

# First Impression Training

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*Virginia Beach City Public Schools  
Virginia Beach, Virginia*

A refresher course on social graces helped employees of Virginia Beach City Public Schools reach out to parents who felt unwelcome in their schools. The district's First Impression Training gave more than 500 district employees gentle reminders about telephone and e-mail etiquette, as well as tips for working with unhappy or distressed parents who have concerns about their children.

A recent study by the school district's Department of Media and Communication indicated that some parents did not perceive their schools as welcoming places. These parents also indicated that they were less likely to be involved in school events and activities because of this perception. District officials decided to do all they could to change that perception by helping educators and staff brush up on good customer service skills.

In particular, they wanted to assist "first responders," such as office assistants, security personnel, and others who have initial contact with parents and other visitors to the schools. The district publicized the training sessions in its staff and parent newsletters, and in the Principal's Packet. The local newspaper also covered the sessions.

More than 500 teachers, staff, and school administrators attended the four-hour program last summer. The Director of Community Relations opened the session with a presentation on the school system's goal of positive community collaboration. She discussed a model for motivating people—Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs—explaining how basic economic, physiological, and psychological situations in parents' lives can affect relationships. She also discussed reasons for parents' disengagement from their children's schools, such as a disconnected phone conversation with a school secretary or a confrontational encounter with a teacher.

After a break, the leader focused on techniques of effective customer service, includ-

ing phone and e-mail etiquette and tips for dealing with unsatisfied customers.

After the session, district officials mobilized "secret shoppers" to phone and visit schools anonymously to see if the skills were being put into practice.

The training session drew rave reviews from school staff. "I found the First Impression Program to be professionally prepared, presented in a light mood so attendees are not defensive, but rather reflective and introspective about their daily interactions and mannerisms . . . toward the public. The presentation dealt with daily situations in a practical manner and was not overly slick or polished, like many motivational/instructional seminars," a school staff member noted.

"Very helpful. I can see how and where professional and personal relationships have broken down due to low social capital," added a teacher.

The district covered the cost, about \$3,500 in food and supplies. District officials have scheduled another training session for summer 2008. They are designing new content to address topics of how to work well to solve problems in school and family relationships.

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