

## Creating an Inclusive School Community

Our program was created to provide specific additional support for new faculty and staff during their first year at our school. It is a school wide effort and begins in earnest once the hiring process is complete. It continues throughout the summer and requires new hires to be on campus for two full days prior to the return of all faculty and staff.

Physically, our main campus is large and spread out. It houses the administration as well as both the lower and the upper school. Our middle school is approximately six miles down the road. Since it is easy to feel disconnected while trying to find your way, coming to campus two days early helps new hires become somewhat familiar with the facilities and hopefully avoids their becoming lost in the crowd. Once everyone is back, the mentors take over to answer questions and to continue the welcoming process specific to each division.

Once our new hires are in place, what are the next steps in helping them become acclimated?

Mentors are crucial to the success of our program as they begin to reach out during the summer. They are division specific and may or may not be members of the same teaching team.

We hand out the tools new hires need to become organized. At our school this translates into providing computers with all of the required technology the Friday prior to the orientation days. While this is not mandatory for new faculty and staff, it is strongly encouraged. Having email, ID badges, and contact information available eliminates a lot of the guess work.

New hires from all three divisions plus new staff from administration to grounds gather on the main campus the first day of orientation and at middle school the following day. We make a real effort to make everyone feel welcome in addition to helping them with HR issues, security concerns, crisis management, and anything else deemed necessary for a smooth transition.

Our program does not stop once classes begin but continues throughout the year. The entire group gathers five times and concludes with a casual dinner at the head of school's home. While three of the meetings are social in nature from an off campus gathering to a luncheon hosted by the parents' association, two additional meetings have a more defined, mission oriented purpose. One is called "Student Voices" and introduces a group of upper school students who may or may not fit the typical mold. Another meeting facilitated by our director of diversity planning addresses topics of inclusion.

Additionally, every division schedules meetings to cover specific topics such as comment writing, hints for a successful parents' night to name just two. When scheduling meetings for new hires it is important to be specific and selective. Too many meetings may be overwhelming and take away from the desired effect.

Finally, we check in with the new hires not to check up on them but to tell them that we are there to help. We assure them that they are members of our community, and that they are valued for their service.

Employees who feel welcomed and supported tend to acclimate faster to their new working environment. While we expect everyone to adopt the tenets of the school's mission, we welcome new ideas. We are not looking for "Groupthink" but for teachers and staff who will enrich our place of learning. In a nutshell, teachers and staff who feel included and empowered will be better prepared to serve our students. Ultimately, that is what is important and makes this process worthwhile on several levels.