



ARCHDIOCESE OF ST. LOUIS
Catholic Education Center

The Development and Implementation of Characteristic One

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The features of this development and implementation should be seen as a type of journey: a journey through the school. It gives one an opportunity to take an internal look at the building and to see how it might become more of a welcoming space: not only for those who currently have children in our school but also for those who visit the school from time to time but whose children are not currently enrolled.

It is a re-visiting and re-evaluating of the space that is called the Catholic school. The journey begins at the outer doors to the school and continues throughout the entire building and the journey begs us to take a look with fresh eyes the message that our space proclaims to all who enter. As you begin the journey, you will find that many of the ideas and suggestions herein have already been implemented to some degree. But the purpose of the journey is intended to help us take a deeper look at the “welcoming environment” as it makes itself known to those who visit.

This characteristic can be seen as the “entrance” to the Evangelizing Catholic school; a school that welcomes everyone, inviting them into the school and parish community, by creating an environment that speaks the values of Jesus Christ and immediately says to those who visit that this school is “Alive in Christ.”

But this venture of making our schools more welcoming is not the responsibility of the principal alone or even another job for his/her staff. It is a shared responsibility of all who belong to the school community. While the coordination of setting an environment rests with the principal, there are countless persons, from the parents of children enrolled in the school to other parishioners with the talent to help give shape to the environment if just asked for their input, who can join in evaluating, fashioning and helping to set an environment that proclaims:

***Welcome.
Every person is a child of God!
This is a fundamental message of Jesus Christ and of our school!***

The following pages are filled with practical ideas on how to make the environment of your school one that is inviting and welcoming to everyone who enters. Many of the suggestions contained herein may already be in place. That's good! However, other suggestions may spark creativity on your part and you may want to incorporate those into the ones you are already doing to enhance the welcoming atmosphere to keep it fresh and alive. Most of the suggestions are simple and can be completed with little or no expense. Others may require some funding that hopefully can be acquired from one of your parish or parent organizations.

Hopefully this simple to implement characteristic will help you to take a fresh look at your welcoming environment and will help to spark more creativity as you prepare to welcome the stranger, the sinner and all who enter your doors.

*Having entrusted himself to Jesus,
The Christian comes to know the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus,
The requirements and promises contained in the Gospel message,
and the paths that Jesus has laid down for anyone who wishes to follow Him.*

CHARACTERISTIC ONE

So how does one go about creating an environment that proclaims loudly and boldly that Jesus Christ is your center? And how does one keep that proclamation from becoming stale and losing its impact to those who visit, either purposefully or accidentally? You may already be saying to yourself that your school entrance and your corridors and classrooms proclaim this message. So you may be asking what more do I have to do? Even if the message has already been proclaimed by the actions you have taken you can continue to foster the message of Jesus Christ by re-evaluating its effectiveness on a regular basis.

As with all communication, verbal or visual, repetition that proclaims the person of Jesus Christ and His message is a necessity. Re-evaluating past efforts is a continual task so that the message does not become routine and so that it continually takes on a new face so the message can penetrate the stony hearts that are spoken of in the Scriptures.

So the ideas and suggestions that follow are intended to help you re-evaluate the things that you have already implemented to proclaim the person and message of Jesus Christ. It is, in a real sense, a checklist that will not only give you a feeling of success because many of the items have already been implemented but also provide a spark that will re-ignite your creativity. By using this checklist, you will hopefully find new ways to lead those who enter your school building into intimacy with Jesus and transform them into disciples so that together, as Church, we might lead society into the kingdom of God.

Characteristic One basically says: *“How does the physical environment of our school proclaim the message that everyone who enters here is welcome and valued? What does it say to those who enter our doors?”*

It has been said time and time again that actions speak louder than words. So too the appearance or environment of your school speaks as loudly as the teaching that goes on in your school. We definitely need to re-evaluate exactly what the non-verbals of our school environment proclaim and adjust that environment accordingly so that it proclaims and coincides with what the “verbals” of our school community are saying.

