Welcome Letters

Sending letters home is a convenient and popular method used by teachers to communicate with families. A “welcome” letter sent to families at the beginning of the school year can be an effective way to begin to establish a connection with students and their families. Welcome letters can be sent just before the school year begins, or during the first few days of school. However, often letters have been used as a one-way communication vehicle. In addition to using letters to give information to families, letters home can be used to receive useful information from families. When writing a letter to send home, especially when it is the first letter you send, considering how it may be received is worthwhile. Remember that a letter sent home at the beginning of the school year sets the tone for your future interactions with families. How do you ensure that it has the desired effect? What is the message you are trying to send, and is it clearly conveyed? Considering factors such as the appearance of the letter, the language used, and the message sent can go a long way in helping you create an effective and inviting letter.

Appearance

Families are often flooded with paperwork during the first few weeks of school. Thus, it is important to think about what you can do to set your letter apart from the others. Consider using colored or patterned paper, or pictures or graphics to make your letter enticing. Sometimes it may be beneficial (or even required) to write letters on your school’s letterhead. However, letters received by families on formal or official school stationary may elicit unpleasant feelings, especially for families who have had negative school experiences in the past. The length of your welcome letter is also an important consideration. It may be best to keep your letter brief; no more than one page. You can always give more detailed information about events, requirements, and assignments at a later time. If your first letter is long and includes several details, families may just scan it rather than read it thoroughly.

Language

As you begin to write your letter, think about the characteristics of the families with whom you will be working. This will help guide you to select the type of information that might be important to include in the letter. For example, a kindergarten teacher may include more information about school routines, the daily schedule, or what to expect during the first few weeks of school—issues that many families may understand more clearly by the time students reach fourth or fifth grade. A teacher who has learned that many of the students come from families with a low literacy level will want to write a letter using less complex language than a teacher who has learned that the majority of the students come from families in which the caregivers hold college degrees. Try to consider how the language you use may be received by families. Even seemingly minor details, such as the greeting, can influence whether some families feel included or excluded. For example, beginning a letter with the traditional greeting “Dear Parent(s),” subtly excludes families that are headed by other adults, such as grandparents, aunts, or uncles. A greeting such as “Dear Caregiver” or “Dear Family” may be more inclusive. Try to use clear and simple language to convey your ideas. Consider that your students’ families will, in all likelihood, come from a variety of educational and cultural backgrounds. Also remember that, for some families, English is not their native language. If you are aware of a family who is not yet proficient in English, or if you work in an area in which several of your students use English as a second language, it may be beneficial to have your letter translated into their primary language. Not only does this help ease their understanding of the information that you are providing, but also it shows that you are aware of, and appreciate, their particular cultural background. Avoid using jargon or acronyms without taking the time to explain what they are, because many family members may not be familiar with terms educators take for granted which can create, or reinforce, communication barriers that exist between schools and families.

Style of Relating

The information you choose to include (and not to include) in your welcome letter also contributes to the connection that you are trying to build with families. The welcome letter is an opportunity for you to give families information about and a sense of your teaching style, your priorities, and your desire for family involvement. Think about how you want to structure your relationship with families. Do you want a hierarchical (teacher as expert) relationship or a collaborative partnership? Be sure that the message you send in your letter and your priorities and goals that you have established for your classroom match up. For example, writing that you welcome families in your classroom and value their input, and then stating that families are not to be on campus during school hours sends a mixed message; the first part indicates that you desire a partnership with families, whereas the second part sounds more authoritative and hierarchical. Additionally, consider the tone of your letter. It may be tempting to make your letter sound formal, but it can be challenging to make a formal letter sound enthusiastic and welcoming to families. Often, formal letters send the message that the school is a powerful institution, and that those who work for the school are in control. A letter written in an informal tone, on the other hand, can convey a desire for a partnership or equal relationship between the teacher and the family. For example, although some teachers may feel the need to include extensive information on their education, preparation, and credentials in their welcome letter, such information may be intimidating for some families. They may sense that you are establishing yourself as an “expert” with the expectation that they will follow your advice and direction, rather than share a collaborative relationship with them. This example reiterates the value and importance of learning the characteristics of your students’ families so that you can provide the most helpful information and foster the type of relationship you desire with them. In keeping with the idea that the welcome letter should convey your desire for family involvement, your welcome letter is probably not the best place to make many requests of families before you know much about their particular situation and resources. Together with the language you use, the message you send influences whether families feel included or excluded. If your first letter home is filled with requests for supplies or time commitments, families with limited resources may get the feeling that they are going to be excluded or asked for more than they can provide. You can create other opportunities for these requests to be made at a later time. In your welcome letter, include information on how you plan to maintain communication with families throughout the school year. Will you be calling home? Sending a class newsletter? Using a school–home notebook or journal? What will be your next step? When and how should they plan to hear from you next? Additionally, let families know how they can contact you, and keep in mind that not all families have the opportunity to call or visit during school hours. Although creating your first welcome letter may take thought and time for beginning teachers, remember that once you have successfully created the first letter, you can save and modify it as needed in future years. Ultimately, the time and effort you put into developing methods for communication with families will pay off for you, your students, and their families. In Table 8.2 you will find a brief summary of the important qualities to attend to when writing a welcome letter to families. Now let us take these key concepts and apply them by looking at two different examples of welcome letters in Reflective Exercise 8.1a and 8.1b.





