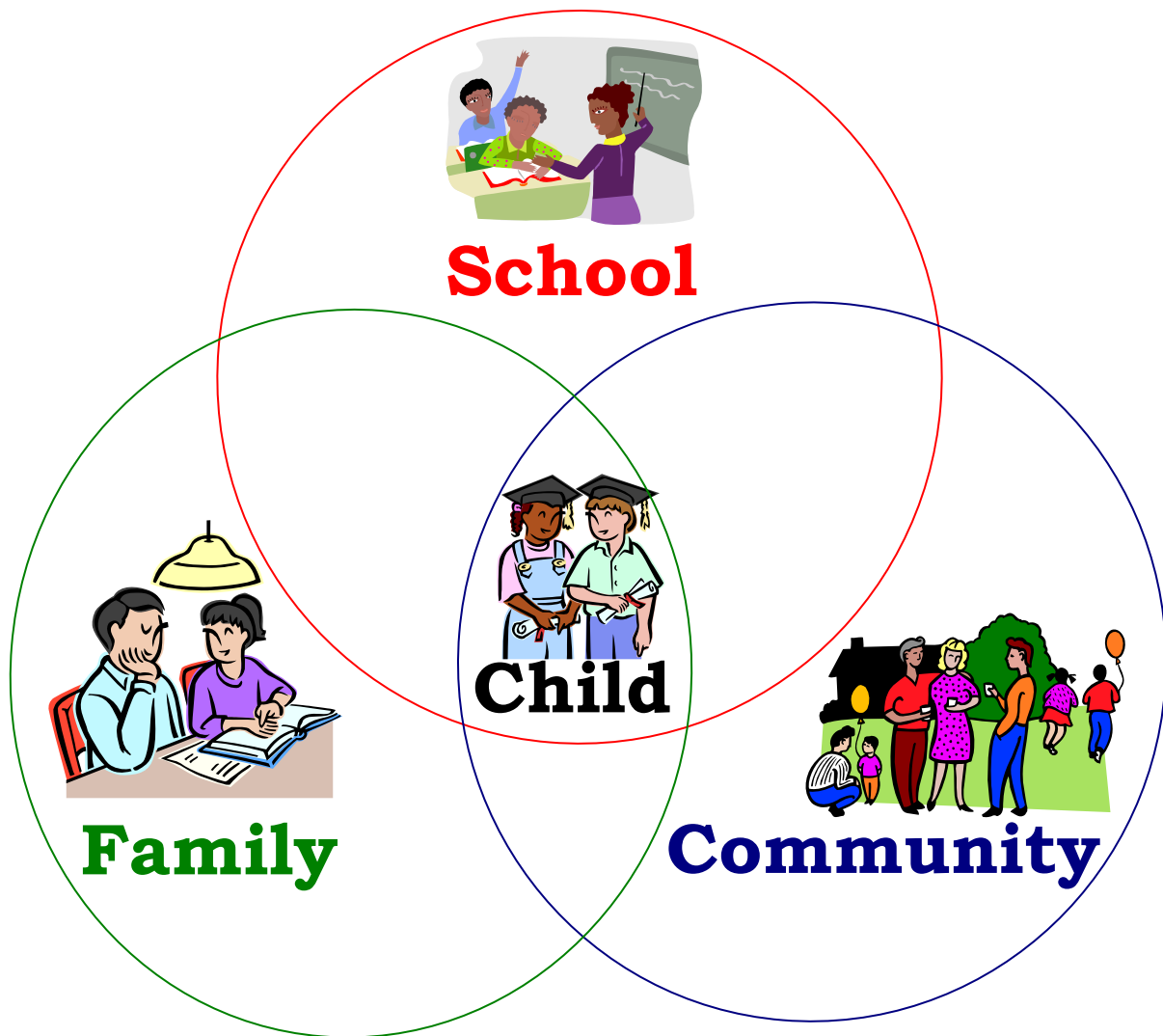



Family-Friendly School Environments

A Guiding Document for School Personnel



Prepared by a Work Group of the
Bright Stars Steering Committee and the Partnership for Children

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INTRODUCTION

What do you remember about elementary school? Do you remember the teachers, the playground, your classroom, a buddy or a bully, a special event? Do you remember feeling afraid, embarrassed, excited, proud? Did you feel like you belonged there, that people knew you? Did people say “hello” or did they walk by without speaking? Did your parents come to school? Did you pass your tests, get good grades? Were you retained? Did you change schools frequently? Did anyone ever yell at you or call you names? Did you have a special job in your classroom, the library or the office? Did you ever win anything?

The answers to these questions may color the ways you, as an adult, think about yourself, your family, learning, education and school. Childhood memories are often lasting memories. They linger in the background of our consciousness. When we have generally positive memories of school we share that view with others – especially our children – then they develop a positive view of school. If our experiences and memories are tainted, then we pass along a more neutral or negative view to others.

In the 21st century, it has never been more true that “an important ingredient for life success is school success.” How do we ensure school success for all children in our community? The individual child’s attributes have a lot to do with success or failure but research tells us that ensuring success in school and in life goes well beyond the child alone. The family, the school, and the community play a large role in children’s healthy development, skill acquisition, sense of self and self-confidence, safety and security.

That is why this project was undertaken – to highlight the collaborative role that the child, the family, the school, and the community have in ensuring school and life success and to advocate for concrete ways to build a family-friendly school.

The idea of a Family Friendly School Environment Project for Albemarle County Elementary Schools was generated at a Bright Stars Steering Committee meeting in December 2002. Committee members were concerned with school readiness and what happens with children and families as they move along in the grades. Multiple and sometimes conflicting demands on children, school staff, and families seemed to be mounting due, in part, to the push for accountability and meeting yearly Standards of Learning. The committee recognized that some of the practices carried out in preschool programs like Bright Stars and Head Start helped in making the schools more welcoming, safe and family-friendly. Could some of those practices be replicated or modified to fit for grades beyond preschool? Could family-friendliness in kindergarten through grade 5 be a priority not just because it may sound good but because it is good practice? Teachers and school administration cannot do it alone. Families and the community have a role to play as well. But they need to feel welcome, valued, and important in the overall educational process.

The work of Dr. Steven Constantino came to the attention of many in the Charlottesville/Albemarle community. His work was being recognized as an innovative and credible approach to improving school cultures through family engagement. Dr. Constantino's research struck a responsive chord for many who attended his workshops, read his materials, and tested some of his approaches.

At the same time, the Partnership for Children, an umbrella organization for agencies and systems that serve children 0-6 years old in Albemarle and Charlottesville, was devoting its energies to defining school readiness. This group was setting out to identify the role that children, schools, families, and the wider community have in helping children grow up in healthy families and start school ready to learn. This group's research clearly showed that readiness

encompassed social, physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral domains and that the responsibility for ensuring readiness was a community responsibility.

It seemed like the interests of one group were converging with the interests of another group at a critical time. The next step was to get these groups together for a dialogue.

The Bright Stars Steering Committee agreed to take the lead for moving to this next step. The Committee extended invitations to members of the School Readiness Workgroup of the Partnership for Children to attend our next meeting in January (see Appendix --). An Albemarle County School representative on the Steering Committee noted that the schools were required to include a strategy for encouraging Family Engagement in their School Improvement Plans. Several schools had already implemented some strategies toward realizing this goal. The group did not want to duplicate efforts but felt we could contribute to and enhance what was already being done.

Over the next three months, the Partnership for Children and the Bright Stars Steering Committee discussed how we could contribute to the process of developing a family-friendly school environment. The principal of Agnor-Hurt Elementary School, who served on the Steering Committee, volunteered her school as the pilot site for the project. A letter of invitation was sent to potential members for this workgroup based on the following criteria:

- Ability to think broadly, with interest in K-5 education, parent involvement and community collaboration.
- Knowledge of current educational issues.
- Knowledge of the needs of children entering school and their families.
- Knowledge of the school and/or local community.
- Team skills, patience and willingness to “stick with it”.

