

### Exploring One School District's Tool for Assessing Family-Friendly Schools

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**ABSTRACT.** As formal, nonformal, and informal educational settings work to improve participant involvement, understanding perceptions of physical and digital spaces can add insights for improving specific aspects of any educational setting. This exploratory study examines the use of the Washoe County School District [WCSD] family-friendly school assessment tools for gauging the extent to which school environments welcome families. The WCSD family-friendly school assessment tools consist of the walk-through rating scale (17 items), the website rating scale (11 items), and the phone survey (10 items). Metrics of inter-rater reliability (IRR) included percent agreements and Cohen's kappa. Results from the walk-through rating scale and website rating scale reported good agreement. Inter-rater reliability for phone survey items was lower than for walk-through and website categories. Implications for this study focus on applicability of these tools within formal, informal, and nonformal educational settings.

*Keywords:* family life education, family-friendly, assessment tool

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### **Exploring One School District's Tool for Assessing Family-Friendly Schools**

At its core, family life education (FLE) is focused on reaching and supporting families in various educational settings (Ballard & Taylor, 2012; Ballard, Tyndall, Baugh, Bergeson, & Littlewood, 2016). The foundational and operational principles of FLE methodologies are intended for practitioners to create meaningful educational efforts that work to meet the needs of the community and engage participants (Darling, Cassidy, & Rehm, 2017). As discussed by Darling et al. (2017), FLE is considered a translational family science that uses research to benefit and strengthen communities. FLE researchers and practitioners have expanded and professionalized this area, including frameworks (Bredehoft, 2001; Bredehoft, & Walcheski, 2011), principles of family life education (Arcus, Schvaneveldt, & Moss, 1993; Darling et al., 2017), levels and domains (Arcus et al., 1993; Doherty, 1995; Myers-Walls, Ballard, Darling, & Myers-Bowman, 2011), and best practices (Ballard & Taylor, 2012; Ballard et al., 2016; Hughes, Bowers, Mitchell, Curtiss, & Ebata, 2012). They have also explored innovations such as the practice of FLE in Early Head Start (Petkus, 2015; Walsh, Mortensen, Edwards, & Cassidy, in press) and techniques such as family life coaching (Allen & Huff, 2014; Myers-Walls, 2014). To support its expansion and professionalization, FLE is in need of research-based techniques as part of family life educators' broad backgrounds.

Whether the educational setting is formal, nonformal, or informal, perspectives of families and individuals served are vital to understanding and increasing their involvement with programs (Darling & Cassidy, 2014). While educating in the three types of settings are similar and methodologies can overlap, each has its specific focus. The formal educational setting is usually within educational institutions, is structured according to laws, policies, and norms, and includes curricula, assignment of grades, and/or outlined programs of study (Darling & Cassidy, 2014). Nonformal educational settings are educational sessions or classes created and taught by professionals. However, this setting is often flexible and based on the needs of students or target audiences (Darling & Cassidy, 2014). Informal educational settings include a wide range of ways to learn using supplements from formal and informal settings such as attending lectures, exhibits, or museums, reading books, magazines, or journals, or even through conversations or meetings with others (Darling & Cassidy, 2014).

The current study explores a rating system that has been used in formal educational settings to measure the extent to which physical environment, staff telephone customer service, and website navigation support the whole family's involvement. Building on the view that FLE translates research for individuals and families, research from family involvement in formal educational settings can be translated and used in nonformal and informal educational methodologies to increase participant involvement.

### Increasing Involvement

Often considered a part of formal educational settings, increasing family involvement of the whole family has become a focus for a wide range of organizations and FLE educational settings. To encourage family involvement, more organizations have been interested in adopting family-friendly approaches (Warner & Barrera, 2005). The term *family-friendly* is widely used to describe the desire to include the family unit as a partner, client, patient, or customer (Grover & Crooker, 1995; Wang & Walumbwa, 2007) or to illustrate overall appreciation of an individual's choice to have children and be involved in their children's lives, or to have their children involved in their lives. Although different organizations may have slightly different views of the definition, most agree that a family-friendly environment welcomes and supports people of all ages and life circumstances, which relates to many foundational methodologies of FLE (Darling & Cassidy, 2014).

