

Creating Welcoming, Caring, Respectful & Safe Learning Environments

The Walk Around: A School Leader's Observation Guide

The Walk Around: A School Leader's Observation Guide is designed to assist school leaders in gathering information about the extent to which the school they lead is a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment. Using this tool, in conjunction with [The Walk Around: Teacher Companion Tool](#), may reveal practices that are working well and should be celebrated and maintained. It may also expose gaps between the perceptions of school leaders and teachers, pointing to areas requiring attention or improvement.

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 Walk Around tools have been developed at the request of school leaders. The content was informed by research and focus groups with school leaders across the province. It is important to note that neither of these tools are intended to be used to evaluate school community members' contributions or performance. It is also important to note that while these 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.

Both tools focus on the following four aspects of a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment:

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

As a school leader, it is important to ask yourself:

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

How to use this tool:

For maximum effectiveness, the School Leader's Observation Guide is intended to be used in conjunction with the [Teacher Companion Tool](#) and as a component of [Creating Welcoming, Caring, Respectful and Safe Learning Environments: A Process Guide for School Leaders](#). The Teacher Companion Tool was designed to be easily modified to capture the perspectives of students and their families, support staff, or community partners.

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

- check the items that you are confident are demonstrated consistently; and
- leave an item unchecked if you are not sure if it is demonstrated consistently.

When using this tool to inform conversations or planning, consider:

- comparing your observations with feedback (from the Teacher Companion Tool or other data sources) provided by other school community members and community partners;
- working collaboratively with other school community members and community partners to identify key areas for growth or improvement; and
- add additional ideas to the “Observations/Thoughts” at the end of each section. You may wish to modify the Teacher Companion Tool to include these items prior to distributing it to teachers.

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](#)

[High School Completion Strategic Framework](#)

[Healthy School Planner](#)

[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.

I provide opportunities for all school community members and/or partners to demonstrate ownership and pride in the school:

- The school, including outdoor spaces, is litter free.
- Graffiti is rare and cleaned within a reasonable timeframe.
- Interior furniture and fixtures are in good repair and broken items are reported, fixed or replaced as soon as possible.

It is a priority to ensure the school feels welcoming and inclusive:

- Entrances are neat, clean and uncluttered.
- Students can move easily throughout the school.
- The tone of school signage welcomes and informs rather than warns.
- Displays and school resources/materials reflect the diversity of the student population (e.g., culture, interests, family structure, gender expression etc.).
- Displays and school resources/materials contribute to the positive, welcoming tone of the school.
- Student work displayed throughout the school demonstrates differing levels and types of achievement.
- Common areas for students (e.g., lunch room, locker areas, bathrooms, etc.) and staff (e.g., staff room, work room, common prep. areas, etc.) are neat, clean and uncluttered.
- Gender inclusive washrooms and change rooms are available and respectfully identified.

Learning spaces feel welcoming and inclusive:

- Evidence of all students' learning and diversity is visible.
- Spaces are organized to respect diversity in learning.
- Areas and materials are accessible to all students.
- Spaces are neat, clean and uncluttered.
- Students can move easily throughout the learning spaces.
- Signage/displays are positive, respectful and purposeful.

Other (i.e., examples/indicators/evidence):

My Observations/Thoughts on Physical Appearance

What is working well?

What needs improvement?

What actions could be taken to celebrate our successes or to make improvements?

Who needs to be involved?

2. SOCIAL CLIMATE

School community members treat each other with dignity and respect at all times, including during times of disagreement:

- Students and their families, staff and community members are greeted and welcomed when they enter the school/office.
- Staff and students engage in friendly conversations outside of the learning spaces (including before, during and after the school day).
- Staff model healthy relationship skills and attitudes.
- Students and staff encourage and welcome families' participation in instructional and non-instructional school activities (e.g., field trips, assemblies, celebrations, evening or weekend events, etc.).
- Peers and staff use a student's chosen name and pronoun as the student has requested.