In all, fourteen professionals in early childhood – educators, administrators, family workers and school support staff – participated in the project at various points.

The first meeting was in April 2003 at Agnor-Hurt Elementary School. The charge for the Workgroup was to develop “a model for Agnor-Hurt Elementary School and other County elementary schools that recognizes the role that children, parents, school staff, and community agencies play in support of successful learning outcomes for all children in the County.”

The workgroup wanted to hear from parents and school staff other than those participating on the workgroup. They wanted to align their work with what research was saying about best practices. And they were also committed to designing a tool that would reflect the culture of Albemarle/Charlottesville, not some distant community that might be doing wonderful things but not things that would fit our population. So the group began with the “as is state” here, the “hoped for state,” the gap(s) and the potential solutions (see Appendix --).

The workgroup met during the spring, summer and fall of 2003 to brainstorm, identify various perspectives, complete the gap analysis and bring forward pertinent research. Focus Groups for parents and teachers were held in the fall of 2003 and the winter of 2004. By late winter the workgroup was ready to put all the pieces together. There were some unanticipated gains throughout the process – people getting to know each other, surprise about services and practices that were not known before, increased respect for each other and the work each performs, respect for all our customers, realization of the richness of resources in our community.

This final product is still a work in progress. We call it final for now, knowing that as it is rolled out to one school and then others, we will hear suggestions for additions, improvements, and redrafting. This is just fine and to be expected in a climate that values continuous quality

improvement, creativity and initiative. We welcome feedback and suggestions from the real “experts” in the field. Above all, we hope that there are things here that will help you.

WORKGROUP MEMBERS

Organization	Name
Bright Stars Program Coordinator	Charity Haines
Partnership for Children	Jacki Bryant
Agnor-Hurt Elementary School	Linda Ferguson - Present Principal Sylvia Henderson - Past Principal Jeannette Orrock – Past Assistant Principal Dottie Devall – Former Front Office Marci McKenzie - Bright Stars Leslie Puckett - Kindergarten Ginny Wean - Grade 1
Bright Stars Family Coordinator	Sue Tansey
Child Health Partnership (CHIP)	Dilcia Colindres
Head Start	Meg Sewell
Healthy Families/Family Partners	Dawn Gillette
Stone-Robinson	Ashby Kindler - Present Principal
The Parent Center	Miriam Rushfinn

WORK PLAN

Step 1	Send out letter of invitation and Charter for the workgroup with expectations and planned meeting dates
Step 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introductions • Review Charter • Brainstorm draft set of group norms: how do we expect ourselves to behave? Use the draft for first meeting. • Split into 2 groups: what does a family-friendly environment in a school look like to you, a child, a parent, school staff, the community? • Come back together, report out • Agree on key characteristics
Step 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review group norms and finalize for adoption • Small Groups: how do administrators behave in an environment that is family-friendly? How do teachers and others behave? How do students and families behave? (Decide on a plan to talk to families, and school staff)
Step 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convene Focus Groups
Step 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gap Analysis – how far away are we from what we say it should look like?
Step 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct Research: align local data and practices with national research
Step 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop the plan
Step 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present to Workgroup and Bright Stars Steering Committee • Pilot at Agnor-Hurt for 4 – 6 months • Revise as needed
Step 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop strategies for rolling out the plan to other schools

USING THE 5 “C” MENUS TO ESTABLISH FAMILY-FRIENDLY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS

Menus for each of the 5 “C’s” were developed by the work group as guidance for school personnel interested in implementing family-friendly school practices. They were created by work group members, including school personnel, community agency personnel, and school administrators, and incorporated feedback from parents, teachers, and sound research available in the field. They are the result of a collaborative effort and represent the latest thoughts about family-friendly school environments.

There is a menu for each of the 5 “C” areas: climate, communication, collaboration, continuity, and continuum. The menus have headings describing the desired state for family-friendliness followed by bulleted ideas for school practices related to the desired state within each of the “5 C” areas. Some of the ideas are presented in more than one menu as they are appropriate for more than one of the 5 “C” areas. The menu items are not described in detail but are presented as a starting point for school personnel when implementing family-friendly school practices. Work group members recognized that individual schools have varying policies, procedures, and practices and wanted the menu items to be brief and flexible so they could best meet each school’s individual needs.

Each of the 5 “C” menus has a list of items from which schools can select. The menu items can be used individually, in groups, and/or in their entirety. It is not intended that school personnel must implement all the ideas in the menus in order to establish a family-friendly school environment. Rather, it is hoped that schools will use those ideas presented in the menus that will most help to enhance their current practices and meet the specific needs of their

particular students, parents, and staff. Menu items can be expanded to meet school needs and should not be viewed as absolutes but rather as ideas from which to build.

As family-friendly school environments depend on the investment of the entire school, school administrators may find it useful to present the menus to school staff to obtain their feedback about how to best implement. Research clearly shows that having the buy-in of school staff greatly enhances the success of the implementation. Asking school staff's opinion about current family-friendly school efforts, allowing them to help choose which items to implement, listening to their ideas and concerns about implementation, and jointly problem-solving about potential challenges to implementation is likely to increase their commitment to and involvement in implementing family-friendly school practices.

Climate

Safe, Friendly, Inviting, Helpful, Diverse

Everyone in the school receives a greeting.

- Children are greeted individually at classroom door in the morning and told goodbye by the classroom teacher at the end of the day.
- Visitors, parents, staff are greeted regularly when they enter the school and throughout the school.
- Parent volunteers serve as “greeters” at the front door of the school to welcome and direct visitors and families.
- Implement a buddy system so each child feels connected to someone.
- Office staff recognizes and greets parents and visitors promptly.
- Countertops that are closest to the door in the office are lower so that they feel more accessible and welcoming to children and adults.
- Add a sign in the office that acknowledges that there may be a wait before office staff can assist visitors, ex. Thank you for your patience. We will be with you as soon as possible. If you wait more than 15 minutes, please let us know.

All LEP Families have opportunity to be heard and understood in their primary language.

- Partner with PVCC, UVA, AHS and/or utilize parent volunteers to provide translation.
- Earmark events and/or write grants to raise money for translation.
- Survey teachers to identify language resources within the school.
- Have correspondence/forms available in other languages.
- Offer cultural diversity training for professionals and parents.
- Use international symbols and signs wherever possible.

All visitors, parents, children, and community people know where to park, how to enter building, and location of rooms.

- Create very visible signs/banners with words, international symbols, and arrows to direct visitors/parents/children/community people to the parking area, front door, main office, and other important locations.
- Ensure the parking lot and its spaces are clearly marked for reserved and visitor parking.
- Have “You Are Here” maps throughout the school.
- Plan a Treasure Hunt for children/parents at Back to School Night to help them learn their way around the school.

A variety of ways are in place for contact with teachers.

- Teachers meet buses to greet children and families at all grade levels.
- Teachers have incentives (recertification points, pay, staff development hours) to conduct home visits and participate in family events with children and families.
- Staff is visible throughout the day, at arrival and dismissal times, and during lunch.
- Office staff serves as the “hub” for the school – they have information and can give information.
- Send home a sheet with contact information to all parents listing best times to contact, when to expect return calls, phone number, email address, and any other contact information.
- Include “yearbook” picture on contact sheet maybe with limited personal information, so families feel more familiar with teachers, administrators, and other school staff.
- Hold social events, i.e. picnics, as a chance for parents/staff to interact informally.
- Parents have the opportunity to participate in staff development with teachers.
- Teachers have business cards with contact information to distribute.

Parents know their child is appreciated; people are friendly; there will be others like them.

