

Creating Welcoming, Caring, Respectful & Safe Learning Environments

The Walk Around: Teacher Companion Tool

This tool is designed to gather information from teachers about the extent to which the school is a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment. It provides insight into four aspects of the school environment:

- 1. Physical Appearance**
- 2. Social Climate**
- 3. Success in Learning**
- 4. Home – School – Community Relations**

The *School Act* outlines increased responsibilities for boards, schools, parents and students to ensure that schools are welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments that respect diversity and foster a sense of belonging. Creating and maintaining positive, safe learning environments requires an intentional, whole-school approach.

The content for this tool was informed by current research and focus groups with school leaders across the province. For maximum effectiveness, it is intended to be used in conjunction with [The Walk Around: A School Leader's Observation Guide](#) to gain multiple perspectives on what is working well and what areas require attention or improvement. It is not intended to be used to evaluate the contributions or performance of school community members. It is also important to note that while the Walk Around tools may support schools with implementing new provisions in the *School Act*, it is the responsibility of each school to develop a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment.

As a teacher, it is important to ask yourself:

“Do my observations provide evidence that my classroom and our school are welcoming, caring, respectful and safe for all members of our school community?”

How to use this tool:

For each of the four themes (Physical Appearance; Social Climate; Success in Learning; and Home-School-Community Relations):

- check items that you are confident are consistently demonstrated;
- leave an item unchecked if you are not sure if the item is consistently demonstrated; and
- comments may be added to provide an explanation or examples of:
 - what is working well;
 - what needs improvement; and
 - what actions could be taken to celebrate successes or to make improvements.

Resources that support the development of welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments through a whole-school approach include:

[Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#)

[Comprehensive School Health](#)

[Healthy School Planner](#)

[High School Completion Strategic Framework](#)

[Joint Consortium for School Health \(JCSH\) Positive Mental Health Toolkit](#)

[Mental Health Matters](#)

[Positive Behaviour Support](#)

[Response to Intervention](#)

[The Heart of the Matter](#)

[The Society for Safe and Caring Schools & Communities](#)

[Whole School Approach to developing a safe and caring learning environment](#)

1. PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The school's vision or core purpose and guiding principles or beliefs are:

- Visible to all who enter the building.
- Written in language that is easily understood by children, youth and adults.

The school feels welcoming and inclusive:

- Entrances and common areas are neat, clean and uncluttered.
- The school, including outdoor spaces, is litter free.
- Graffiti is rare and cleaned within a reasonable timeframe.
- Furniture and fixtures are in good repair.
- The tone of school signage welcomes and informs rather than warns.
- Displays and school resources/materials reflect the diversity of the population (e.g., cultural, interests, achievements, etc.).
- Gender inclusive washrooms and change rooms are available and respectfully identified.

Student work displayed in the hallways, main entrance, etc. demonstrates:

- Differing levels and types of achievement.
- The diversity of the school community. (e.g., culture, interests, family structure, gender expression etc.).
- Alignment with the school's vision or core purpose and guiding principles or beliefs.

The learning space(s) where I teach feels welcoming and inclusive:

- Students see evidence of their learning and diversity.
- Organization of the space fosters co-operative learning.
- Areas and materials are accessible to all students.
- Décor promotes a sense of comfort and security.
- The space is neat, clean and uncluttered.
- Displays/signage is positive, respectful and purposeful.

Notes: *Please use the space below to jot down comments on what is working well, what needs improvement and/or what actions could be taken to celebrate successes or make improvements.*

2. SOCIAL CLIMATE

It is a school expectation that I am treated with dignity and respect by:

- School leaders
- Other teachers
- Support staff
- Students
- Families
- Community partners
- Others (e.g., volunteers)

It is a school expectation that I treat others with dignity and respect including:

- School leaders
- Other teachers
- Support staff
- Students
- Families
- Community partners
- Others (e.g., volunteers)

In our school, treating each other with dignity and respect means:

- Interacting positively with others before, during and after the school day.
- Modelling healthy relationship skills and attitudes.
- Addressing bullying behaviours when they occur.
- Taking responsibility for misunderstandings or conflicts and a willingness to make amends.
- Actively encouraging families' participation in school activities and non-instructional school activities (e.g., field trips, assemblies, celebrations, evening or weekend events, etc.).
- Greeting one another by name and engaging in friendly conversations.
- Peers and staff use a student's chosen name and pronoun.

