

# A Virtual Reality Tour of a Family-Friendly Partnership School

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Ohio Department of Education  
Columbus, Ohio

“This is just what we needed,” said Ohio Superintendent of Education Susan Tave Zelman, when she saw the CD-ROM and companion web site that take viewers on a virtual tour of a family-friendly partnership school. “It begins in the parking lot and leads viewers on a narrated tour of the building, including the office, classroom, cafeteria, gymnasium, library, and Parent Resource Center. Along the way, viewers see innovative examples of how schools can be more friendly and functional for students and families, as well as for the entire community,” the tour materials explain. The Virtual Tour CD’s web site is located at:  
[www.familyfriendlypartnershipschool.org](http://www.familyfriendlypartnershipschool.org).

The tour includes many architectural and school improvement ideas, such as clear and obvious signs, maps, and directions around the building and campus, a welcoming entrance, and a bright cafeteria. The purpose is to suggest activities and enhancements that will make all schools family friendly, so that families will feel more comfortable partnering with their children’s school.

The Ohio Department of Education’s Office for Federal Programs and Parent Involvement decided that schools and districts needed new ideas on how to engage families more effectively. State, district, and national leaders contributed ideas through e-mail, focus groups, and personal contact. Districts asked their Action Teams for Partnerships (ATPs) for contributions and the ATP at the Department of Education also worked on

the project. Some of the ideas from the tour include:

For the school office: “The school office has no counter between the family and the office staff. Removing this barrier encourages communication and is less intimidating to the customer.” Or “In-service training for all staff is available on how to respond to the family in person and on the telephone.”

For the classrooms: “Adult-size chairs are available when meeting with adults.” And, “There is a parent information bulletin board by the door inside the room that contains a monthly parent-volunteer sign-up sheet for special occasions, class projects, field trips, and celebrations.”

The Department of Education first distributed the Virtual Tour CD at a statewide conference and, thereafter, at meetings and conferences. School and district decision makers are encouraged to view the tour and then discuss it. They can take the tour all at once or stop along the way to look at links and related resources that accompany each stop. The CD will not be updated in the near future, but the accompanying web site will. As schools try new ideas to engage parents, they can contribute the successful strategies, via a feedback form, and the strategies will be added to the site.

Ohio’s Office of Federal Programs paid the \$25,000 cost, which included duplicating and mailing copies of the CD and maintaining the web site. Attempts to secure outside funding were unsuccessful; however, a graphic arts company consulted on the project.

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The Virtual Tour CD and Web Site will be evaluated through feedback from its customers. Like the state superintendent, the associate director of the Office of Federal Programs, Stephanie Gerber, gushes in her praise of the project: "All your hard work will benefit the children and families served not only in Ohio but across the nation. I respect and admire your efforts to complete this project that will touch many lives!"

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