So together, let all that we do proclaim: *“All are welcome. All are welcome in this place.”*

ENTRANCE

We all want our individual homes to have a feeling of warmth! Our individual personalities shine through the décor in our homes and speak “welcome” to those who enter. Even when a stranger appears at our door, they can tell a great deal by the physical environment that confronts them. We want our homes to be inviting. If we didn’t, we’d close off our doorways and put in a window with curtains on it to signify that we don’t really want to be bothered by visitors. Or at the very least, we’d hang out a sign that says “Go away!”

It should be the same with our school if the school is truly “Alive in Christ” (home to Jesus Christ). The entrance to our school should not deter people from visiting, but truly invite them into a sacred space where Jesus Christ is visible and where His message is truly proclaimed.

Because we need to promote a safe and secure environment for our students, it is necessary and appropriate to have the entrances to our school locked. In some cases, the secretary or the principal’s office is removed from the front door so an intercom has been installed. Does it say: *“Welcome! We appreciate your visit.”* Or does it say, *“We’re busy. We don’t have time for you today. Come back another time.”*

- Does the sign outside of the building by the button or bell that must be rung to gain access convey the Gospel message? *“Welcome to Saint _____ school. Your visit is important to us. Please ring the bell and someone will be with you in a minute”* could be a message.
- The sign outside might say: *“Our children’s safety is important to us. These doors are locked but your visit is very important to us. Please ring the bell and someone will be with you momentarily.”*
- Maybe having a parent volunteer or a retired parishioner looking for a way to fill a portion of their time could be scheduled to welcome and greet people who visit. You might think that their time would to a large extent be wasted but, just maybe, you would not only be welcoming the stranger, but also caring for the needs of someone who is looking for a way to be of service.

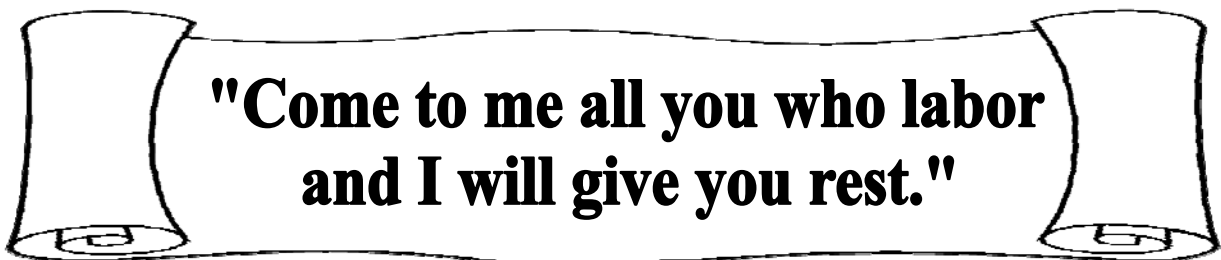
***Every person is a child of God!
This is a fundamental message of Jesus Christ and of our school!
Welcome!***

