



A WELCOME WEEK IDEA for Administrators

Plans, Procedures and Activities

Introduction

It's the start of another school year and students are going to be arriving next week. There is an air of excitement and anticipation in everyone – the parents are excited to see their son/daughter enter a new grade level with a new teacher, the staff is excited to receive a new group of students and renew acquaintances with colleagues, and administration is anxious to make the opening week run smoothly and be as successful as possible. What can the leadership team and the staff do to make opening week in an elementary school even more exciting than it already is. The answer, strangely enough, comes from what high schools have been doing for decades – a Welcome Week program!

Traditionally, first week programs at high schools have been called Frosh Week. It usually consists of a theme for the week, pep rallies, a variety of activities, often culminating in a football game in which the entire student body is encouraged to attend.

This is in stark contrast to what is often found in elementary schools across the country. Although all elementary schools carefully plan their school opening activities, few plan a coordinated team effort in the form of a weeklong series of events.

This paper looks at the concept of initiating a Welcome Week program in an elementary school setting. The rationale is simple. A Welcome Week program will encourage all who are engaged in the educational processes in a school to work together as a team. Secondly, it will help to create an atmosphere of community in all those taking part. And finally, it will guarantee that school opening is fun for everyone – students, staff and parents!

The Last Week in June

Planning an effective school opening welcome week begins in the last month of June when students are finishing off the current year and anticipating the

next one. Most schools begin planning for the next year in May and June; plans that include number of classes, class sizes, and grade levels. Once these have been established, there is an opportunity for the present staff to meet and greet their next year students.

How can this be done? Once the administrative team has assigned teachers to classrooms, the stage has been set. A common time in the last week of school can be chosen and students from grades one to grade seven can be invited to move to their classrooms to meet the teacher and participate in an activity. The activity need not be long (1/2 hour to 45 minutes) but would be interactive and "fun".

Since the grade eight students are "moving on" to high school, they should be invited to play a special role in the activities by taking responsibility in pairs to introduce and run the activity for the teacher in his or her classroom. Following the activity time, the entire school might meet in the gym to sing a couple of songs and share a treat (i.e. popsicles). There are many ways this pre-first week activity can be modified to suit the unique needs and special differences among schools but the idea is to give students a time to meet their new teacher and classroom prior to the end of the school year.

Because some staff members will be leaving the school at the end of the year, arrangements might be made by the administration to invite the incoming teacher to participate and meet the students. Onus for picking the activity would reside with the incoming teacher and the outgoing teacher could go and cover the class. Allowance for travel-time between schools would have to be accommodated by the administrative teams in both schools.

The First Week in September

The staff is introduced to the concept of Welcome Week during the opening week in September prior to the arrival of students. The concept and reasons behind the week are introduced and time is given for discussion, concerns, etc. Depending on the enthusiasm of the staff and the complexities and constraints around school opening that year, a week is chosen for the Welcome Week activities to take place. It does not need to take place the first week of school – any time during the month of September would be suitable.

The concept as introduced involves having a special activity every day for all students in the school. The purpose is to provide bonding activities for students and staff in the school and create an atmosphere of community

with staff, students, and parents. The goals of the program are outlined below:

- To provide a dynamic opening to the school year
- To allow students and staff to get to know each other through participatory 'fun' activities
- To build a community atmosphere within the school

A committee of staff members is then struck to deal with the details and is asked to report back to the staff with their proposed plans.

Welcome Week

Once the committee has returned to the staff with its plans, they should be presented to the staff for reaction, clarification, and modification. Then the parents should be notified of the activities by letter and invited to attend specific parts. The school is then ready to proceed. A suggested plan of events is given below.

Monday

This is an ideal time to bring the whole school together in an initial assembly and explain the week and share in some singing. It is important in this first assembly to introduce students and staff members who are new to the school. It is also an excellent time to set the patterns and tone for all future assemblies.

The first all-school activity should follow the assembly (to prove that something exciting is really happening). This is an excellent time to do an all-school scavenger hunt activity on the playground. Prepare ahead of time on 4" X 4" card stock, the multiple copies of the letters needed to make up the phrase – "Have a Good Year". As each class leaves for the playground, hand out to each class, many copies of one or two of the letters only. The object is for each class to find the rest of the letters needed to make the phrase and invite a person with that letter to join with his or her class. When a team has assembled all the letters, they stand in a line, holding their letters over their head to show they have completed the task.

