

Annual Neighborhood Bus Tour

*Hermitage Elementary School
Virginia Beach, Virginia*

To reduce the first-day-of-school jitters, Hermitage Elementary instituted an Annual Neighborhood Bus Tour as part of its back-to-school kick-off week.

During the week before school opened, teachers and staff boarded a school bus that made three stops in the neighborhoods where the school's students live. Wearing Heritage T-shirts with the year's theme, "Coming Together for Learning," teachers and staff visited with the students and their parents for about 20 minutes at each stop. They passed out school supplies, tickets for a raffle and tips for a successful school year. This gave students a chance to meet their new teacher and to reconnect with their former teachers. At the end of the visit, the principal drew the winning ticket for a book bag stuffed with school supplies.

The Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) endorsed the bus tour as a way to bring the excitement of back-to-school week to students and parents. Passing out materials also helped give parents a break on school supply expenses. The ATP also thought that the tour, started during the school's first year as a member of NNPS, would give teachers additional insight into their students' home environments.

This is Hermitage Elementary's first year as a Title I school, with 40 percent of its students receiving free or reduced-price lunches. The school serves a large number of students from the nearby naval base.

Along with a mailing about students' room and teacher assignments, the school sent each family a flier with information on the three bus stops and the time the bus would arrive at each stop. Also, the schedule was posted on the school website. This year, the bus tour was videotaped by VBTV and shown on the Virginia Beach station. About 100 students and 50 parents met the bus.

The ATP arranged for the bus and worked closely with the PTA and secretaries to get school supplies ordered in time. With many school supplies donated, the event cost less than \$80. Costs were covered by the Student Activity Fund.

Students, parents, teachers and community members all benefited from the practice. Because the students were able to meet their new teachers on the youngsters' "turf," they were more comfortable with their teachers by the first day of school. Teachers were able to greet many students by name when they arrived, making the classroom friendlier and helping everyone to get the year off to a good start. Parents and community members also benefited because they were able to see the school staff out and about and interact with them.

"I thought it was a wonderful way to get out to the places where our students live and see their home environments for ourselves," said one third-grade teacher. "It was great for public relations too. The students and parents loved it!"

The school uses its yearly survey and comments collected during the tour to evaluate the activity. One parent expressed her enthusiasm: "We love the bus tour. The kids in our neighborhood are thrilled to see all the teachers pile out of the school bus to say hello! The enthusiasm the teachers show during the tour is extremely contagious. The bus tour is an eagerly anticipated event in our community."

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