- School staff will ask – “Tell me about your child” – at lower grade levels so parents have an opportunity to provide important information about their child.
- School staff will ask upper grade children, “What would you like to tell your teacher about you?” so teachers know about child from their perspective.
- Collect the responses each year and present to students at the end of 5th grade.
- Ask parents for feedback about their child and experiences with teacher during parent conferences. Students also have the opportunity to participate.
- Administrators and school calendars support teachers making personal contact with parents on a regular basis.
- Hallways showcase and celebrate children’s talents and works.

Child will not be judged or chastised because of parents’ actions.

- Training for teachers on concepts such as no prejudging, keeping an open mind, no gossiping, and remembering the parent is not the child and child is not the parent.
- Parents feel free to discuss concerns with school staff without fear of retribution for their child.

There is an expectation that friendliness occurs throughout the school.

- Offer children opportunities for informal interaction with principal.
- Identify and train students to greet and give tours to new students.
- Offer children non-verbal and verbal methods for greeting people they meet in the halls;
- Encourage kids to be friendly to all students on the playground, perhaps offering rewards for kids caught being friendly.

- Post signs around the school reminding staff and students about friendliness and acceptance for all.
- Implement Character Counts program.
- Have clear rules that everyone knows about treating everyone respectfully.
- Office staff explains more clearly the “sign-in” process so not seen as unfriendly or uninviting.

Everyone is welcome and accepted at our school.

- Books available in the library and classrooms that show diverse cultures and are available in other languages.
- Provide cultural diversity training to all teachers and staff.
- Offer special programs during the year recognizing and honoring other cultures.
- Give questionnaire to students that identifies areas that can build commonalities, i.e. soccer players, good readers, artists, etc.
- School staff reflects diversity of population.
- School-specific calendars are available with important school information and dates. The calendar includes pictures from the school.
- Create a “Brag Book” which promotes your school and its programs and have it available in visitor areas.
- Implement a “Take Your Family To School Day” which is available a variety of times on a quarterly basis.

School committees/workgroups/PTOs reach out to include everyone.

- Offer range of volunteer and involvement options for parents.
- Tailor introductions and invitations to join PTO to specific populations.
- Parent info board available in the school to inform families about activities and volunteer opportunities.
- Provide informal forums for parents to express opinions.
- Establish a welcoming committee in coordination with the PTO to involve more parents.
- Parent volunteers serve as “greeters” at the front door of the school to welcome and direct visitors and families.
- Permanent nametags available at the front door/sign in area for regular volunteers.
- Offer parent training on best practices for volunteers.
- Create database of family’s talents and interests to better match volunteer opportunities and encourage parent assistance with school activities.

All school staff is important and makes a contribution.

- Develop this culture throughout the school through behavior, language, expectations, and activities.
- Teacher Assistants included in meetings and on-site trainings with pay.
- School staff is expected to listen and incorporate ideas of everyone.
- All staff are offered meetings with principal.
- Establish recognition and learning opportunities within the school that appreciate and help children learn about the contributions of all school staff.

Everyone has opportunity to be familiar with school building and grounds.

- School tours available during Back to School Night and Kindergarten registration and volunteer tour guides are available at other times.
- Powerpoint presentation available as another means for presenting information about the school building and grounds to staff, students, parents.

Children, parents and staff are knowledgeable about the ways school is a safe place.

- Safety plans are communicated proactively and reactively and consider all perspectives when being developed.
- Talk with kids about physical and emotional safety, possible unsafe situations, and how safety is ensured at school.
- Send notes home to parents when emergency situations occur so they are informed and can talk with their children.
- Create a handbook of crisis plans for parents.

Meeting space is attractive and accessible; people are welcomed to meetings; there is a planned purpose for a meeting and it is communicated to everyone; confidentiality is respected.

- Have plan for hosting meetings for school and community participants.
- Have regular times that the library and computer lab are open for families to use. Offer parent and family programs through the school.

Worries are a part of growing up; give children tools to take care of their worries.

- Signage around the school provides information for children.
- Have discussions with students about who to ask for help.
- School staff all wears badges so easily identifiable to students.
- Provide opportunities for children to meet other staff.
- Provide training for kids on how to ask for help.

Collaboration

Partnering, Sharing responsibility, Accepting limitations, Reaching out

Parents will know that staff members understand the multiple responsibilities of parents.

- Parent contact forms will ask, "What would I like the school to know about me?"
- Staff will use parent conference times to update emergency information, phone numbers, teacher contact times, etc.
- Staff will provide multiple opportunities for meetings and volunteer opportunities at varying times on varying days.
- Staff will offer voice mail and email access.
- Staff will approach problem solving as a two way street.
- Staff will provide adequate notice for parent meetings, reminders, etc.

Parents will gain knowledge in best practices of parenting.

- School will provide speakers, sessions on parenting skills (using agency collaborations for this - e.g., Parent Center, Partnership for Children).
- School will distribute information on community workshops and events, Albemarle Kids newsletters, and other online resources

The school will establish a parent center near the front of the school.

- Use a resource room for the parent center.
- Offer parent literature in the parent center, library, guidance office, and other discreet locations.

The school will collect parent input regularly and use it in planning and decision- making.

- The parents will receive surveys yearly.
- Teachers will develop a variety of instruments to collect and analyze data.
- All data will be available to the staff, PTO, SIP committee.

School staff will engage parents and community in decision making.

- Staff will understand that the process of engagement is long term.
- Staff workshops will focus on the benefits of working with the community.
- Collaborations with businesses and social service agencies will be positive and not viewed as a deficit or problem.

Mutuality/adult-to-adult communication is the norm.

- Teachers treat parents as adults who have their own areas of knowledge and expertise regarding their child(ren) and vice-versa.
- Administrators treat teachers respectfully.
- Teachers sign notes as they address them (first and last names).

School staff exhibits confidence and respect when communicating with parents.

- Administration uses partnerships with community agencies to provide training to school staff on active listening skills, etc.
- Staff attends classes offered by the county ARC.

Home visits are recognized as a tool for building home-school relationships.

- This practice becomes a high value/expectations for school staff; time is provided for visitations.
- Adjustments in the school district calendar could foster visits.
- Administrators provide consistent support for teacher's decisions when tough decisions are made related to parent issues.
- Staff pairs with community agency representatives to make visits.
- Clear purposes exist for home visits.

Selected school activities include parents/family members.

- Regular communications with parents and families encourage participation in family events.
- Yearly schedules of PTO, Bright Stars meetings are available online to help families plan well in advance.
- Events are planned on different days and times to allow all parents equal access.

There is widespread support for the school improvement plan which is developed by a team reflecting the diversity of the school.

- There are regularly scheduled discussions with SIP team members regarding progress toward the SIP goals.
- Staff uses surveys to determine what is important to staff, parents, and students.
- Administration makes every effort to include under-represented families on (committees, SIP team, etc).

Schools continue to expect all students to achieve by involving the home, school, and community.

- Advance notices of testing dates and helpful hints to parents regarding testing are routinely shared.
- Teachers provide a scope and sequence of yearly curriculum in the beginning of" the school] term. Timely updates are provided also.
- Staff demonstrates at workshop sessions what the home and community can do to support skill development.
- Staff will encourage increased volunteer support to help with one-to-one tutoring. . Family centered agencies and school staff develop an understanding of how family issues can be barriers to academic performance and develop strategies to facilitate student learning.

Communication

Open, Confidential, Respectful

All families have accurate information about starting school and how to contact individual school staff.

- Orientation includes: information on how/when to contact staff; process for handling questions/concerns; program expectations and goals; testing information and procedures; developmental information and strategies to support learning at home. (Kindergarten camp as a possible model).
- Share visiting hours for the school and individual classrooms with families.
- Use a variety of communication methods: telephone, home visits, weekly/monthly newsletters, e-mail, in person, and notes from home/school.
- Establish a welcoming committee for students and parents.

