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How Do You Treat the ‘New Kid’ in Your School?

Increasingly, as WSASCD provides professional development for teachers and administrators, student mobility and English Language Learners become topics of conversation. With that in mind, I’ve chosen to focus my article on ways to ensure that new students are comfortable in our schools, enabling them to become engaged learners. When a person is comfortable in a setting, students and adults alike, they are far more likely to engage.

As a child born into a military family, I had the opportunity to be the ‘new kid’ at school a number of times, even attending three different high schools. I will never forget the butterflies in the pit of my stomach every time I had to face a new classroom of students. I was terrified! That feeling is something I’ll never forget, and it became the impetus for me to provide a safe, welcoming, and caring environment for new students who came into my own classroom years later. The challenge became even greater when I became an elementary principal, as I tried to help teachers understand that for many students, it is all they can do to muster up enough courage to go to a new school. The last thing they need is to be told that we are not ready for them, so they have to wake up the next day and face that fear all over again.

As a principal, when I talked with students who were moving from my school to a new school, their biggest worry was that they would not have any friends or that people would make fun of them. The prospect of being friendless or getting teased is a concern for many students and can profoundly affect their sense of affiliation with school. Students, new to my school, would share the pain and anger they felt when they seemed invisible or not included. At the extreme, some students were not only treated with indifference but became targets of bullying.

Families that move frequently, do so for a wide variety of reasons – job changes and/or losses, homelessness, family issues, or military service. Military children get new schools, new friends, and new homes on average about every three years, while the average American family moves once every five years. Most military children will attend six to nine different schools from grades K-12. According to the National Military Family Association, kids say that next to deployments, moving was the toughest thing about being a kid in a military family.

Research has shown that frequent school transitions can affect a child's self-esteem and academic performance. However, as a primary social environment for children, classrooms and schools are uniquely good places to learn how to treat others and how to tell others the way we want them to treat us. Dozens of times a day, people in schools negotiate interpersonal exchanges with others from diverse backgrounds, making schools a premier learning environment for social, emotional, and ethical learning, which can translate into more student engagement and increased academic performance. With that in mind, here are some tried-and-true strategies that various schools have implemented.

1. Remember that adults play a critical role in teaching children to be welcoming or rejecting. As a teacher, receiving that note in your mailbox, "You're getting a new student tomorrow," or seeing the classroom door open as the principal escorts a new student into the room can feel overwhelming. Your first thoughts might be "Where am I going to find a desk for him/her?" or "What about placement testing?" If you let these thoughts shape your responses and treat the child as a bother and a nuisance, so will your students. If you treat each new student as a welcome addition to the community, your students will, too.
2. Establish routines for welcoming new students. Teach students that it's their job to welcome and include. Show them what that means. Use strategies to communicate with and include children who don't speak English. Partnering students who speak the same language would be an obvious solution, but without that benefit, a buddy or partner could use signs, pictures and other non-verbal means of communication to connect with the new student. Assigning lunch partners for lunchtime or play-partners at recess is another important way to build connections with the non-English speaking student. The languages of food and play are universal. With a child who is new to the country, as well as to your classroom, share information about the child's home culture. Honor new students and their home culture by asking them to teach the class words, show pictures, or share their culture. Children feel more empathetic if they know something about the newcomer's background.
3. Create a link on our website to an online 'Welcome Wagon' with a wide range of topics. Give families the opportunity to e-mail their questions and special student needs to the school/district prior to arrival. Make it possible for parents and students to schedule a visit to the school before school starts. Upon arrival, provide a map of the layout of the school.
4. Create a buddy system within the classroom where teachers assign new students a 'buddy' to accompany the student to classes and that all-important first day of lunch. Provide training and role-playing exercises for the buddy prior to accompanying the new student.

5. Create a parent-buddy system for newly relocated families. Encourage members to hold PTA offices. Having a parent get involved in school serves as a good example for a child to do the same.
6. Create a welcome bag with items such as a 'The Principal is my Pal' eraser, a coupon for a free cookie from the cafeteria, a pencil with a note from the school counselor, and a brochure from a kid's perspective created by older students.
7. Keep on hand a 'welcome wagon' packet of information that you would normally give to new students at the beginning of the year, including the school handbook. Contacts for local resources like the post office, library, popular parks, or after-school programs, help new families get acclimated to the area quickly.
8. Create a morning 'Welcome Room,' staffed by a counselor, social worker, behavior interventionist, or caring parent. This would be place where any student could go when they arrive at school each day. For some students, the need to start the day with a caring adult can help with their transition to the new school. It is also a place where students, who are not new to the school, can get the socio-emotional support they need to start the day.
9. Create a 'New Found Friend Program' or 'Newcomers Club.' New students become members of the Newcomers Club and meet monthly with the school counselor at a designated time. Club activities vary according to the needs of the members.
10. Encourage new students to join a team, a club, the band, a service organization, or student activities. Especially for older students, having that sense of 'belonging' to a positive group can make all the difference in their outlook on school. Be sure to reserve slots in classes, athletics, and clubs for students who arrive later in the year.

Children who feel welcome and comfortable in the school setting show increased engagement, better school performance, improved health, and more productive behaviors. Schools and educators are in a unique position to create ways to make that happen. I wish you all the very best as you find ways to make the 'new kid' feel like he/she belongs at your school.

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