talk or placing a 'Welcome' sign on the wall." Hunt is principal at Fair Plains Renaissance Middle School in Benton Harbor, Michigan, where students reflect the rainbow of social, economic, racial, religious, and family-lifestyle diversity of the community. "Our school has the wonderful opportunity and a tremendous responsibility to harmonize those differences into an environment of universal acceptance. *We* are the ones who create the true feeling of being welcomed. A smile, a *Thank you*, or a *May I help you?* coupled with a commitment to serve others reflects the true core values of our school much more than a sign or slogan can."

At Sacred Heart Regional Grammar School in Vineland, New Jersey, principal Patrice Demartino and her staff have worked diligently the past five years to develop a welcoming atmosphere for students, parents, and visitors alike. "We created a shared vision and goals to accomplish that vision," Demartino told Education World. "We have worked consciously to brighten our school -- physically and emotionally."

Among the concrete things that help set a welcoming tone at Sacred Heart are weekly newsletters, a Web site that is regularly updated, an on-line homework notification system, an online grading system that allows teachers to post grades and parents to check grades, and a guaranteed-quick response to parent inquiries.

In order to create a truly welcoming atmosphere, "we even provided in-service training for teachers on the specific topic of speaking to parents," added Demartino.

"Some of our teachers seemed reticent to call the parents, almost intimidated by them, so I wanted to empower them," Demartino explained. The training was tailor-made for the staff. Two speakers were brought in. The sessions allowed for role-playing and included tips for setting boundaries for, and staying on topic during, meetings with parents. With a few new skills under their belts, Sacred Heart's teachers are making the school a more welcoming place than ever.

Curb Enthusiasm

Most mornings, you will find principal Karen Mink standing at the curb in front of O.C. Allen Elementary School in Aurora, Illinois. "My assistant principal and I are outside before and after school every day," she explained. "We open car doors for our students and greet both our students and their parents.

"In addition, all of our teachers greet their students in the hall every morning. We want our kids to feel they are wanted and welcomed."

At Weatherly Elementary School in Huntsville, Alabama, principal Teri Stokes stations herself right inside the front doors. The school's lobby has a welcoming appearance, but the truly welcoming atmosphere extends beyond "the cosmetics," said Stokes.

"I stand in the lobby so I can welcome students and visitors into the building. Our assistant principal stands at the side entrance and does the same thing. We make sure that the parents and students know that we are a safe place where learning takes place, both for students and staff."

"Being visible is part of the job, and being visible and approachable go hand in hand."

--- *Director Jim Pastore*

In Trieste, Italy, Jim Pastore, director of the International School of Trieste, a K-8 school, stations himself out front of the school at least a few days a week. "I have also encouraged my staff to be out front with me," said Pastore.

"Being visible is part of the job, and being visible and approachable go hand in hand," Pastore told Education World. "I'm out there at the end of the school day too. Being outside and talking to parents and students creates a welcoming atmosphere *and* keeps me in tune with what's going on. It's a win-win situation."

First Impressions Matter

The first impression that anyone gets at Oakridge Elementary School in Arlington, Virginia, comes from the welcoming signs on the doors. Small placards say "Hi," "Hello," "Welcome," or "Welcome to Oakridge" in many different languages.

"Our student population represents 68 different countries and 39 languages, so the signs look lovely and give a cheery, welcoming feel," principal Lolli Haws told Education World.

The reverse side of those signs are printed with foreign language expressions that translate to mean "Good-bye," "Thanks for coming," or "See you soon."

Once inside the school's lobby, a small seasonally decorated table provides visitors with easy access to school pamphlets, flyers, newsletters, bumper stickers, PTA information, and more.

"We have a giant screen TV in the lobby too," added Haws. "That TV constantly plays a photo slideshow of our students in action. It also rolls lists of students who had perfect attendance the previous month or who made honor roll, or a list of parents who attended the most recent PTA meeting or school event."

Each month, the TV presentation features a different continent from which students come. "Music from that continent accompanies the slideshow. The combination of music and colorful pictures of kids is very appealing. Visitors often stand there watching for 5 or 10 minutes."

Principal Charlemeine Zemelko tries to create a welcoming atmosphere in the lobby at Chicago International Charter School. A parent information board with all the news is one of the first things parents see, said Zemelko. But the real draw is the coffee shop. "We have a coffee shop for our students and parents. They can enjoy coffee and sweet rolls, oatmeal, yogurt, fruit, and other items when they drop off their teens before heading to work. The coffee shop is a popular convenience for busy parents during the morning rush. Soothing music helps everyone relax before a hectic day begins."

"Our receptionist warmly greets everyone who enters the building. She is our number-one public relations person."