School-wide practices support students to feel cared for, safe, welcomed and respected:

- Inclusion is the norm.
- Homophobic, sexist or racist language or comments are responded to in ways that support a change in behaviour/language.
- Students are encouraged to openly and trustingly share their ideas.
- All students are connected to a school staff member with whom they can discuss their needs, interests and concerns.
- Vulnerable students are supported through groups/peer support networks. This could include gay-straight or queer-straight alliances, peer support networks, mentorship programs, elder-in-residence programs, etc.
- A variety of extracurricular activities are available for all students and students can participate according to their lived gender identity.
- Opportunities are available for students to learn and apply leadership skills.

- Supervision of students is consistent to ensure their physical, psychological and emotional safety.
- School community members have opportunities to share their cultural understandings and/or traditions with others.
- Positive attitudes are displayed towards the diversity of family structures.

Staff and students organize and/or participate in activities that promote healthy relationships and positive mental health through:

- National Bullying Awareness Week (third week of November)
- Random Acts of Kindness Week (week of February 14)
- Pink Shirt Day (last Wednesday in February)
- Mental Health Awareness Week (first week of May)
- Other special events that fit your community context.

Healthy relationships are the norm between and among staff members:

- There are a variety of professional and social opportunities to mix together (e.g., across divisions, grade assignments, subject areas, departments, etc.).
- To help each other out, we exchange supervision times or cover classes.
- Materials, resources and ideas are shared generously with one another.
- Substitute teachers are treated with support, respect and courtesy.
- Staff actively participate in opportunities to learn from each other.
- Staff celebrate each other's successes and accomplishments.

Students are recognized and valued for their contributions and accomplishments:

- Students are recognized for diverse contributions/accomplishments (e.g., academic, citizenship, leadership, social justice initiatives, sports, etc.).
- Students have opportunities to celebrate each other's successes and accomplishments.
- Students' improvements and successes are communicated to appropriate family members.

Positive behaviour expectations characterize school and classroom procedures and policies:

- Expectations for positive behavior respect diversity and nurture a positive sense of self.
- Expectations for positive behaviour are communicated clearly to students, families, staff and community partners throughout the school year.
- Consequences of inappropriate behaviour focus on collaborative problem-solving, reconciliation, and restorative practices rather than punitive measures; consequences take into account the student's age, maturity and individual circumstances.
- Support for students impacted by inappropriate behaviour, as well as for students who engage in inappropriate behaviour is provided.
- Staff members expect students to promote and model healthy relationship skills.
- Staff members are skilled at addressing bullying behaviours. If not, meaningful and relevant learning opportunities are provided to develop skills.
- Staff members take responsibility for addressing inappropriate student behaviours regardless of when or where the behaviour happens in the school or on the grounds.
- Teachable moments are meaningfully utilized to build students' understanding and skill development for respecting diversity and developing healthy relationships.

Notes: *Please use the space below to jot down comments on what is working well, what needs improvement and/or what actions could be taken to celebrate successes or make improvements.*

3. SUCCESS IN LEARNING

Teachers use a variety of strategies to identify students' strengths, weaknesses and areas for growth and ensure that every student experiences success in her/his learning:

- High expectations are set for all students to think critically and creatively and to work cooperatively.
- Students are engaged in relevant and meaningful learning experiences, including assessments.
- Students are supported at appropriate levels and in the different ways they learn.
- Cross-graded instructional activities are intentional and planned.
- Cross-graded non-instructional activities are intentional and planned.
- Students receive positive and specific feedback in regard to their behaviour, healthy relationship skills and academic performance.
- Students are grouped and re-grouped regularly during instructional and planned non-instructional activities in order to make their socialization more fluid.
- Cooperative learning techniques are used regularly to help work effectively in groups.
- Each student has the opportunity to reflect on their learning and set meaningful goals for her/his growth or goals are set collaboratively with the student and her/his parents or other caregivers.
- Students are co-creators of classroom rules and expectations, which supports students to learn from each other as well as from teachers.
- Students have classroom roles that create daily interaction among classmates.
- Students have regular opportunities to learn and practice social-emotional skills to support their learning (eg. identifying emotions, managing emotions, listening actively).
- Culturally responsive practices are used to build upon the values, preferences, beliefs, cultural context and identity of all students, families and the community.
- Teachers and or other staff consult with each other to better meet individual student needs and interests.

