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How Do You Create an Intentionally Inviting School?

Welcome. A gentle greeting and an invitation to come in. A nurturing point. A message to a friend or stranger that in one instant, one word, offers a great gift – that this place and time is for you. *Welcome.* Are these words spoken, expressed, or elicited when students, teachers, parents and administrators walk through the door to your school? Is everyone welcome, and have you established a plan, a protocol or simply a way of inviting everyone into your school for a welcoming experience? Are you intentionally creating an inviting school atmosphere? In this short article, I would like to suggest a few little ways you can make your school more inviting. *Come in. Come in.*

Begin with the end in mind

Author Stephen Covey reminds us that one of the surest ways to a solution is by beginning with the end in mind. What would we need to do to create a school environment that is intentionally inviting? What would we gain by being more welcoming? Perhaps the first place in this transformation is with an agreement to begin. So what can we do to be more inviting?

A few years ago I taught in a primary school in England. Faced with a changing student population and the pressures of national student assessments that compared and sometimes pitted local schools against each other, the headmistress at my school called a meeting and asked the staff to consider ways the staff members could raise morale and overcome the daily grind and pressures inherent in a high stakes environment. Everyone sat quietly, sitting on hands when a second-year teacher broke the silence by suggesting we start simple, that we begin by making time to talk to each other. This followed with another teacher recommending we work to make the staff lounge a more inviting place to join with colleagues at lunch. When asked what seemed to be driving teachers from visiting the staff room a staff member responded, “It’s all the whinging*. We really bring each other down by insisting on chatting about this bad kid and this bad moment. One cannot really enjoy oneself in such a negative spirit. That’s why I eat alone ... and I know I’m missing out but I’m tired of the gasbagging.” Out of the quiet and the safety to stare a problem in the face, the staff agreed on a drastic measure – to stop ‘whinging.’ To stop complaining. To err on the positive or put on a stiff upper lip and get on with things.

While that might sound Draconian, as a visiting teacher I was awestruck at the response. Teachers literally came back to the staff room for lunch. It did not take long before teachers started demanding the same assurances outside the staff room. I can remember slipping one day on the negative. Racing to school, I was set back ten minutes by a farmer crossing the road with his cattle. I thundered down the hallway when I saw Simon and grumbled about my drive. I was calmly interrupted, "That can happen, can't it? Well, get on with your morning, then. Make the best." With guidance, a bit of reflection and a sense of starting small, our English school took measures to make itself more welcoming. I remember the ease by which staff members shared their weekend adventures or gardening tips. We talked about the weather and of books read. The simple measure of substituting a negative for a positive made my year abroad incredibly memorable.

Okay, is stopping the whining the answer? Not entirely. I think we can also take stock of a successful clothier to push us up a notch. What makes Nordstrom such a popular department store? Most would agree it is their mission of putting the customer first. What might that mean for us in education? I suppose it means that in order to welcome everyone through our doors, we must equip ourselves with a mission that recognizes the importance of the client or families that come to our school. And can we dedicate ourselves to making them a top concern? And if so, unlike Nordstrom's return policy where clothes that don't fit right can be returned with no questions asked, what can we do? Maybe it is intentionally greeting, listening and responding to our families and kids. And what does that look like? A smile. A handshake. A nod of recognition by all staff to intentionally recognize the presence of each person who walks through our doors. Isn't that what we do when friends come through our doors at home?

The last suggestion in this journey of becoming a welcoming school is in the feng shui or attention given to what our schools look like. Are they bright, light, colorful, full of life and art? Are community members struck by the attention to detail? Is one welcomed by student work and achievement elegantly displayed? Are there shining examples of professional recognition and is the furniture comfortable? Perhaps you chuckle at these cosmetics, but I go back to my original question: how do we create an intentionally inviting school? Imagine a school where visitors are greeted with a welcome, a smile and a brilliantly presented vision of what a warm school looks and sounds like. Wouldn't you want to come back?

*whinging = whining

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