Families and school staff feel that their input is important and their opinions are valued.

- Begin communication with a positive focus and view parents as the “experts” about their children.
- Administrators set the tone for a collaborative climate (i.e. informal presence in lobby/classroom during school hours and lunch with the principal).
- Use methods of two-way communication which send the message that parental involvement is valued (parent surveys, polls, conference feedback forms, homework sign off sheets).
- Create a climate of acceptance and openness with cultural and informal events (i.e. Family BBQ, Picnic, Family Reading Night).
- Train school staff in communications and interpersonal skills for interactions with parents, students, and other staff.
- Ask parents for feedback about their child and experiences during parent conferences. Students also have the opportunity to participate.

Volunteers assist families and school staff by facilitating communication when appropriate.

- Parent volunteer coordinators are paid when possible.
- Parent surveys are used to indicate interests and skill areas, as well as limitations (work hours, etc).
- Volunteers are valued: create volunteer center, host appreciation events, address barriers to involvement.
- Volunteers serve as greeters during the school day in the lobby (Welcome Desk).
- Parents mentor other parents with similar interests and/or concerns.

Schools use and expand technology to enhance communication.

- School staff are properly trained and provided with ongoing technical support.
- All schools are equipped with state-of-the-art technology to meet needs of students and families who may not have access at home.
- Staff has access to and regularly uses various methods of communication with families, i.e. voicemail, email, and/or websites.

Students are key participants in the communication to problem solve and suggest creative solutions related to improving communication.

- Families and teachers ask students for input/feedback re: school events, parent/teacher conferences, etc.
- Students are encouraged to use a variety of methods to invite families to school for events.
- Establish forums for student input such as Student Council, suggestion boxes, surveys, etc.

Schools address the challenges faced by families, students, and visitors with limited English-speaking and/or reading capabilities.

- Provide resources in parents' first language to promote student success and family acceptance (i.e. interpreters, translation software).
- Use a variety of communication methods in families' first language (i.e. telephone, personal meetings).
- Organize multicultural events and clubs.
- Staff have access to and regularly use various methods of communication with families i.e., voicemail, email and website.

Continuity

Day to day, Place to place, Year to year

Home and school expect and enforce similar rules so children understand what behavior is acceptable at what place.

- The parent questionnaire asks, “What are the top 3 rules at home?”
- The School Handbook includes the top 3 rules at school.
- The School Handbook includes the 6 Pillars of Character Counts and the 4 Behavioral Expectations that are operative at all grade levels.

Communication (oral and written) at all grade levels and school staff support a positive view of parent involvement - parents are welcome!

- Signage conveys a welcoming message.
- Place additional signs around the building to guide parents and other visitors.
- Use pictures or visuals as an alternative to words.
- Clearly mark areas for parents/visitors to park.
- Show directional signs for moving around in the parking area.
- Request support from the county and the state to acquire needed signage.
- Volunteers who are familiar with the layout of the school direct parents/visitors at the front entrance.
- Enlist parents, staff, volunteers, seniors as greeters at the front entrance.

School/home and community are recognized as collaborative and supportive of each other.

- School website includes links to community resources, for example, Albemarle Kids and the United Way I & R Bulletin.
- Circulate newsletters and parent bulletins to a wider audience.
- Review the school handbook regularly and highlight a particular section each month for students, parents and staff.

The school serves as a community focus and a community center.

- Inform community of events through calendar, weekly parent bulletin, and PTO newsletter and so forth.
- Keep teachers, students and parents apprised of community events through the United Way I&R bulletin and Albemarle Kids (available on the internet).
- Increase bilingual opportunities and outreach.
- Schedule community events and activities after school hours; invite community providers to come to the school for meetings, performances and so forth.

Students, parents, teachers and community providers recognize that relationships and services continue over time and are dynamic and evolving.

- Invite community providers to Round Table meetings that are specific to individual child/family needs.
- Use staff meetings and PTO meetings as forums for sharing information about the school and the community.
- Hold “child at a glance” meetings between current teacher and next grade level teacher.
- Review and possibly revise content on “blue” and “yellow” cards used by the school.
- Develop a PTO Mission Statement that includes supporting linkages with community resources.

Continuum

Varying needs, Range of choices, Pre-K – 5 parent involvement

At each grade level, parents will routinely be involved in areas of school life, respecting that parent involvement will look different from one grade level to another and one child to another.

- Provide a variety of formal and informal opportunities for parents to come to the school to interact with teachers and administrators: parent-teacher conferences, back to school nights, picnics, grade-level events with the principal, “coffees with parents” and so forth.
- The school improvement plan includes a concrete and meaningful parent involvement component.
- Parent volunteers participate in training opportunities to assist them in carrying out their volunteer work more effectively.

Parents and school staff will broaden their understanding of ways the home environment can contribute to a child’s success at school.

- Provide links on school website that address parenting and educational issues.
- Offer a “tip of the week” for parents to do with their child at meals or while riding in the car, i.e. “tell a story about....”
- Schedule monthly or quarterly family events for all grades featuring children demonstrating/presenting their school work.
- Consider how parents who want to volunteer could do their volunteer work from home, i.e. preparing materials for classroom/school projects, researching topics on the computer, preparing mailings and so forth.
- Create homework games that provide an enjoyable learning experience for parents and children and also reinforce important concepts and skills.

Develop individualized outreach strategies that meet the needs of diverse family groups.

- Target outreach efforts to specific populations who have unique needs:
 - disabled,
 - young parents,
 - single parents,
 - grandparents raising grandchildren,
 - new families moving into the community,
 - ethnic/cultural/racial.

NEXT STEPS

For the School

1. Pilot at Agnor-Hurt Elementary School for four to six months.
2. Identify some priority items or items that spark the most interest and can be accomplished school-wide.
3. Identify some priority items that could be done by smaller school teams or grade levels.
4. Include Family – Friendly School Environment Project as a regular agenda item at all staff, teachers, and team leader meetings.
5. Ask teachers to choose from one to three items to implement in their classrooms as part of their staff development plan.
6. Participate in survey or focus group during the pilot phase to respond to these questions: What did you do? How did it go? What could be done to improve the plan?
7. Utilize members of the workgroup, especially the staff at Agnor-Hurt, as coaches and resource people during the pilot phase.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

For the Workgroup

1. Participate in introducing the project to the Partnership for Children Partner's Group and the Bright Stars Steering Committee.
2. Participate in introducing the project to the Agnor-Hurt school staff.
3. Take the lead in identifying training or technical support/assistance to implement some menu strategies.
4. Hold focus groups or design a survey to measure change at the four to six month point.
5. Revise document based on feedback.
6. Expand pilot to other schools.
7. Ensure on-going communication between workgroup members, school staff, the Partnership for Children and the Bright Stars Steering Committee.

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Continuum of Parent/Program Relationship Types: Zigler and Weiss, 1985

Websites

www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/parents

www.pta.org/programs

www.nea.org/parents

www.nea.org/technology

www.tandemfs.org/parentsassociation

Interviews

Linda King, Assistant Principal, Greer Elementary School

Fred Caitlin, Head of School, Montessori Community School

Matthew Landahl, Principal, Cale Elementary School

Sylvia Henderson, Principal, Meriwether Lewis Elementary School

Andrew Grider, Principal, Murray Elementary School

APPENDIX

Appendix I – Letter of Invitation to Work Group

Dear _____,

As part of an Albemarle County plan aimed at helping children grow up in healthy families and start school ready to learn, the Partnership for Children and Albemarle County Department of Social Services, through their School Readiness Workgroup and the Bright Stars preschool program is organizing a workgroup to develop a model for a family-friendly school environment. Agnor-Hurt Elementary School Principal, Sylvia Henderson, has agreed to have Agnor-Hurt develop and pilot this model for other County elementary schools. Representatives from the school, Partnership for Children, Bright Stars, Child Health Partnership, Head Start, Healthy Families/Family Partners will be on this workgroup.

