

Whistle Stop Tour

*Maple Elementary School
Cambridge, Maryland*

Think summer fun and the first day of school don't go together? Students and teachers at Maple Elementary School disagree. On a steamy late-summer day, 26 teachers boarded a bus armed with freeze pops, determined to bring information and some cool relief to students and their families.

Administrators from Maple Elementary came up with the Whistle Stop Tour three years ago to help the school's teachers and staff get to know their students' families. Cambridge is a rural community with a high poverty rate. All students ride the bus to school and many of their families are unable to afford the bus fare to get to open house nights or to teacher conferences. Teachers and staff wanted to find a way to welcome new families, keep other parents and guardians involved, and ease the first-day jitters for students.

Over the summer, the school's principal and her secretary chose the most strategic locations along the school's bus routes for the tour. They developed a schedule, publicized times, and sent out notices asking for volunteers to help with the event.

On their first day back from summer vacation, 26 teachers stayed 2½ hours later than they normally would to hop on the bus and meet students and families. Nearly 100 parents and students met the bus at the various stops. Many cheered as teachers arrived and handed out the freeze pops. Even some of the "most challenging students came for a hug, a warm greeting, and an ice pop," said one teacher.

At one stop, eager fifth-graders greeted teachers with snacks that they had prepared. Parents were able to ask teachers questions about their children's transition or return to Maple Elementary. Meanwhile, teacher's friendly smiles and freeze pops put new students at ease.

Each stop lasted only about 15 minutes—long enough in the summer heat.

After the tour, teachers gathered for dinner to celebrate the tour's success.

The school advertised the tour with letters sent to students' home and by posting waterproof signs in the neighborhoods about a week before the tour. Thanks to the county, which donated the bus services, expenses were low—\$20 covered the freeze pops and the materials used to advertise the tour. The school used parent involvement funds from a Title I grant to pay for all of the materials.

Students, staff, and parents agreed that the event was a great success. "We know you really care about our kids because you came to us. You understand that we can't always come to you. Thank you so much," a grandparent said.

The school plans to repeat the Whistle Stop Tour next year, hoping to expand the number of stops to more neighborhoods. The staff is also considering doing a winter tour, handing out hot cocoa and candy canes along with warm greetings.

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