LOBBY / GATHERING AREA

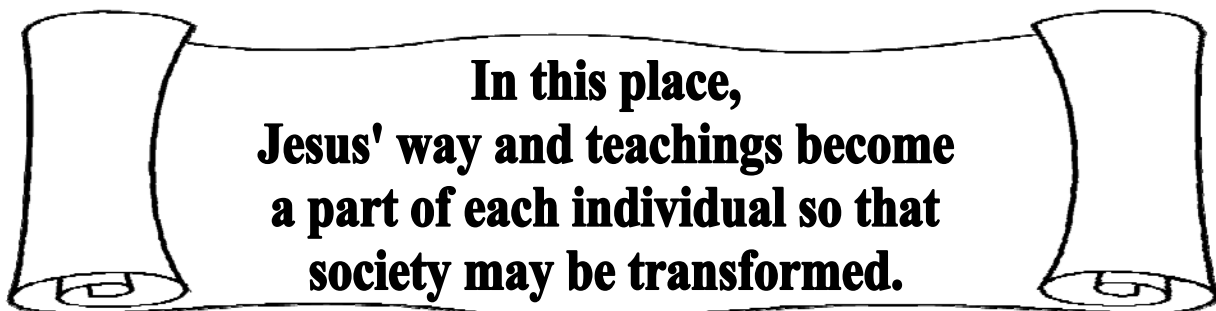
The lobbies of our schools can be multi-purpose rooms. Many share common space with the gathering space for the church building. Some become massive bulletin boards housing announcements that all too often are out of date, tattered, and so varied that they lose their effectiveness. During particular seasons of the year, they become home to canned food drives, the giving tree at Christmas, clothing drives and a myriad of other collectables that seem more like clutter than a proclamation that “in this space, the work of Christ continues.”

Depending upon various factors, such as sharing a lobby with the parish church, having ample space for setting an environment, having a lobby that is particular to the school and other such factors, some of the ideas presented below may be impossible to implement. No matter your situation, if you agree that the lobby or gathering area of your school / parish should proclaim to all that they are welcome, specific adjustments can be made to implement some of the ideas.

- **Display a picture of St. Louis of France**
- **Display the icon of the Sacred Heart of Jesus**
- **Design a poster / banner proclaiming to all who enter that Christ is the reason for this school / parish or all who enter here are welcome.**
 - This can easily be accomplished by using the computer, taking it to Kinko's or some business office store and having it enlarged and placed on foam board or heavy duty paper.
 - Or you might just purchase some heavy duty paper and have a scroll or banner calligraphied by a teacher or parishioner.
 - The banner or scroll will be relatively inexpensive to reproduce and printing it in color will add to its attractiveness.



**"Come to me all you who labor
and I will give you rest."**



**In this place,
Jesus' way and teachings become
a part of each individual so that
society may be transformed.**

- **Either permanently or on a sporadic basis, set up a screen and computer or a television and DVD player in the lobby** (the possibility would be to mount this permanently on the wall).
 - Take pictures of various events where the faith community of the school and / or the parish come together (these could be regular classroom activities, sports gatherings, sacramental celebrations, celebrations of Eucharist, baptismal preparation and reception, etc).
 - Transfer these pictures to your computer and place them in a power point presentation.
 - Add music (the song that comes to mind is “All are welcome”) and coordinate the words of the song with the movement of pictures.
 - This could be a very moving representation of the faith life of the school / parish community for those who visit.
 - In general, there are many things you can do in the lobby or gathering space that will immediately allow the visitor to feel at ease and to feel welcome.
 - The goal is to keep it fresh and to make minor changes from time to time so that those who visit repeatedly will know not only that they are welcome but that they continue to be welcome.
 - The Archdiocesan theme, *Alive in Christ*, should be appropriately displayed.

- **Establish a seating area in the space** (this could be as simple as one or two soft chairs or a sofa or a grouping of furniture if the space allows. Add an end table and a lamp and you’re all set).
 - So many times people come to speak with us, planned and unplanned, and the most we can do is offer them a folding chair in the secretary’s office or in the hall.
 - Sometimes we can’t even offer them that much and they stand waiting in the lobby or the hall.
 - An area set aside for them to wait until you come to greet them can make all the difference in the world.
 - If the lobby is attractive, with appropriate reading material on the faith or on the mission of Catholic education, it can make the time pass quickly if you are held up for any reason.
 - Even if there is no room for any type of grouping of furniture, you can find some space to create an environment where the person visiting is made to feel welcome and comfortable.
 - Naturally we have to remember, especially if the lobby is also the church gathering area, that the work of the parish is likewise important in the eyes of any visitor. So if the “giving tree” is part of the environment during Advent perhaps the items that are brought in and stored in the lobby can be arranged in such a way that it becomes a neatly organized accessory to the normal environment.
 - Or if we collect canned goods for the poor during the year perhaps “building a tower of food” instead of stacking bags on top of bags on top of boxes will help the visitor to see the “work that we do” without thinking “what a mess!”

