Put out the welcome mat: the welcoming school

Creating a welcoming and inclusive school environment for English language learners and their families is a whole-school activity requiring the commitment of the principal and vice-principal, teachers, support staff, and other leaders within the school community. The reward for this committed effort is a dynamic and vibrant school environment that celebrates diversity as an asset and enriches the learning experience for all students.

Make a good first impression

How effectively do you welcome newcomers and their parents to your school? What first impressions do they take away? The three checklists that follow will help you identify your strengths, as well as areas where you may need to rethink the way your school welcomes new students and their families.

A WELL-DEFINED WELCOMING PROCESS

☐ Our school has a specific process for welcoming newcomers.

☐ All staff members, including administrative staff, are aware of and understand the process.

☐ Our school has a designated reception team.

☐ Multilingual welcome signs, in the languages of the community, are posted in the school.

AN EFFECTIVE INTAKE INTERVIEW PROCESS

☐ Whenever possible, we have competent adult interpreters available to assist parents and help them fill out forms.

☐ We allow ample time for the intake interview, taking into consideration the needs for interpretation and for the explanation of unfamiliar school-related terminology (for example, home room, field trip, and credits).

☐ We strive to make newcomers and their parents feel comfortable, regardless of their proficiency in English.

☐ We ask parents to provide the name of a person, such as a relative or family friend, who speaks English and whom the school can contact in case of an emergency.
EFFECTIVE ORIENTATION FOR PARENTS

- We provide parents with essential information, such as the name of the principal; the school phone number; and the dates of holidays, professional development days, and parent-teacher interviews, and inform them about essential procedures, such as those that apply to student absences.
- We tell parents about basic routines.
- We inform parents of community programs, supports, and resources that may interest them, such as local adult ESL classes.
- We strive to establish a relationship with parents so that their orientation to the school can continue over time.

It is hard to argue that we are teaching the whole child when school policy dictates that students leave their language and culture at the schoolhouse door ...
(Cummins et al., 2005)

Insight

Orientation resources for teachers and families

Citizenship and Immigration Canada funds a program called Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS), which is now available in several Ontario school boards. In addition to locating settlement workers in schools to provide direct orientation services to newcomers and their families, SWIS offers resource material that all schools can use to provide these services themselves. Guides explaining the Ontario education system are available for newcomer families to download in various languages. Videos are also available on topics that are important to newcomers.

For more information, visit the SWIS program website.


See Your Library – a video about library services for newcomers at www.settlement.org/site/ed/guide/videos.
Insight

Selecting an interpreter

When confidential information is being discussed – for example, during an intake or parent-teacher interview – the interpreter should be an adult member of the student’s family, a bilingual teacher, or a professional interpreter.

In less sensitive situations – for example, to help convey information to parents by phone or newsletter – adult members of the newcomer’s linguistic community may be willing to serve as interpreters.

Although many students interpret for their parents, it is preferable that teachers ask students to interpret only for their peers – for example, to help their peers with orientation, or when working as partners with them in class. Peers can also be used in emergency situations when necessary.

Try it now!

Hand out school information sheets

Develop a one-page information sheet or a small brochure about the school, and have it translated into the languages of the community.

Personalize the information for each newcomer by leaving blanks where the name of the student’s classroom or home-room teacher can be inserted.

“You never get a second chance to make a first impression”... is true of schools, where the first few minutes can be crucial. If the school seems to be a welcoming place ... parents and children may be reassured that the experiences that await them are likely to be positive. (Ashworth, 2001)
Insight

Something to think about: the adjustment process

Immigration is an experience that some psychologists compare to bereavement. Even for newcomers who arrive as part of a planned, voluntary process, immigration is a significant dislocation. For those who leave their countries as a result of war or another crisis, the experience can be highly traumatic.

No matter what the circumstances, newcomers of all ages tend to go through a predictable sequence of stages in adjusting to their new circumstances. Within the same family, siblings and different generations may pass through these stages at different rates and with varying responses, depending on a variety of factors, such as their knowledge of English, the opportunities they have to experience social inclusion, their interactions with the larger community, and whether they experience success at work or at school.

- **Arrival and first impressions:** Newcomers are excited to be in a new environment and optimistic about new opportunities. Everything seems new and exciting. Refugees are relieved to have arrived in a safe environment.

- **Culture shock:** Newcomers are less optimistic as the challenges of resettlement become more evident. They find it difficult to make friends, and the challenge of learning in English may seem insurmountable. They miss friends, family, and everything that was familiar. Students may begin to wonder who they are. As a result, they may cling to their own language and culture or discard everything they feel marks them as different. Some children or other family members may get “stuck” at this stage, and even become clinically depressed. Students and their families need support and encouragement during this period, and special efforts must be made to help them feel part of the school community.

- **Recovery and optimism:** This period is characterized by renewed optimism. For students, the new mood is often prompted by a success in school, or by finding their first friend. Students who are well supported at school, and whose linguistic and cultural backgrounds are valued by their teachers and classmates, begin to feel more confident about learning English and about fitting in without having to abandon their cultural identity.

- **Acculturation:** Immigrants become comfortable with a new identity that balances their original culture with elements of the new culture. This balance is different for each person, and depends on many factors. To help students achieve this balance, schools need to enable them to become bilingual and bicultural, able to move effectively between their old and new linguistic and cultural worlds.
It is never easy to come into a new school where everyone already seems to have friends, know the teachers, and understand the routines. But when that new school is in a new country, then the problems can be even more formidable. (Porter, 1991)

Be welcoming

Teachers can make new English language learners feel welcome, accepted, and supported in their classrooms by taking a few simple steps:

- Practise and use the correct pronunciation of the student's name.
- Seat the student where he or she can see and hear all classroom activities.
- Introduce yourself and the students who sit near the newcomer.
- Assign the student a classroom partner – someone of the same gender and, if possible, the same language background – to explain or model routine classroom tasks or to help the student in other ways.
- Ensure that the student understands school routines and is familiar with school facilities.
- Teach the student basic phrases, such as hello, goodbye, and I don’t understand.
- Help the student learn to express important personal information in English – for example, to respond to questions about his or her name and address.
- Provide the student with some basic language learning materials, such as a picture dictionary or simple books on tape.
- Incorporate images and examples of linguistic and cultural diversity into all subjects in the curriculum, and celebrate diversity in all aspects of your practice.

Try it now!

Appoint an ambassador

New students feel particularly welcome when introduced to the school by a peer. Select a student ambassador – preferably one of the same gender who speaks the same language as the newcomer – to take the student on a guided tour of the school and introduce him or her to its facilities, sports programs, clubs, and other co-curricular activities. Ambassadors will need some training for this role, and their contribution should be recognized in a public way.