Your name has been suggested as a potential member of this workgroup based on the following criteria:

- Ability to think broadly, with interest in K-5 education, parent involvement and community collaboration
- Knowledge of current educational issues
- Knowledge of the school and/or local community
- Team skills, patience and willingness to "stick with it"

It is anticipated that this workgroup will meet no more than 5 times, the first meeting scheduled for May 12, 2003 from 3:00 - 4:30 at Agnor-Hurt.

This is a letter of invitation to you to join this community/school collaboration. We believe it is an important initiative towards building a better, healthier community for children and adults and supporting children's success in school.

Appendix II - The Charter for this Workgroup:

The Family-Friendly School Environment Workgroup is charged with developing a model for Agnor-Hurt Elementary School and other County elementary schools that recognizes the role that children, parents, school staff and community agencies play in support of having successful learning outcomes for all children in the County. The Workgroup will be structured to identify:

- What does a Family-Friendly School Environment look like?
- How do administrators, teachers and other school staff, parents, children and community providers behave in this kind of environment?
- How far away are we from where we want to be?
- What are the barriers/challenges we need to address to get where we want to be?

The Workgroup is charged with developing a plan to implement at Agnor-Hurt for the 2003-2004 school year and to have this plan serve as a model for other schools to adopt. The Workgroup will present their recommendations to the Bright Stars Steering Committee and the School Readiness Workgroup of the Partnership for Children. These two groups will also serve as resources to the Workgroup, as needed.

Appendix III – Brainstorming Perspectives

Family Friendly School from a School Staff View

- It's different for different staff
- Helpful to others
- Teachers/staff feel immediate benefits – the benefits of being engaged
- Mutual respect – no negative talk
- Teachers feel supported by parents
- Teachers feel supported by administration
- Teachers can learn about engaging parents
- All school staff are important and make a contribution
- Take time to listen and not assume
- Establish clear lines of communication
- Time and encouragement to do home visits
- Confidentiality
- Space is open and inviting
- Activities and events include parents
- Clear expectations for volunteers including confidentiality
- Use of technology
- Support for school improvement goals
- Looping
- Continuity
- Communication
- SOLs – teachers are expected to accomplish this

Family Friendly School from a Child's View

- Will my teacher be nice/friendly?
- Teachers greeting students at door
- Allow child and parent to tour school and classroom (when possible)
- Upper grade or same grade mentor for new students
- Somebody who speaks child's language
- Is the school safe?
- Will people like me? (other kids, teachers)
- Will people recognize my uniqueness?
- What is expected of me? Rules? Student Handbook?
- What do I do if I get lost? Who will help?
- Can I bring something from home? Show and tell?
- Will I get to play? Will I have fun?
- Will school be too hard? What will I learn?
- Are school rules the same as home rules?
- Will there be people like me?
- Are my parents welcome? Can they come to school?

Family Friendly School from a Parent View

- Looking for accurate information about starting school
- Being greeted in a friendly fashion
- Spanish speaking people available
- What will my child learn? Will it be too hard? (ESOL differences)
- Need for safe and open environment
- An awareness of the facility (where are rooms)
- Will someone appreciate my child?
- Visibility and availability of school staff
- How do I contact the teacher or person I need?
- How do I get my needs met?
- Will I be respected, listened to, and will my opinion be valued?
-
- Will there be friendly people there?
-
- Will I belong – are there other there like me?
-
- Will my work schedule be respected? What about childcare?
-
- Will my child be chastised or be judged by my actions?
-
- What communication will I receive?
- Will the school respect my busy lifestyle (2 or 3 jobs)?
- Will there be concrete experiences for me to learn to be a better parent?
- Lots of differing perspective
- Positive vs. negative
- Front door/office accessible and visible
- Inviting space/personnel
- Positive relationship building

Family Friendly School Environments

- Open lines of communication (from the very beginning)
- Parent center – near the front
- Parent literature – accessible
- Continuum of parent involvement
- Avoid closed, cliques
- Parent survey
- Encourage at home involvement as well as meetings

Family Friendly School from a Community View

- Feel welcome
- Educate each other @ systems
- Collaborate
- Respect for roles and limitations
- How to contact school staff – difference in schedules
- Space for meetings
- Invited to meetings – welcomed @ meetings
- OK to have different opinions
- Good signage directions
- Identified contact person shared with all team members
- Who's problem is it – shared responsibility
- Who do we trust – different norms – confidentiality
- Instructional team approach
- Keep a long-term view – the collaboration is on-going
- Have a liaison between school and agency
- The school as a community center and community focus
- Awareness of the continuity of services

Appendix IV – Characteristics of a Family Friendly School

Communication: Open, Confidential, Respectful

- Accurate information about starting school
- How to contact teacher or the person I need
- What kinds of communication will I receive?
- Open lines of communication
- Mutual respect - no negative talk
- Take time to listen and not assume
- Establish clear lines of communication
- Clear expectations for volunteers including confidentiality
- Use of technology
- What is expected of me? Rules? Student Handbook
- Differences of opinion are okay
- Identified contact person shared with all team members
- Who do we trust? Different norms. Confidentiality
- What will my child learn? Will it be too hard?
- Will my opinion be valued?

Climate: Safe, Friendly, Inviting, Helpful, Diverse

- Being greeted in a friendly fashion
- Spanish-speaking people available
- Awareness of the building (where are the rooms)
- Visibility and availability of school staff
- Will someone appreciate my child?
- Will there be friendly people there?
- Will I belong - are there others like me?
- Will my child be chastised or be judged by my actions?
- Appreciation for lots of different perspectives
- Front door/office accessible
- Inviting space/personnel
- Avoid closed cliques
- All school staff are important and make a contribution
- My teacher is friendly and nice
- Teachers greeting students at the door
- Child and parent can tour school and classroom (when possible)
- What do I do if I get lost?
- Is the school safe?
- Will people recognize my uniqueness
- Will people like me?
- Space for meetings
- Invited to meetings and welcomed at meetings
- Good signage directions
- Will I get to play? Will I have fun?

Collaboration: Partnering for and with family, Shared responsibility, Acceptance of limitations, Knowledge of boundaries, Purposeful outreach

- Will the school respect my busy lifestyle (2 or 3 jobs)?
- Will there be concrete experiences for me to learn to be a better parent?
- Parent center near the front
- Parent literature accessible
- Parent survey
- Teachers/staff feel immediate benefits - the benefits of being engaged
- Teachers feel supported by parents
- Teachers feel supported by administration
- Teachers can learn about engaging parents
- Time and encouragement to do home visits
- Activities and events include parents
- Support for school improvement goals
- Support for SOLs - teachers are expected to accomplish this
- Upper grade or same grade mentor for new students
- Educate each other about the systems
- Respect for roles and limitations
- Who's problem is it? shared responsibility
- Keep a long-term view - the collaboration is on-going
- Have a liaison between school and agency

Continuum: Varying needs, Range of choices, PreK-5 parental involvement

- Provide a continuum of parent involvement
- Encourage at-home involvement as well as meetings
- It's different for different staff/parents

Continuity: Day-to-day, Place-to-place, year-to-year

- Are school rules the same as home rules?
- Are my parents welcome?
- Can I bring something from home? Show and tell?
- The school as a community center and community focus
- Awareness of the continuity of service

Appendix V – Gap Analysis Charts

CLIMATE

Safe, Friendly, Inviting, Helpful, Diverse

As Is State	Hoped for State	Gap	Potential Solution
Parents & Visitors are sometimes greeted	Everyone in the school receives a greeting	No formal process for implementing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children are greeted individually at classroom door. • Visitors, parents, staff are greeted regularly. • Children are told good-bye. • Checklist on door • Buddy system
	All LEP families have opportunity to be heard and understood in their primary language.	Trained personnel; funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnering w/PVCC, UVA, AHS, to provide translation. • Earmark event to raise \$ • Write a grant • Survey teachers to identify language resources.
Building and parking areas can be confusing and inaccessible to visitors.	All visitors, parents, children, and community people know where to park, how to enter building & location of rooms	Signage indoors and out.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create signs with words, international symbols, arrows, banners, marked parking lot. • Front door and main office are accessible. • Plan a Treasure Hunt for children/parents at Back to School Night.
School staff lacks visibility and availability.	A variety of ways are in place for contact.	Lack of formal procedure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet buses • Home visits • Staff are outside their classrooms • Office staff is everyone’s reference point. • Parent volunteers as “greeters”.
Parents wonder how their child will be treated.	Parents know their child is appreciated; people are friendly; there will be other like them they		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School staff will ask – “Tell me about your child.” • Collect these responses.

