

Welcoming Atmosphere Walk Through

*Middletown Public Schools
Middletown, Connecticut*

Research shows that students are more successful in school when parents and the community are involved. It also shows that parents are more likely to visit and volunteer in schools they find attractive and welcoming.

To ensure that it measures up, the Middletown Public Schools District adopted the “Welcoming Atmosphere Walk Through,” developed by the Fairfax (Va.) County Public Schools’ Parenting Education Center. It was introduced to the Middletown district by the state’s School Family Community Partners (SFCP) team. What makes the walk-through helpful is that it provides the school with an objective tool for assessing school climate, collecting perceptions, and making recommendations to bring positive change.

By the end of this school year, five schools were scheduled to complete the process, involving more than 2,000 students, 3,000 parents and caregivers and 300 teachers. The superintendent has asked all 11 schools in the district to conduct a walk-through.

A team of parents, staff and community members evaluates the physical environment, school-wide practices and policies, written materials and how welcoming it finds the school staff. The team then makes recommendations to the school’s Action Team for Partnerships (ATP), which develops an action plan for implementing the six types of family and community involvement. In addition, the practice also helps the school meet the family involvement requirements of No Child Left Behind by directly involving parents in evaluating and changing communications, procedures and policy.

Each school invites parents, staff, students (in high schools only) and community members to participate. The District Facilitator for Partnerships, the ATP and the principal

put together a representative team to complete the walk-through and make recommendations.

A typical walk-through takes about two hours. It includes a welcome from the principal, a statement of purposes and objectives and description and directions from the district facilitator. The participants are then divided into four smaller teams, which spend about one half hour to:

- * Walk through the school with the checklist to evaluate the physical environment.
- * Walk through the school with the checklist to evaluate the welcoming staff.
- * Review the written materials (gathered by principal in advance) and web site.
- * Interview the principal on practices and procedures.

Examples of checklist statements and questions include:

- A school map is displayed near the entrance that highlights frequently requested locations.
- When an irate parent calls, the staff member answering the phone remains calm, listens attentively and attempts to solve the problem or find someone who can.
- Is information about school and classroom policies, school rules, parent-teacher conferences and bus and lunch schedules available to parents in their languages?

Following the walk-through, the four small teams summarize their findings, reconvene and suggest next steps. The district facilitator then takes all reports and prepares a list of recommendations, which also includes a commendation section for what is presently working well.

Students benefit directly from the implementation of the recommendations. For example, one Middletown middle school started a chapter of the National Honor Society to recognize students’ academic success. It set up

additional displays of student work and established awards. The staff also rewrote discipline letters that are sent to families so that they were clearer and more appropriate. One school bought the software for an auto-dialer so it could better inform students and parents about major events. Another school used its auto-dialer more frequently and added messages in Spanish.

Gathering a representative team proved a challenge for some schools. In addition, some teachers and staff members thought the evaluation could be punishing or detrimental to the school. Inviting teachers and all staff to participate was one way to overcome this perception.

In the end, the walk-through was considered a positive activity. It not only offers a concrete strategy for improving the school, but also empowers everyone involved to participate and take pride in those improvements.

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