No matter whether it is within a formal educational setting such as a school or another educational site, research has shown the importance of creating environments that encourage involvement and participation to building trust, rapport, and retention (Ballard & Taylor, 2012; Darling & Cassidy, 2014; Ohio Department of Education, 2014; Wiley & Ebata, 2004). Along with businesses and community organizations, many schools and formal educational settings have adopted the family-friendly mantra to increase family involvement (Carter, 2003; Moles, 1996; 2000). The definition of family involvement in schools may range from volunteering at school functions to participating in formal and informal collaboration and decision making with school officials (e.g., teachers, school administration) (Carter, 2003; Moles, 1996; 2000; Ohio Department of Education, 2014; Warner & Barrera, 2005). An important goal for any educational program regardless of setting or audience is to create environments that are welcoming and encourage participation. Thus, a family-friendly educational setting that is formal, nonformal, or informal is one whose physical environment, staff telephone customer service, and websites are welcoming and informative.

Many researchers have suggested ways of creating family-friendly school environments that could be used within FLE educational settings. Epstein (2011) describes six categories of ways families can be involved in their child's education: family obligations, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community. Within each category, teachers and administrators can influence families' decisions to be involved. For example, welcoming classroom climates and family members' experiences within the school environment may influence families' desires to become involved at the school (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Personal invitations for families to participate in their child's school also increases families' involvement (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005). Families are often involved in the schools largely because of the information and opportunities schools provide so they may collaborate with teachers and administrators (Ohio Department of Education, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Families' perceptions of school receptivity and family involvement have also been found to predict family involvement for all age levels including elementary, middle, and high school students (Overstreet, Devine, Bevans, & Efreom, 2005).

Many schools' actions aimed at increasing family involvement are predicated on research demonstrating the importance of such involvement to children's education and to the school environment (Epstein, 2011; Fan & Chen, 2001). While the importance of family involvement is well documented in the extant literature, no studies using empirical data have explored the notion of family-friendly environments. Such exploration would be relevant to many educational settings because the extent to which an environment, staff, or website is welcoming and informative may encourage or discourage participation in educational efforts.

### **Family Life Education Program Development Models**

Over the years, many scholars have discussed multiple models of program development. Two of these models are Hughes' (1994) *framework for developing FLE programs* and Fink's (2005) *model for integrated course design*. Both include the importance of evaluation or assessment of specific program content to program planning and decision making (Darling & Cassidy, 2014). Hughes (1994) took his model a step further and created the Family Life Education Program Review Form, which provides a means to critique current programs and to plan future programs. While the goal of assessing and evaluating FLE programs is to create sustainable, strong curricula that reach and fortify the community, other factors can affect a program's ability to garner participation (Duncan & Goddard, 2017).

Beyond evaluating program content and design, it is also necessary to review the program's structural characteristics and/or situational factors including timing, audience, teaching space, and e-learning because each can affect participant involvement and learning (Darling & Cassidy, 2014). Each factor also has similar yet unique considerations for formal, nonformal, and informal educational settings.

Within formal educational settings the timing of many activities and milestones (e.g., meeting times and dates, length of classes) is predetermined, but educators also must include exams and assignments within the schedule. Within nonformal and informal educational settings, educators have much more power to decide on class structures as related to timing the number and length of classes, but the target audiences and their needs must be a key focus (Darling & Cassidy, 2014).

Within a formal educational setting, the target audience's needs are "ascribed" based on a specific program of study or curriculum (Darling & Cassidy, 2014; Myers-Wall et al., 2011). By contrast, the target audiences' needs are often felt or self-identified within nonformal and informal educational settings, which allows educators much more freedom to use more of a facilitator's than an expert's approach (Darling & Cassidy, 2014; Duncan & Goddard, 2017; Myers-Walls et al., 2011).