Collaboration

Partnering, Sharing responsibility, Accepting limitations, Reaching out

AS IS STATE	HOPED FOR STATE	GAP	POTENTIAL SOLUTION
Parent(s) wonders if school staff understand their multiple responsibilities	School will respect my busy lifestyle (2-3 jobs)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent contact form: "What would I like the school to know about me?" • Use parent conference times to update emergency info, phone # job info, etc. • Provide multiple opportunities for meetings (at different times of day, etc.) • Approach problem solving as a two way street • Give enough notice for parent meetings, reminders, too
Some parents don't know best practices of parenting	Concrete experiences for parent to learn to be a better parent	Information and referral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School brings in speakers, provide sessions on parenting skills (use agency collaborations for this - Parent Center, CYFS) • School distribute information on community workshops and events
Parent Center does not exist, or is not easily accessible	Parent Center near the front; comfortable setting; parent literature available	Space, signage, furnishings, leadership/ownership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent corners with literature, in school library or entry • Discrete location so parent can seek help or pick up info w/o embarrassment
School staff lacks data from parents	Parent input is collected regularly and used in planning & decision-making	Consistent use of surveys and other feedback mechanisms across grade levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surveys for all stakeholders • Instruments to collect, analyze and disseminate

Family Friendly School Environments

	processes		<p>data</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data available to staff, PTO, SIP groups or on web-site
All school staff do not recognize benefits of reaching out to parents	School staff feel immediate benefits of being engaged with parents, community		
and other community agencies	and others		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the process of engagement is long-term • Link collaborations with mission/core values of school (marketing) • Collaborations with business, social service agencies are positive not as evidence of a deficit or problem
Modes of address and behavior reinforce distance and authority	Mutuality/ adult-to-adult communication is the norm	Protocol for developing relationships and mutual respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers treat parents as adults who have own knowledge and expertise re: child • Administrators treat teachers respectfully • Teachers can sign notes with their first and last names
Some school staff are uncomfortable relating to/communicating with parents	School staff exhibit confidence & respect when communicating with parent	Engagement comes more easily to some; not always part of teacher preparation and training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use partnerships with community agencies to provide training to school staff on active listening skills, etc.
Little support or time for home visits	Home visiting is recognized as a tool for building home-school relationships	Time and compensation for home visits; training on best practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This practice becomes a high value/expectation for school staff and time is provided • Administrators regularly provide back-up for teacher's decisions when they have to make tough calls on parent issues • Establish purpose(s) for

Family Friendly School Environments

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a home visit • Pair with an agency representative
Some school activities and events include parents/family members	Family members are welcome most of the time	Advance notice of events including purpose, cost (money or time), recommended or mandatory participation; time of day is considered when planning events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mechanism/protocol for notifying families • Year-long plan available to families so they can plan ahead • Events scheduled at various times and days
School Improvement Teams make plans for increasing quality	Widespread support for school improvement plans; diverse membership on the teams	Are all family sub-groups represented on the teams? How invested are parents in the plans?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use surveys to determine what is important to staff, parents, children • Purposeful outreach to underrepresented families • Means to sustain interest and investment throughout the year
New students enter school lacking knowledge about the overt and covert culture of the school. Sometimes there is a gulf between upper and lower grade children	<p>Students at different grade levels act as mentors for new students.</p> <p>Book Buddies use older students to read with younger ones.</p>	Support and leadership for this project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assign mentors during orientation or as needed throughout the year • Solicit a volunteer among staff to manage or provide a small stipend • Encourage expanded peer support projects

Family Friendly School Environments

<p>Lack of information about other systems in the community</p>	<p>School and agency staff continuously increase their knowledge about community resources; Respect for roles and limitations develops</p>	<p>Plan for sharing this information</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family Support Workers can serve as liaisons • Reciprocal training(s) are scheduled during the year • Designate liaisons for each school and agency • Provide opportunities for dialogue • Provide release time for school staff to participate in case conferences • Protocol helps agencies & schools to ease transitions and minimize disruptions to ongoing relationships
<p>School staff and agencies sometimes have a short-term focus</p>	<p>Community takes a long-term view of education and support; collaboration is viewed as on-going, year to year</p>	<p>Communication is sporadic usually driven by individual cases</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schedule meetings at the beginning and end of the school year to introduce new staff, new programs and changes being made.
<p>Professionals sometimes feel they are solely responsible for a child/family</p>	<p>Shared responsibility - raising children is a home, school and community responsibility</p>	<p>Knowing and being open to the idea that everyone holds a different piece of the puzzle</p>	

Continuity

Day to Day, Place to Place, Year to Year

As Is State	Hoped for State	Gap	Potential Solution
1. Are school rules the same as at home?	Home and school will expect and enforce similar rules so children will understand what behavior is acceptable at what place.	School staff and parents not in regular communication about behavioral expectations.	*“What are the top 3 rules at home?” *“What are the top 3 rules at school?” *Add to Handbook *Add to parent questionnaire.
2. Are my parents welcome?	All school communication will emphasize that parents are welcome.	Inconsistent communication; mixed messages.	*Tweak signage, add additional signs, use pictures/visuals, clearly mark areas for parents/visitors to park, show directional signs for moving around in the parking area. Have locality and state help with acquiring signage. *Volunteers to direct parent/visitors at the front entrance. * Greeters at front entrance – parents and staff/volunteers
3. Uncertainty about boundaries between home and school. “Can I bring something from home? Show and Tell.”	School/home and community are promoted as complementary and supportive.	Lack of knowledge about what is happening in each area.	*Parent bulletin, newsletter, and handbook – highlight a certain section each month.
4. Weekend and after hours events are hosted at the school; agency staff come to school for meetings. Fall Festival, Math Night, use of soccer fields, PTO fundraiser, voting site.	The school as a community center and community focus.	All residents do not recognize the school as a potential community center and focus; school may be an under-utilized facility	*Inform community of events through -Calendar, Parent Bulletin (weekly), PTO Newsletter; *entertain direct requests from administrators; *United Way – I&R (link off of website), *some increase in bilingual opportunities

Family Friendly School Environments

5. Linear & static	Recognition that services continue over time, are dynamic and evolving and include other providers	Lack of awareness among school staff and community providers and families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Round table event(s) – invite community people. *Staff meeting or PTO meeting. *Transition meetings – “The child at a glance.” *Blue & yellow cards, *PTO Mission Statement.
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Continuum