--- *Principal Deborah Harbin*

As Teri Stokes greets students, parents, and other visitors, one cannot help but notice how the physical surroundings at Weatherly Elementary have been carefully arranged to make everyone feel welcome. "Our front courtyard has picnic tables where parents and students can meet to eat lunch. In our lobby, we have two rocking chairs with a small table in between them, two park benches, plants, and a small waterfall area."

"Each month, a different grade level is in charge of putting up student work on the office and lobby windows, and another class is in charge of putting up student work in the lunchroom. We also have three display cases in our lobby. One of them is a Reading Showcase. Pictures of students who have met reading goals are posted there. Students sign up to create a display of their favorite hobby in our Hobby Showcase. The art teacher displays student artwork, with a description of the art concept she is teaching, in the third showcase."

At Estes Park Middle School, parents and visitors get a first impression of the school from its entryway, or "commons" area. "The commons is an inviting area with student work hung everywhere," said principal Tammy Quist. "A bulletin board displays pictures of staff and students. Virtually every wall has student-created work on it. Silk art done by art students is hung from the ceilings. A big sign offers a 'Welcome to Estes Park Middle School!' greeting"

Office Staff: Your School's PR Firm

In Tallahassee, Florida, principal Michelle Gayle says visitors who step onto the campus of Griffin Middle School are always greeted with a friendly hello. Frequently, the front office is where that friendly first impression is made. "Visitors often comment that there is a sprit of warmth and friendliness here," said Gayle. "Office staff, teachers, and aides all take responsibility for making sure guests feel welcomed in the front office. Saying hello, providing useful information, and having a warm smile all make a difference."

While a principal can set a welcoming tone for a school, the person who sits at the front desk is key. "Our receptionist warmly greets everyone who enters the building," said principal Deborah Harbin. "She has to check IDs against our computer system, and she must print nametags for all visitors, but through all that she makes sure visitors feel welcomed and wanted. She has that same warm and welcoming presence on the phone. She is our number-one public relations person."

Harbin recommends that if any principal wants to know how their building "feels" to a visitor or caller, they should send a friend or neighbor into the school, or have them call on the phone. Then gather feedback about how that person was treated.

Tracey Thomas knows that the school secretary plays an integral role in representing her school. "Recently I interviewed for a new secretary," said Thomas, principal at Coldstream Park Elementary/Middle School in Baltimore. "I intentionally had her role-play situations that gave me an idea of how she might handle parents or visitors in the building, including irate individuals. I even had her demonstrate how she would answer the telephone."

"During the interview I made it clear that our secretary is the *first* point of contact when people call or visit our office, and that it is extremely important to me that she be calm, pleasant, and professional at all times."

"Don't let your parent reception area also be the area where students who are in trouble wait to see the principal."

--- *Principal Paul Young*

The front office at Silver Sands Middle School in Port Orange, Florida, is a busy hub of activity. "Between visitors, parents registering students, late- and early-release kids, county office people we always try and be friendly and helpful," said principal Les Potter. "Sometimes it isn't easy, but we do go out of our way because we know that the front office operation is the first -- and sometimes only -- impression that many visitors will have of us."

At Weatherly Elementary, the school motto - "Go the Extra Mile" -- extends to the welcome feeling people get inside the building. Besides principal Teri Stokes' presence each morning, members of the student safety patrol are involved with greeting visitors during the a.m. rush. "They are there in the hallways every morning to help visitors who look lost, and to help younger students as well," said Stokes.

Custodians are Key Players in Welcoming Visitors

For Paul Young, recently retired principal of West Elementary School in Lancaster, Ohio, a welcoming atmosphere starts with the school custodians. Custodians have a responsibility to give the outside of the school "curb appeal." A mowed lawn, flowers, trimmed bushes, and swept sidewalks are among the first things that visitors notice. Signs on the school's marquee welcome parents and provide information.

When parents and visitors reach the school's front door, the welcome signs on the door can make a big impression too, added Young. A sign that says STOP in big letters, or a sign that greets visitors with the words "WARNING! All visitors must first report to the front office" is *not* very welcoming. "Signs at the front door should provide directions to the office, but it is possible to find a way to make the language on those signs welcoming, not offensive," said Young.

"The entryway is the part of a school every parent sees and experiences, so you want them to leave with a great first impression. Don't be afraid to spend some money to spruce up the office or waiting areas. Add soft classical music in the background."

Young had one final piece of advice about creating a welcoming atmosphere: "Don't let your parent reception area also be the area where students who are in trouble wait to see the principal."

Going the Extra Mile for New Parents

Creating a welcoming atmosphere can be *especially* important in schools where the student population is ever changing. Oakridge Elementary School, which is located in the shadow of the Pentagon, is just such a school.

