

Family-Friendly Walk-Through

*Rhode Island Parent Information and Resource Center
Pawtucket, Rhode Island*

How friendly is your school? Do parents feel welcome? Can visitors find their way to the office? The restrooms? Are letters to families concise and well written? Is the school's website up to date and easy to access?

These are the kinds of questions answered by the Family-Friendly Walk-Through, a service of the Rhode Island Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC) in Pawtucket. PIRC conducted its first walk-through last winter at Carey Elementary School in Newport.

The walk-through assesses four components of school friendliness: the physical building, staff demeanor, written materials, and school-wide policies and practices, such as "How do you communicate with families who speak languages other than English?" and "What is the system of communication between parents and teachers?"

This service of PIRC gives schools a clearer picture of what they do well to make families and other visitors feel welcome and where they need improvement. With a welcoming atmosphere, schools make families more comfortable and let them know they are important partners in their children's education.

PIRC staff decided to create this service after hearing from parents and seeing stumbling blocks at many schools: websites that were not up-to-date, long and difficult-to-understand letters, and information for parents buried in student handbooks.

A four-person team from PIRC visited Carey Elementary on an assigned day. Before the official team arrived at the school, one

member went unannounced and asked to use a restroom. Her treatment was compared to how the rest of the team was greeted when they announced themselves a little later. Throughout the day, the team members gauged the school's friendliness by using checklists prepared in advance. The team also reviewed the friendliness of the staff throughout its visit, noticing if the staff greeted visitors and offered them help, if they answered the phone promptly, and if they remained patient and professional.

The team examined the school's website and printed materials to see if they were free of jargon, available in languages other than English, and full of information parents look for, such as school calendars and teacher contact information.

The fourth component, schoolwide policies, was assessed in an interview with the principal. Questions included: Is attention paid to pronouncing parents' names correctly? Does the community use the school for community events? Do you provide information packets for new families?

In its report, the team commended the good things the school was already doing. Then, it made suggestions in three categories: (1) can be done with few resources, (2) needs resources, and (3) needs additional planning. When the team delivered the report, it included a banner reading "Welcome Families" in both English and Spanish. Less than a week later, the school had the banner hanging along a fence in full view of passersby—fulfilling one of the report's recommendations.

PIRC is hoping to conduct more walk-throughs this year. It is also developing a customer service workshop specifically for front office staffs. When schools are inviting to families, they are more likely to get involved, said the project coordinator. “When the parents are more engaged and student achievement is raised, everyone wins.”

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