Varying needs, range of choices, PreK – 5 parental involvement

As Is State	Hoped for State	Gap	Potential Solution
1. Commitment to parent involvement is inconsistent across grades.	At each grade level, parents will routinely be involved in most areas of school life	School-wide expectations and standards for involving parents	*P/T conferences *Back to School Nights, *picnics, *“pizza w/principal,” (4 th students), *coffee with parents, *craft some specific parent involvement around SIP, *train parents on copying, making general informational calls, volunteering
2. Some parents are unaware of ways to help their children w/school-related work.	Parents will know that they play a critical role in their children’s success at school.	Menu of options for parents.	*Volunteers can work at home, *homework games, *tip of the week for parents to do w/child at meals or in the car; *“tell a story about....,” *parent educational links on school website * monthly or quarterly family events for all grades featuring children demonstrating/presenting.
3. May have more “one size fits all” opportunities than targeted ones.	Staff and parents use strategies that work for them.	Menu of options for parents and staff.	Target specific populations as well as encouraging cross-cultural efforts. - Ethnicity - Grandparents - Young parents - Race - Single

Appendix V – Parent Focus Group Report

**REPORT TO FAMILY FRIENDLY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT
WORKGROUP**

**AGNOR-HURT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
PARTNERSHIP FOR CHILDREN SCHOOL READINESS WORKGROUP
BRIGHT STARS STEERING COMMITTEE**

PARENT FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

Conducted January 6, 2004

Prepared by Charity Haines, Bright Stars and Family Support Program Coordinator

INTRODUCTION

On Tuesday, January 6, 2004, Jacki Bryant and Charity Haines moderated a focus group of Agnor-Hurt parents on behalf of the Partnership for Children, the Bright Stars Steering Committee and Agnor-Hurt Elementary School. A focus group is a qualitative research methodology used to collect information. Focus groups allow for more in-depth reporting by participants than a paper and pencil survey. The focus group is not designed to reach a consensus among the participants. It was designed to collect information from each participant to identify concerns and trends.

This focus group was designed to gather data from parents whose children attend Agnor-Hurt. The data are intended to inform the pilot plan and continued development of the Family Friendly School Environment Project and to identify continuous improvement strategies for Agnor-Hurt to better serve customers and the community.

It is intended that this pilot project at Agnor-Hurt will be available to other County elementary schools who are interested in developing, implementing or enhancing a Family Friendly School plan. The plan will be offered in a menu format and will be written as recommendations rather than rules or guidelines.

COMPOSITION AND PROCESS

The focus group consisted of individuals who were invited to participate. One time slot was offered. A full focus group typically consists of up to twelve participants. The response was less than twelve.

Jacki Bryant and Charity Haines shared facilitating the focus group. We explained to participants that their responses would remain anonymous but not confidential. All were encouraged to be honest and forthright. The focus group lasted one and one-half hours. The total number of participants was four.

The facilitators led participants in the focus group through a formal and sequenced set of questions.

The purpose was to explore parent perceptions of what is working and not working with the way Agnor-Hurt elementary school operates in regard to providing services to families, children, internal staff and administration. The key focus questions included:

- Tell about your own elementary school experience. What seems memorable to you?
- What works with the way services are currently delivered to families and children?

- What does not work in the way services are delivered?
- What could be done to improve things? What is your top priority

The facilitators used “probes” or follow-ups around each question to clarify what each focus group participant was saying.

FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY RESULTS

All focus group participants recalled memorable things, both positive and negative memories, from their own elementary school experiences.

- Relationship with their teacher was of central importance – it could make or break a school day; teacher was very important , always there for me; looked forward to seeing her even after I left her class
- Peer group was important but not as important as the teacher
- Moving from one school to another was hard and teacher could make a difference
- A safe environment was important: a safe place to be; a safe person to go to even for shy children; didn’t feel as safe in 5th grade
- Good when teachers reached out to children and children were encouraged to reach out to other children like lunch buddies and playground buddies; inclusion of children with disabilities and intentional efforts to eliminate prejudice and get kids to play and work together
- Teasing, prejudice and being hit left a mark
- Couldn’t rely on parents to help out – what could parents do?
- Felt singled out for negative attention – couldn’t do anything right
- Didn’t have as many demands on me – SOL’s, homework, activities after school; more time to be a child; not stressed out like kids today
- Remember carrying over bad feelings from year to year; one year’s experience colors another year

WHAT WORKS?

All participants perceived that Agnor-Hurt has many strengths and offers a comprehensive program to children and families and that most staff is dedicated, creative and resourceful. Parents cited the following examples:

- Janitorial and cafeteria staff is phenomenal – love kids, friendly to everyone, greet with a smile, know kids by name, go out of the way to help and give constructive feedback. Communication with them is good.
- The Specialist Programs (PE, music, art) are strong
- The Library is set up well and the librarian helps and guides the kids

- Some outstanding volunteers who give a lot and have good hearts; some have been here for several years
- Some teachers “light up like Christmas tree;” some have “open door” policy that makes you feel welcome; some greet parents whether or not they have had your child in class
- Front office staff takes their job seriously: they watch the door like hawks so that everyone is safe
- Staff cares about kids and their safety; staff is qualified
- The facility is clean, functional and safe
- The artwork on the walls is great
- Teaching Assistants do a lot and don’t get enough credit
- English as a Second Language (ESOL) program is beneficial and the welcome that these students receive from all school staff and students is a real strength
- The school has a diverse population so kids will get to know and relate to those from different cultures

WHAT IS NOT WORKING AND RECOMMENDED IMPROVEMENTS

Parents expressed concern about the inefficiency of communication between school staff and themselves, the climate/atmosphere of the school building which they perceive as rigid and pressured, sometimes unwelcoming and inconsistent from one teacher and one grade to another and an over emphasis on completing assignments and homework.

Communication Between Parents and School Staff - Some parents said that “if they didn’t push it, they wouldn’t know what is going on” and there needs to be more and different ways to communicate.

Suggestions for Improving Communication included:

- Set an expectation from the top down that communication with parents is required
- Translate flyers and other materials into other languages especially Spanish
- Provide an e-mail address and a contact phone number and available times to talk
- Provide opportunities to debrief different or difficult situations
- Practice an “open door” policy and/or be flexible so parents can come in
- Look to parents as resources for knowing their child
- Parent & Teacher “report cards” to rate how parents are doing and to give feedback to teachers

Climate and Atmosphere of the School Building – All parents agreed that the building is clean, functional and safe and that the artwork on the walls is notable and attractive. Concerns were expressed by almost all of the parents about what behavior is expected

of them when they are in the building, i.e. can they talk in the hallways to the teachers, children or each other? Can they use the copy machine? They wonder if they are welcome. Some talked about a “tense” and “tight” atmosphere for parents and children. All parents felt that the school did not do as well as it could in welcoming new families, including those whose children are transferring from another County school. Some wonder who is responsible for creating a comfortable atmosphere – the teacher, administrator or parent? Parents would like more consistency between County elementary schools, more real teamwork between teachers and teachers and parents, a clear expectation that being rude or disrespectful is not an option – ever - and that teachers who are “set in their ways” should be encouraged to listen, be flexible and open to change.