- Again, imagination and cooperation among all parties concerned will present an environment that always speaks “Welcome.”
- This does not have to become the work of the principal. It can be a group of people from the parish or school organizations who have the shared responsibility of keeping the environment vibrant and interesting.

THE SECRETARY’S OFFICE

We all know the inordinate amount of paperwork that passes through the office at our schools. Usually there are machines, coffee maker, stacks and stacks of paper, forms, file cabinets, not to mention possibly the “cot” for ill students. It can be much like the lobby we spoke of earlier – “a catch all.”

If you’re not skilled at looking at a room and imagining how to make the room more spacious, more organized and more inviting utilize someone from your school community to come in and give you some ideas.

Remember this is usually the second stop for a visitor. Even if their first impression was a favorable one, their visit to the office can undo and make the first impression fade into the background.

- A crucifix or picture / poster of Jesus, especially surrounded by children, should be the prominent image upon entering the office.
- One might take the “witness statements” found in the Administrator’s manual from the Catholic Education Center and frame them so that visitors can be aware of what you are about in this place (or perhaps these could be framed and placed in the lobby or gathering area as part of the environment).
- If there is open shelving for paper, supplies, forms, etc, a simple way of cleaning up this environment is to place curtains over the openings to keep things out of sight.
- Maybe to create more room in the office, to help set a more attractive environment for visitors, office machines could be moved to another location (an extra room or a part of the teacher’s lounge might be a possibility).

PRINCIPAL’S OFFICE

Have you ever walked in the office of the chief executive officer of a company? What was it like? What sense did it convey to you? The office was probably set up in such a way that it made you put your guard up and feel a little tense. That was the intent. The person wanted you to know immediately upon entering that he/she was the one in charge. You were just a visitor – someone who had to be handled.

The principal is like the chief operating officer of the school. How is the office set up? What message does it convey? Upon entering, do visitors see it as a battleground that says: “you’re on my turf...I’m in control here” or does it continue the message of welcome to those who enter?

If you're not good at spatial contexts you might enlist the help of someone in your school community that has this talent. Perhaps you just need to ask a parent or teacher what your office and its arrangement says to them when they enter or what they think a disgruntled or questioning parent might think initially when they come into your office. Again, depending upon the space available as an office, these ideas and suggestions might have to be adapted.

- The décor in your office allows visitors to gain a glimpse of who you are; what your interests might be; your faith life and gives other insights that can put them at ease.
 - Many corporate and some church organizations limit the number of personal items an employee can have at their work station in an effort to re-enforce the work ethic.
 - Tasteful decorations can add a lot of warmth to an otherwise business environment.
 - A crucifix or favorite picture of Christ could serve as the center of a wall grouping surrounded by some of your favorite prints of an inspirational nature.
 - Another grouping of family or community pictures can give an insight into the important things in your life.
 - Possibly, if the “witness statements” spoken about earlier have not found a home yet, these statements, neatly framed, can provide an insight to those who visit the importance of collaboration among all members of the faith community.
- Since you are the spiritual leader of the school, there are certain things that should be in your office.
 - A small table where the Scriptures can be prominently displayed and opened to a favorite passage (maybe opened to a short passage that could be read at the beginning of every meeting or discussion).
 - A couple of side chairs (even if you have to rearrange the chairs in front of your desk around the Scripture setting).
- The positioning of your desk says a lot about what people can expect when they enter your office.
 - Does it serve as a barrier, separating the “executive” from the “employee?”
 - Are the chairs arranged so people automatically think that you intend to have the upper hand in resolving this or that situation?
 - Or is your desk cluttered with varied items (i.e., computer, printer, or other personal items that help to strengthen the barrier of protection)?

