

# Can Your School Pass the Parent “Blink Test”?

**M**alcom Gladwell’s best-selling book, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, got me wondering how many schools would pass the parent “blink test.”

The book is about the power of the unconscious mind to assess a complex situation and, in the blink of an eye, judge, decide, or act—all in a sophisticated way without conscious deliberation. Studies have found that in a high percentage of cases, instant judgments are uncannily accurate.

It is the unconscious mind that is responsible for our first impressions, those immediate powerful feelings we often get upon encountering someone or someplace new. That brings us to parent involvement and what I call the parent “blink test.”

Every time parents come into your building, they unconsciously filter tremendous amounts of information, drawing conclusions and making judgments. The parent “blink test” refers to the feeling or description parents unconsciously assign to your school shortly after they arrive. In order to promote effective parent involvement, we must earn positive parent reactions and encourage parent-school cooperation at every opportunity. Any time a parent approaches your school, such an opportunity exists.

The Fairfax County (Virginia) Public Schools Family Services and Involvement Section has developed what it calls “The Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through” to evaluate how schools appear to parents and other visitors. Read on to see if you can use some of the ideas at your school.

A 16-person assessment team, comprised of parents, community members, and school staff, is divided into four sections, each responsible for reviewing a different aspect of the school’s welcoming atmosphere from an outsider’s perspective.

*Team one looks at the physical environment of the school—entrances, offices, hallways, the cafeteria, the gym, and other public spaces:*

- Are there clear directions from all exterior doors to the building’s main entrance?
- Is there a welcome sign on the door? Is it written in more than one language, if appropriate?

**“Every time parents come into your school, they unconsciously filter tremendous amounts of information...”**



- Do visitors receive a badge that says “Parent” or “Volunteer” rather than “Visitor”?

- Is there a place where visitors can comfortably sit to chat, read available resources, and wait for meetings with school staff?

*Team two examines schoolwide practices and policies*, interviewing the principal and asking questions like these:

- Is there an orientation for new families?
- How does the school communicate with parents who do not speak English?
- How does the school communicate with noncustodial parents?

*Team three talks with school staff.* During the tour, have team members ask themselves:

- Do office personnel greet visitors quickly, and with a smile?
- Do all staff members smile at visitors they see in the hallways?
- What happens when a team member tries to walk through the school without a badge?

*Team four reviews the school’s written materials*, assessing how understandable and parent-friendly they are:

- Are educational acronyms explained?
- Would the printed materials be understood by someone new to the school?
- Is student work highlighted?

I suggest it is worth your school’s time to make a “welcoming atmosphere” checklist, invite suggestions, and polish that all-important impression you make on visitors every day—in the blink of an eye. ■

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## FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information about the Fairfax County, Virginia, “Welcoming Atmosphere Walk-Through,” contact Karen Willoughby, Family Services and Involvement Center, Fairfax County Public Schools, 703-277-2626; [karen.willoughby@fcps.edu](mailto:karen.willoughby@fcps.edu).

For additional information on this and other parent involvement issues, visit [www.parentinstitute.com](http://www.parentinstitute.com).