I take care to ensure the school organization supports all students to feel respected, welcomed, cared for, and safe in the learning spaces and beyond (e.g., hallways, playground, bathrooms, lunch room or cafeteria, library, gymnasium, etc.):

- Inclusion is the norm.
- A student's right to gender self-identification is respected and confidentiality maintained.
- Homophobic, sexist or racist language and comments about physical appearance or disabilities are responded to in ways that support a change in behaviour/belief/language.
- All students are connected to a school staff member to whom they can express their needs, interests and concerns.
- Students are encouraged to openly and trustingly share their ideas with peers and staff.
- Vulnerable students are supported through student- or staff-led groups. This could include gay-straight or queer-straight alliances, peer support networks, mentorship, elder-in-residence programs, etc.
- A variety of extracurricular activities are available for all students; 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.
- All students have access to safe washrooms and change rooms that meet their individual needs and privacy concerns, regardless of the reason (eg. medical, religious, cultural, gender identity, gender expression, etc.).

I encourage culturally responsive practices to build upon the values, preferences, beliefs, cultural context and identity of all students and their families and the community:

- The cultural diversity of the school community is recognized and honoured (e.g., National Aboriginal Day, La cabane à sucre, etc.).
- 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.

I promote a culture where healthy relationships are the norm between and among staff:

- Staff members cordially greet one another by name.
- Staff are provided with a variety of professional and social opportunities to mix together (e.g., across divisions, grade assignments, subject areas, departments, etc.).
- Staff members exchange supervision times or cover classes to help each other out.
- Staff members share materials, resources and ideas generously with one another.
- Substitute teachers are treated with support, respect and courtesy.
- Staff members actively participate in opportunities to learn from each other
- I provide leadership for recognizing and valuing students and staff.
- Students are recognized for diverse contributions/accomplishments (e.g., academic, citizenship, leadership, social justice, sports, etc.).
- Students have opportunities to celebrate each other's successes and accomplishments.
- Students' improvements and/or successes are celebrated by staff and communicated to appropriate family members.
- Staff members celebrate each other's' successes and accomplishments formally and informally.
- Celebration boards display positive things happening in the school and achievements by school community members.

Staff and students are supported to 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

Positive behaviour expectations characterize school and classroom policies and procedures:

- Expectations for positive behavior respect diversity and nurture a positive sense of self.
- Expectations for positive behavior address the prohibited grounds of discrimination set out in the *Alberta Human Rights Act*.
- Expectations for positive behaviour are communicated clearly in multiple ways to students, families, staff and community partners throughout the school year.
- Reminders of positive behaviour expectations are visible in the school and included in/on communication tools (e.g., website, school/student information database such as PowerSchool or SchoolZone, newsletters, etc.).
- 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 behavior is provided.
- Staff expect students to promote and model healthy relationship skills.

- Staff are skilled at addressing bullying behaviours. If not, I ensure meaningful and relevant learning opportunities are available to develop their skills.
- Clearly communicated procedures for reporting bullying behaviours are in place. Students feel safe reporting.
- Staff takes responsibility for addressing inappropriate behaviours regardless of when or where the behaviour happens in the school or on the playground.
- Teachable moments are meaningfully utilized to build students' understanding and skill development for respecting diversity and developing healthy relationships.

Other (i.e., examples/indicators/evidence):

My Observations/Thoughts on Social Climate

What is working well?

What needs improvement?

What actions could be taken to celebrate our successes or to make improvements?

Who needs to be involved?

3. SUCCESS IN LEARNING

I support teachers to 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 behavior, healthy relationship skills and academic performance.
- Each student has the opportunity to set meaningful goals for her/his growth or goals are set collaboratively with the student and his/her parents or other caregivers.
- Teachers and or other staff consult with each other to better meet individual student needs and interests.