THE CORRIDORS OF YOUR SCHOOL

The corridors of our schools range from sterile environments to cluttered collections of announcements, artwork and miscellaneous memorabilia of things past. Our corridors should be inviting to those who walk them, from the occasional visitor to the teachers and students who are there every day. But inviting does not necessarily mean every square inch of space needs to be filled. Again, tasteful and organized arrangements at key points along our halls can add a welcoming environment that will catch the attention of those who visit.

- A selection of artwork of a religious nature will help to improve the environment of the corridors and give visitors an indication as to the nature of the school.
 - Prints or photos enlarged and placed on foam board or neatly framed and hung throughout the corridors can be permanently displayed.
 - Or, if the monies are available, you can rotate the religious artwork from time to time.
 - Many times throughout the year, school organizations or graduating classes purchase something for the school. This would be a good time to have researched various artworks that could be used for many years to come.
 - Even though you strategically place artwork throughout the corridors there is still plenty of space for other wall hangings.
 - Schools always display various art projects created by their students and in many cases if there are 25 students, an equal number of pieces of artwork are displayed.
 - In these cases, the student artwork usually stays up until there is something else to take its place.
 - An idea might be to stagger the artwork over a period of time keeping the look of your corridors fresh and inviting and still be able to display every piece of art created.
 - Likewise, some sort of framed explanation of the project or its connection to the faith life of the school would be appropriate.

TEACHER LOUNGE

While the lounge for teachers is usually off limits to anyone but the staff, that does not prevent the creation of an environment that welcomes those who frequent it every day. For the staff, too, needs to feel welcome. And, on occasion, while opening the school to other visitors or substitute teachers and the like, the environment in the teacher lounge will reinforce the welcoming atmosphere created in the rest of the school.

The environment of the lounge for teachers sometimes reflects the environment that was mentioned earlier for the lobby of the school. Usually there is a space for eating, and a kitchen of sorts and an area to relax with sofa and / or easy chairs and bookshelves. This type of environment can basically be left intact with certain improvements.

- A centerpiece of some sort or another, simple but yet profound, to help those gathered around the table remember that the sharing of their meal is akin to that of the early Christian communities who gathered to share bread and to share the common story of Jesus Christ.
- A place devoted to the Scriptures with appropriate accessories (candle, floral arrangement, spiritual reading books, etc).
- Artwork that reflects the Catholic nature and identity of the school.

CLASSROOMS

It's important that you carry the work you've done on setting a welcoming atmosphere into the classroom. Classrooms can be sterile and take on the look of hospital waiting rooms or they can be rooms that abound with posters, pictures, notices and charts conveying everything from physical education to religion.

There's a happy medium for a classroom. We must never forget that the reason for our school's existence is to teach Jesus Christ and His message.

- Therefore, prime consideration should be given to bulletin boards that convey this message and make it come alive for all to see. They should also convey the message that our schools are, "Alive in Christ."
- The addition of prayer corners in the classroom is of prime importance and just because we call it a prayer corner doesn't mean that it has to be in the corner of the room. It should be placed in an area where all can see it (not at the back of the room next to the coat rack).
- And, it should be used! The display of the Scriptures or some central theme of celebration during the Church Year should not be a dust collector but a vital part of what you are all about.
- Proclaiming the Scriptures each day (even if it's a short proclamation or synopsis of the readings) lets everyone know how important it is for us to know and reflect on the teachings of Jesus and His Church.

Hopefully, the steps on this journey have helped to make you more aware of the message that your environment conveys to those who visit your school. The ideas presented were intended to help you take a new look at your environment so that the First Characteristic, "***An evangelizing school is a Catholic faith community where all are welcome, opening itself to receive children and parents who desire Catholic religious formation and education, helping them to know they are children of God, made in His image and likeness and, therefore, to be valued***" can be loudly and boldly proclaimed to all who enter your school.