Students who need extra help are recognized and supported:

- Staff are attentive to indicators that students may be struggling (socially, emotionally, or academically).
- Staff can confidently recognize, respond to and report suspected child abuse.
- Applicable student information is shared with appropriate family members, staff and/or community partners.
- Students' questions and struggles are treated with patience, kindness and support.
- Staff take responsibility for the well-being of all students in the school community.
- Students who do not participate appropriately within the boundaries of the school's expectations are supported with respectful, welcomed and useful strategies.
- Students who are not experiencing a sense of belonging within the school are supported with respectful, meaningful strategies.
- Students who struggle academically are supported with respectful, meaningful strategies.

Students' positive mental health is promoted through planned:

- Instructional activities.
- Non-instructional activities.

Staff has access to professional development that promotes welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments. Topics may include:

- Strategies to implement positive behaviour expectations.
- Diversity (eg. cultural, sexual orientation, gender diversity and expression, learning styles) and its impact on group dynamics.
- Developing healthy relationship skills, including pro-social skills and social-emotional learning.
- Promoting positive mental health and wellness.
- Comprehensive school health.
- Formal and informal mentorship programs.
- Restorative practices and conflict resolution.
- Brain development and the impact of trauma.
- Developing responsive learning environments.

Staff approach communication about student progress (e.g., academic, social or emotional) with respect and care:

- Student report cards or progress reports are strength-based. Teachers and school leaders use sensitive and compassionate language to share information about students' academic and social performance.
- Students' struggles and/or their families' concerns are met with kindness, respect, sensitivity and support.
- Students' and families' questions and concerns are responded to within a reasonable and respectful timeframe.
- Students' families have formal and informal opportunities to meet with staff.
- Students and family members (and community partners, if plausible) are key planning members of the transition team (team dedicated to attending to a student's needs when she/he moves into or out of the school community).

Notes: *Please use the space below to jot down comments on what is working well, what needs improvement and/or what actions could be taken to celebrate successes or make improvements.*

4. HOME-SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONS

I make it a priority to develop positive relationships with all:

- Students
- Staff
- School families
- Community partners
- Volunteers

Positive home-school communication is a priority:

- Proactive, positive messages are communicated regularly as opposed to only issues or concerns.
- Communications (e.g., school/student databases such as PowerSchool or SchoolZone, website, blogs, journals) are updated regularly.
- Blogs, websites and other communication tools use non-gendered and inclusive language (eg. Parents, guardians, caregivers, partners, student, “their”).
- Disputes or conflicts between or among members of the school community are discussed and mediated until there is resolution or reconciliation.
- Staff does not give up on, blame or reject students or their families in times of controversy or difficulty.
- Mediation processes are in place to address matters of dispute or conflict between or among school community members.
- Families are engaged proactively to address issues and/or concerns.
- Families have opportunities to participate in decisions regarding their children.
- Privacy and confidentiality are respected.

Community partners and staff:

- Work collaboratively to support students’ social, emotional, cognitive and physical development.
- Actively engage in opportunities to learn from each other.

Welcoming, planning for and acknowledging volunteers are a priority:

- Volunteers participate in all aspects of the school community (instructional and non-instructional activities).
- As appropriate, volunteers are invited to collaboratively plan and/or lead school activities.
- Volunteers are formally and informally recognized and thanked.

Notes: *Please use the space below to jot down comments on what is working well, what needs improvement and/or what actions could be taken to celebrate successes or make improvements.*

GLOSSARY

Bullying is repeated and hostile or demeaning behaviour by an individual in the school community where the behaviour is intended to cause harm, fear or distress to one or more individuals in the school community, including psychological harm or harm to an individual's reputation.

Bullying can take different forms: verbal (e.g., name calling, insults, racial or sexual comments, put-downs, threats); social or relational (e.g., exclusion, gossip, rumors); physical (e.g., poking, elbowing, hitting, pushing); or cyber (e.g., using the computer or other technology to harass or threaten).

Healthy relationships consist of a connection between people that increases well-being, are mutually enjoyable and enhance or maintain each individual's positive self-concept.

Learning spaces are places of instruction (e.g., classroom, gymnasium, science or CTS labs, etc.).

Mental health is not simply the absence of mental illness. The Public Health Agency of Canada describes positive mental health as "the capacity of each and all of us to feel, think, and act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face. It is a positive sense of emotional and spiritual well-being that respects the importance of culture, equity, social justice, interconnections and personal dignity".

School community members include families, students and staff.

School resource team is a team dedicated to developing and implementing an action plan to support students' success.

Staff includes school leaders, teachers, educational assistants, counsellors, administrative supports, custodians, librarians, etc.

Student-support staff includes counsellors, educational assistants, personnel from community partners, etc.

Transition team is a team dedicated to attending to a student's needs when she/he is moving into or out of the school community.