I promote students' development of social-emotional competencies:

- I ensure that instructional time is scheduled for students to actively engage in learning and practicing social-emotional skills (e.g., self-regulation, conflict resolution, active listening, etc.).
- School resources, such as time and funding, support the use of developmentally appropriate, evidence-informed resources to meet health education outcomes (e.g., healthy relationship and decision-making skills).
- I promote and model cooperative learning techniques for students and staff.
- Staff engage regularly in conversations with families and students about student learning:
- I observe that students are comfortable speaking to me and other staff about their interests and concerns.
- Report cards or progress reports are strength-based. Sensitive and respectful language is used to share accurate information about students' academic and social performance.
- Families' concerns are treated with respect, dignity and sensitivity.
- Families have formal and informal opportunities to meet with staff (including teachers, counselors and school leadership).
- Families are invited to events where students share their learning experiences (e.g., demonstration of learning).
- Families are welcome to be actively engaged in collaborative decision-making in relation to their child(ren)'s learning.
- Staff respond to students' and families' questions and concerns within a reasonable and respectful timeframe.
- Families and staff have access to diverse methods for contacting each other (e.g., school/student information database such as PowerSchool or SchoolZone, email, phone, etc.).

I engage and support staff to engage in professional development that promotes welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments. Topics may include:

- Positive behaviour expectation and supports.
- Diversity (eg. cultural, sexual orientation, gender identities 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.

Structures and processes are in place to identify and support students who struggle socially, emotionally, or academically:

- Staff are aware of “red flags” that identify students who need additional social, emotional, mental, physical or academic supports. If not, I provide appropriate learning opportunities for staff to learn how to recognize “red flags”.
- Staff understand protective and risk factors.
- Student-support staff proactively makes themselves accessible to, and build relationships with, students.
- Applicable information is shared with appropriate family members, staff and/or community partners.
- Students are supported by a school resource team.
- Students’ struggles are met with patience, kindness and support.
- Services and supports for students are comprehensive and coordinated to support social, emotional and academic learning.
- Students and family members (and community partners, if plausible) are key planning members of the transition team.
- Policies, practices and processes are in place to support students who may be having difficulty attending school regularly.
- Staff can confidently recognize, respond to and report suspected child abuse. If not, I provide appropriate learning opportunities.

Other (i.e., examples/indicators/evidence):

My Observations/Thoughts on Success in Learning

What is working well?

What needs improvement?

What actions could be taken to celebrate our successes or to make improvements?

Who needs to be involved?

4. HOME-SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONS

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

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

I provide leadership for the school community to promote and strengthen partnerships with community partners:

- Members of the school community are made aware of resources and support agencies within and outside of the school.
- School and community members are encouraged to work together to solve problems and provide input on improvements needed.
- School and community members are actively engaged in appropriate decision-making opportunities.
- Transparency characterizes decisions made.
- Staff and community partners work cooperatively to support students' social, emotional, cognitive and/or physical development.
- Opportunities are proactively created for community partners, families and school staff to learn from each other.

Positive home-school-community communication is a priority:

- School communications (e.g., website, newsletters, blogs) are updated regularly and share the successes of students, families, staff, and community partners.
- School forms, websites and other communication tools use non-gendered and inclusive language (eg. Parents, guardians, caregivers, partners, student, "their," etc.)
- School community members are informed about upcoming school events.
- Home-school-community communication occurs in a variety of ways, and is translated as needed and practical.
- Privacy and confidentiality are respected.
- Feedback is sought regularly from staff, students, families and community members about school safety, social relationships and the learning environment.

I strive to resolve disputes or conflicts between or among school-community members:

- I model not giving up on, blaming or rejecting students, their families or other staff in times of controversy or difficulty.
- Mediation processes are in place to address disputes or conflicts between school community members.
- Responsibility is taken for misunderstandings or conflicts and there is a willingness to maintain positive relationships.
- Families, staff and community members are engaged proactively in addressing issues and/or concerns.

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, school community members are invited to collaboratively plan and/or lead school activities.
- Volunteers are formally and informally recognized and thanked.

Other (i.e., examples/indicators/evidence):

My Observations/Thoughts on Home-School-Community Relations

What is working well?

What needs improvement?

What actions could be taken to celebrate our successes or to make improvements?

Who needs to be involved?

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 student 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.