"One of the things we provide at the information table in our lobby is a 'PTA Ambassadors' list," said principal Lolli Haws. "That is a list of parents who are willing to be called by any other parent who has a question. Categories of ambassadors include *New to Oakridge, Too; Have a Child with Special Needs; and Have a Child in the Gifted Program*. We also have lists for parents who live in specific neighborhoods or apartment complexes. Each 'list' has a parent's name, phone number, and email address for easy contact. Parents love the lists."

With many new parents all the time, the Ambassadors List serves a warm welcome and makes calling other parents and neighbors very easy, added Haws.

"Each year, we also hold a PTA reception for new parents on the evening of the third day of school. PTA and school leaders share a variety of information that new parents would want to know. This year we had a standing-room-only turnout. It was a much-appreciated event. We offered babysitting services, refreshments, and we kept the meeting to exactly one hour, just as we had promised."

Since the student population at Oakridge represents so many countries and languages, parents can feel alone or isolated, said Haws. Parents can think they're the only ones here from Jordan or Syria or Finland, she added, but chances are there are other children and families from those countries in other classes.

"To make our school a more welcoming place for parents from other countries, we transformed our big main-entrance bulletin board into a giant bar graph of the entire school population and smaller graphs of each classroom. The graphs illustrate the countries represented and languages spoken in our school and in each classroom. Creating the graphs was a terrific first-day-of-school project for teachers and students to do as they got to know one another. It integrated graphing with Excel and produced great charts and graphs.

"Parents were so interested and excited to find out that there are other children and families from their countries. Wonderful conversations and introductions -- and new friendships -- were formed as parents crowded around the graphs during Open House night to look for others from 'their country'."

"Our hardworking custodial staff makes sure that the school is spotless. We even have students do 'community service' by having them to clean up when they 'mess up'."
- Principal Tracey Thomas

After years as an elementary school principal on Long Island, Larry Anderson started a new position this year as head of the lower school (grades K-6) at Kew Forest School, an independent school in Forest Hills, New York. Each year, Kew Forest welcomes many new students and Anderson has been very impressed with the way the school rolls out the red carpet for those students, their parents, and new staff members too. "Kew Forest prides itself on a most welcoming legacy," said Anderson, explaining that 36 new students enrolled at the school this year. The resources used to welcome new students and families include

- the school's [Web site](#), which devotes considerable space to information about the school and the curriculum.
- a "library" of helpful resources and materials about the school, including handbooks.
- procedural flyers, summer reading lists, lists of extracurricular activities
- a special half-day welcoming session the day before the term begins.
- assignment of a "veteran" buddy to guide to each new student as he or she settles into classes and school routines.
- an invitation to join after-school and mini course programs for fun, recreation, and socialization opportunities.
- a field day program that provides a special bonding experience for the children and their teachers.

"Kew Forest is a school that thrives on diversity and social interaction among all its students, families, and staff," added Anderson. "Veterans go out of their way, individually and collectively, to make sure the newest 'KF Jaguars' feel that this school is truly a home away from home."

Many other principals go out of their way to answer questions and guide visitors and new families around their schools. At Estes Park Middle School, principal Tammy Quist often takes new visitors on a guided building tour. "If I am able to do it, I will drop everything to greet our guests and assist them," said Quist. "I am always willing to make an extra effort to ensure that visitors leave with nothing but positive things to say about our school."

In addition to personal guided tours with an administrator, visitors to Sacred Heart Grammar School are given packets of information along with a promotional CD and a pen and calendar with our school name on it. It's all part of making visitors feel welcomed, said principal Patrice Demartino.

Connecting With Every Parent

When you think of "customer service," you probably think first of retail stores and home-service companies. But principals who view their own jobs and the jobs of the office staff and teachers as customer-service jobs say that the benefits of that perspective help parents feel welcomed and a part of their schools.

"As principal, I try to delicately stress to my school's staff that we are truly public servants," said Teri Stokes. "We are here to serve the students by being great educators, but we are also here to serve parents by being approachable, concerned educators at all times.

"The only reason we are here is because of the students. Without *them*, there would be no school."

Stokes also goes out of her way to make Weatherly Elementary an inviting place for the staff. "If our staff enjoys coming to work, they will provide a more inviting environment for the students and parents."

Weatherly's calendar of school-wide events includes several "family night" activities each year in addition to

regular PTA meetings. Those PTA meetings often feature student performances of some kind. Having students perform is one way to ensure that we will get parents out for the meetings, said Stokes.

At O.C. Allen Elementary School, principal Karen Mink has gone out of the way to include the bilingual parents in her school's community. "We have created a bilingual PTO this year specifically to help our non-English speaking population feel welcomed as vital members of our school community," Mink told Education World.