Tuesday

This is the day to begin preparing students for the years C.A.R.E. partner program. C.A.R.E. is an acronym that stands for Courtesy, Appreciation, Respect and Enthusiasm towards school and towards each other. Ahead of

time, partner each senior grade level class with a junior grade level class using the following formula:

- *Grade 8 matches with Grade 4*
- *Grade 7 matches with Grade 3*
- *Grade 6 matches with Grade 2*
- *Grade 5 matches with Grade 1*
- *Grade 4 matches with Kindergarten*

Using this formula helps to even out the age differences across the grades and avoids situations that can arise where two grades are C.A.R.E. partners but are only two or three years difference in age.

At a special time during this day, the C.A.R.E. partnered classes get together in one of the classrooms for a one hour 'special' activity designed to get to know one another. These is a great time to have each student interview their C.A.R.E. partner and then design a poster to display on a bulletin board in or outside of their classroom.

Wednesday

This is the mid-point of the Welcome Week program and it's a great time to build a sense of community in the school by inviting the families of the students to join in a Pancake Breakfast. The breakfast occurs before school opens on that day and takes careful preparation and planning. There are numerous choices that can be made in putting this together. The staff may wish to prepare the meal and run the event, the parent council may wish to do it, or the senior grade 8 class can put it together with staff simply overseeing each area of responsibility. The last choice is very effective for building teamwork and responsibility in the senior students right from the start. It also frees up the teachers a great deal so they are able to visit with parents and their families.

Thursday

This is the day the staff really 'mixes' with the students. Each teacher, kindergarten to grade 8 is asked to prepare a special lesson or activity for their C.A.R.E. partner class (or simply another class within the school) and teach it that day. Teachers can exhibit a fair degree of trepidation towards this activity, especially if the grade difference in teaching assignment is extreme, i.e. grade 8 teaches kindergarten or grade one and vica versa. This is why staying with the C.A.R.E. partner formula is a good idea. At a given time during the day, the teachers switch for an hour to teach the lesson or activity.

Friday

Today marks the culmination of the Welcome Week so whatever is chosen needs to have a degree of fun and excitement that rivals all the previous activities. Events that meet those criteria are a sock hop/dance, and/or a gym blast.

The sock hop can take place all afternoon with grade groupings attending at two distinct times. Kindergarten to grade four would have their own 'special' sock hop for one hour first thing in the afternoon. This would be followed by a short break and then a dance for grades five to eight. The dance may extend for one hour after school if there are willing staff members to supervise.

Gym Blasts are organized and run by Youth for Christ members. They are a high-energy set of team building games that take place in the school gymnasium. Gym blasts are designed primarily for grades six to eight so if this was chosen, a concurrent activity would need to be chosen for kindergarten through grade five.

Evaluation

As important as it is to celebrate the successes of your Welcome Week program each year, it is equally important to evaluate the program and seek ways it might improve. All three groups should participate in the evaluation. The student council could evaluate on behalf of the students, the parent council on behalf of the parents and the staff during a planned staff meeting. If evaluations are to be done by grade level then different questions would need to be prepared for kindergarten to grade three than would be prepared for grades five to eight. Evaluations should be in writing from a prepared list of questions. Included in the questions should be the following:

- What did having a Welcome Week at your school do for you?
- What were the best things you saw happening or participated in during Welcome Week?
- What suggestions would you make to improve Welcome Week or make it even better

Conclusion

Instituting a Welcome Week program in the first month of school has many benefits. It launches the teaching staff into activities that involve team planning and provides positive exposure and interaction with all the students

in the school. For the parents, it provides an opportunity to participate in the early stages of their son or daughter's year at school and an opportunity to get to know the teacher and the staff. Finally for students it provides a dynamic and fun beginning to the school year, a chance to get to know everyone in the school.

There is no magic formula for success in a Welcome Week program, but there are few possibilities that it will fail. The possibilities for what may be done during the week are innumerable. Getting the staff 'on board' is the first important step and then it tends to develop its own momentum from that point on.'

Finally, providing a Welcome Week with a variety of activities that involve all teachers, parents, and students will help to unify the school and create a community atmosphere both within the school and the school district. It serves to build a sense of caring among students and staff that has the potential to last well beyond the week, but for the rest of the school year. If the school chooses to make it a part of school opening procedures and events each and every year, then it will be important to vary the activities to resist stagnancy and allow for change. With the collective wealth of ideas for activities found in any given staff, making it different each year should not be a problem.