Suggestions for improving the climate/atmosphere

- Allow new administrator to set the tone for the school. At one time it was a “very relaxed ship, then a “very tight ship” and now it’s unknown
- Everyone follow the Character Counts values and principals – teachers, administrators, parents and children
- Foster a warm and welcoming environment by greeting people with a smile and by name whenever possible.
- Address parents and children’s fears and worries about moving into a new grade with a new teacher, children not wanting to go out to recess because they feel unsafe on the playground.
- Always display an open and willing attitude
- Saturate school with the value of parents working in partnership with teachers and teachers protected/supported by administration
- Evaluate the front office space to determine barriers to greeting children, parents and visitors. Look at architectural, workload and customer service barriers.
- Establish a Welcoming Committee separate from the PTO Board
- Have a Welcome Desk right inside the main door
- Be prepared to take visitors around the school or to a specific location
- Be able to say hello in more than one language
- Increase the volunteer base in all grades; provide training and/or written guidelines about how to use volunteers and what is expected of volunteers
- Provide permanent name tags for regular volunteers and display them at the Welcome Desk
- Provide bilingual volunteers in classrooms and a group to help ESOL kids with their homework

Emphasis On Completing Assignments and Homework – Parents expressed concern that everyone at school seems to be under pressure and that this pressure carries over to the home. Parents spend several hours in the evening helping kids with homework and this is the only “quality” time that they have with their kids. It also stops them from

wanting or being able to contribute additional time to the school. Parents noted a significant difference in the expectations for children today than when they were in school – high stress, many demands, not enough time to be a child, too much homework, too busy after school. Parents are worried that their children will develop medical conditions like ulcers and obesity. Some parents compared their children to machines because many of their activities are timed to fit a schedule. Parents talked about children getting detention, missing recess, not being allowed to use the bathroom except at specified times and not being able to leave at the end of the day because work hadn't been finished. Most expressed concern that the SOLs were driving the system in harmful ways.

Suggestions for Improving the Emphasis on Assignments and Homework

There were only a limited number of suggestions on how to improve in this area.

Help kids filter what's really important so they don't worry about everything

- Reevaluate the consequences for misplacing or failing to bring a folder or homework to class or for not completing work
- Children should not be disciplined by losing recess on a regular basis

PRIORITY AREAS

Each parent identified the priorities for the school:

1. Parent – Teacher – Staff relations
2. Nurturing of volunteerism against competing interests and burnout
3. Knowing what comes next – day to day, grade to grade, year to year
4. Grade level teams working together
5. Celebration of diversity enhanced
6. Addressing the impact of pressures created by the SOLs.

Each parent identified priorities for the PTO:

1. Larger membership
2. Increased attendance at meetings
3. More teacher attendance at meetings
4. Minority involvement increased – reach out to diverse groups in ways that fit for them
5. Job descriptions for Board officers
6. Paid volunteer coordinator

Appendix VI – Teacher Informational Group Report

**REPORT TO FAMILY FRIENDLY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT
WORKGROUP**

**AGNOR-HURT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
PARTNERSHIP FOR CHILDREN SCHOOL READINESS
WORKGROUP
BRIGHT STARS STEERING COMMITTEE**

TEACHER INFORMATIONAL GROUP RESULTS

Conducted January 13, 2004

Prepared by Charity Haines, Bright Stars and Family Support Program Coordinator

INTRODUCTION

On Tuesday, January 13, 2004, Jacki Bryant and Charity Haines facilitated an informational and focus group for teachers/team leaders on behalf of the Partnership for Children, the Bright Stars Steering Committee and Agnor-Hurt Elementary School. The purpose of this group was to present information on the Family Friendly School Environment Workgroup effort to date and to collect information from them to identify concerns and trends.

The data are intended to inform the pilot plan and continued development of the Family Friendly School Environment Project and to identify continuous improvement strategies for Agnor-Hurt to better serve customers and the community.

It is intended that this pilot project at Agnor-Hurt will be available to other County elementary schools who are interested in developing, implementing or enhancing a Family Friendly School plan. The plan will be offered in a menu format and will be written as recommendations rather than rules or guidelines.

COMPOSITION AND PROCESS

The group consisted of staff who held team leader positions, the assistant principal, and the school librarian or those who were otherwise invited to attend. One time slot was offered. A full group typically consists of up to twelve participants. Ten people participated in this group.

Jacki Bryant and Charity Haines shared facilitating the group. We explained to participants that their responses would remain anonymous, that is not attributed to a particular individual, but not confidential. All were encouraged to be honest and forthright. The group lasted one and a half hours.

The facilitators presented an overview of the workgroups effort including the group's invitation and charge, notes on the brainstorming from a variety of perspectives, identification of the 5C's and membership of the workgroup. Then, the facilitators led participants through a formal and sequenced set of questions. The purpose was to explore teachers perceptions of what is working and not working with the way Agnor-Hurt elementary school operates in regard to providing services to families, children, internal staff and administration. The key questions included:

- What is already being done at Agnor-Hurt to provide a family friendly school environment?
- What barriers exist that prevent Agnor-Hurt from being a family friendly school environment?

- What is working?
- What are the challenges?
- What is your top priority that could be accomplished within one year? And what are your recommendations for improvement?

The facilitators used “probes” or follow-ups around each question to clarify what each group participant was saying.

GROUP SUMMARY RESULTS

Most group participants named activities already implemented that are intended to contribute to a family friendly environment. Participants perceived that school staff and administrators are sensitive and responsive to a very diverse population and that this diversity is a strength and attraction of the school in that the environment prepares children for what they will encounter in the wider world.

WHAT IS ALREADY BEING DONE?

- Bright Stars have Family Nights
- Pizza with the Principal
- Weekly newsletter from the principal sent out on Mondays
- Lots of after hours events including –
 1. Family Fun and Fitness,
 2. Skate Night,
 3. Open House,
 4. Fall Festival,
 5. family picnics at the beginning of school,
 6. 4H speech presentations,
 7. parents welcome in classroom for presentations and birthdays,
 8. math night,
 9. lots of volunteers, parents and others, who return year after year; Bright Stars, K and 1 have more volunteers; Bright Stars parents seem more comfortable and engaged here because they see this as their school and they receive lots of 1-1 attention
 10. homework bus sponsored by State Farm,
 11. kindergarten orientation and kindergarten camp,
 12. back to school night,
 13. guidance counselors “First Buddies” who recruit students to help orient new students
 14. one-on-one parent conferences
 15. good turn-out for night events (95-100%)

WHAT WORKS?

- Teachers attend kid's events after school hours to give support to their students
- Monthly grade-level newsletter on the web
- Student Directory
- Gator Gazette – an e-mail newsletter
- All students have school T-shirt
- Teachers help each other out, cover for each other
- Morning meetings
- Appreciation of differences

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES?

Teachers noted that there are things that they have little control over. There are things that haven't changed over time.

- This is a working class community where both parents have jobs outside the home.
- Children above 4th grade have after-school activities that take parents away
- Paperwork at the beginning of the school year can be overwhelming; this work could be "friendlier."
- ESOL programming may be revamped and this may remove some ESOL children and families from our school
- School schedules sometimes gets in the way – not enough time
- Parents who don't change, who maintain old family patterns; families for whom interventions haven't worked
- Families who don't show that they value education

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Teachers recognized areas that could be improved to provide a richer family friendly school environment and to help children be more successful in school

- If parents prefer an "open door," drop-in policy, investigate having a resource person who could be stationed at the front door (similar to Stone-Robinson)
- Provide voice mail for all school staff
- Assign the same teacher for all siblings in a family
- Teachers have more contact with outside agencies in the community
- Get information from all preschools who funnel kindergartners into the school
- Increase after school tutoring opportunities – math and chess club, Buddy Read
- Expand diversity of the PTO
- Provide after school activities that don't cost a lot – movie night, skating

- Provide grade-level family nights
- Organize a club for ESOL parents
- Continue to improve the quality of personal contact and interest in the students
- Develop a keener sense of communication with parents and children – listening
- Agendas for meetings
- Build on the recognized strength of this school – to embrace all children

PRIORITIES

Teachers selected several priority areas for the school that they thought could have a substantial impact on parents and children and that could be accomplished within a 12-month period.

- Establish a Parent Center on-site with a family room to include a washer/dryer, computer and other equipment and materials to assist parents
- Consider expanding this to a community center where health, financial and other services are available
- Have a greeter at the front door. Add a desk with volunteer nametags; greeter (adult or child) can answer questions about the school and guide visitors to particular areas. Separate this position/role from the front office staff
- Have a “Thought for the Day”