"We also have a parent liaison who has a desk by the front door so she can be the first greeter of visitors when they come into our school in the morning," added Mink. "Our parent liaison is paid for with Title III TBE funds. She is there to serve as a connection between the non-English speaking parents and our school. She welcomes parents into the building, makes phone calls, translates, drives parents to unemployment, offers parent training and ESL classes. Because of the nature of her work, some of her work hours may be in the evening or on weekends."

Gina Bettelyoun presides over a unique school with a unique population. "Our school is located in the heart of Lakota country," said Bettelyoun, principal at Crazy Horse Elementary School in Wanblee, South Dakota. "At the beginning of the year we invite all parents to a back-to-school parent night dinner. Our entire staff stays to get acquainted and share a meal with parents. Our superintendent and I discuss our goals for the new school year. In addition, we invite the Lakota elders to lead a traditional prayer ceremony and to give words of wisdom for the staff and parents."

That dinner is just one way in which Bettelyoun and the staff of Crazy Horse Elementary try to involve, and reflect the values of, the community they serve.

A Little "Showbiz" Never Hurt

Like the well-worn elementary school activity, many education practices simply "show and tell" our customers, the public, what we think they should know. The communication process often lacks any significant human interaction or emotional connection. Instead, the "business" of education could be dramatically improved by integrating a "show business" approach into much of what we do.

What Scott McLain suggests to business leaders in his book *All Business Is Show Business* is also applicable for educational leaders. Most educators think their work is focused on teaching, learning, or providing some related support service. But what we must realize is that the real "business" of education is that of creating relationships and emotional connections with people -- students, staff, parents, and the diverse members of the community.

Let's learn what many already know. Let's get past our traditional "show and tell" attitudes and determine that the business of education, in every aspect and level, will be dramatically improved when we are all "on stage" and create experiences and service that will "wow" the public.

Phone calls are also excellent tools for making parents feel comfortable and welcomed, added Bettelyoun. "On a daily basis, several of our teachers make random phone calls to their students' parents to engage in positive conversation about their children. Every day, I personally call the homes of all of students who are absent to speak with their families in a positive way."

At Griffin Middle School, "we have a goal to get every parent into our school at least once a semester," principal Michelle Gayle told Education World. "Sometimes that means we might have to do a home visit first. We find that if we reach out first with some new parents, then they are more likely to come in later on their own. By reaching out, parents get to see that we are real people who care about their kids and care about them as parents of our students."

Reaching out in that way goes a long way and means so much to some of our families who might hesitate to come into school for a wide variety of reasons, added Gayle.

At West Elementary School, the school's social worker often makes home visits. While there, she listens and looks for issues that might lead to discomfort or dissatisfaction. "The social worker is a great conflict manager," said Paul Young.

"Our teachers often send positive notes to students *and* parents to recognize all of them for their good work or accomplishments. Those notes can help us gain positive points that will be rewarded many times over."

At Coldstream Park Elementary/Middle School, every monthly newsletter includes an invitation to parents to visit their children's classes. School principal Tracey Thomas told Education World that the school tries to involve parents in many other ways. For example, "our school-wide discipline management program involves students being able to 'purchase' items from a school store that's rolled around to their classes on a weekly basis," Thomas said. "Parents have really stepped up. They have taken charge of the store. They've even sent letters to local businesses asking for donations. The letter also invites business owners to visit the school to see the store in action."

In order to encourage more parent involvement, "we have also created a 'Wall of Fame' that highlights parents or guardians who have volunteered or done something special for our school," added Thomas.

The Hub of the Community

At Estes Park Middle School, Tammy Quist and her staff aim to create a feeling of family within the school. Of course, they don't just wait for parents and community members to come in voluntarily. "We call and invite them in," Quist told Education World. "The mayor recently paid us a visit after being invited to read a passage to students during Citizenship Week. As we have more and more parents and volunteers come into our school, the atmosphere becomes more welcoming. All of us, from teachers and secretaries to students and custodians, maintain a service-oriented frame of mind as we ask our guests and each other, 'How can I help you today?'"

That philosophy has helped the school become a true hub of the community, said Quist. "It's a great place to be!"

At O.C. Allen School, principal Karen Mink has a similar vision. "In order to welcome our entire community into our school, we have formed a Community Advisory Council," Mink told Education World. "That Advisory Council -- which includes teachers and parents as well as local businesspeople and church organizations -- looks at the problems in our school and our community and tries to find ways to solve them."

Allen Elementary's council has organized coat drives, mitten trees, and holiday gift giveaways for needy families in the community. In addition, the school has hosted a variety of community activities, including a mayoral debate. And neighborhood churches have sponsored tutoring for the school's students. This fall, the school's staff will host a Thanksgiving dinner for needy families of the community.

Events such as those bring the community into the school, said Mink. "We want our school to be the heart of the community, the way schools were in the 'old days.' We are working hard to achieve that."

"Thank You" to This Article's Principal Contributors

(Titles current at time of publication.)

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