Formal, nonformal, and informal settings have similar considerations so far as teaching space is concerned (Darling & Cassidy, 2014). Educators must be aware of the layout of desks,

tables, or chairs to make sure that planned activities or lectures are feasible within the space (Darling & Cassidy, 2014). Furthermore, educators must consider technological and media needs and availability and plan accordingly. While using computers and projectors to present is considered normal in most higher education settings, this may not always be the best means of educating target audiences. Awareness of literacy skills and educational levels should influence the planned program because educators should meet their students where they are, not vice versa (Duncan & Goddard, 2017). When considering the physical environment, some participants may also have reservations about a particular style or location of a class, but educators need to promote welcoming, friendly environments that allow learners to feel comfortable and encourage their participation (Duncan & Goddard, 2017).

Last but not least, e-learning is the factor that all educational settings must be keenly aware of today. Within a formal educational setting, an educator cannot simply upload lecture slides from a face-to-face course but must instead redesign the course with activities that engage and challenge students' learning of the material, as well as provide quality feedback and effective guidance (Darling & Cassidy, 2014). Similar considerations are also true for nonformal and informal education settings. With social media offering a different arena for providing information, educators must be mindful of using research and engaging participants beyond providing information passively (Darling & Cassidy, 2014). While the discussion of e-learning often surrounds content and activities an educator should use in an online space, there is much more to consider with regard to navigability of websites that educators use.

Each of these characteristics or factors can play a role in building trust, rapport, and respect with a target audience; all are known to be critical to the success of a program (Ballard & Taylor, 2012; Darling & Cassidy, 2014; Wiley & Ebata, 2004). However, knowing what factors are associated with increasing involvement and actually putting this knowledge into practice can be challenging in all types of educational settings. Therefore, assessment tools created to measure the family-friendly and welcoming nature of formal educational settings can also be adapted for use by other learning settings to better understand their own practices.

### **Exploring One School District's Tool for Assessing Family-Friendly Schools**

The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine inter-rater reliability of an available 3-tier assessment tool to measure family-friendliness of the physical environment, staff telephone customer service, and website used by a Western US school district. This assessment tool stems from efforts across the US to attempt to measure schools' family-friendliness in order to increase family involvement. Based on a review of literature associated with family-friendly school practices, the Washoe County School District in Nevada created assessment tools to gauge the extent to which schools provide physical and virtual environments, along with contacts that are welcoming and friendly to all families and intended to engage parents in their children's education. An exploration of WCSD approaches for the assessment of family-friendliness can provide insights into ways to create family-friendly educational settings that can in turn result in successful involvement efforts, thus building relationships and rapport that also benefit children,

families, educators, and programs (El Nokali, Bachman, & Votruba-Drzal, 2010; Hara & Burke, 1998; Luster & McAdoo, 1996). Through strategic and intentional evaluations of a program's structural characteristics and/or situational factors, many formal, nonformal, and informal educational settings could gather information vital to understanding participation and involvement of the target audience. These audiences could be families in formal educational settings or participants in FLE programs, which play vital roles in the long-term success of many educational settings. The assessment tool used in this study could be adapted to many different settings, especially in education, to gauge areas of strength or weakness of the environment that may affect participation of a target audience. By examining inter-rater reliability of an available family-friendly school assessment tool, this study aims to understand whether the tool is a reliable means for multiple raters to evaluate the family-friendly nature of educational settings.

## Methods

### Instrument

The WCSD family-friendly school assessment tools were created during the 2005-2006 school year by the Washoe County School District Council on Family Engagement (COFE) in the state of Nevada. Tool development was based on expectations of a family-friendly school as found in the published literature (Carter, 2003; Moles, 1996; 2000; Ohio Department of Education, 2014; Warner & Barrera, 2005). Their purpose was to ensure that three important means of contact with schools—schools' physical environments, staff telephone customer service, and websites—were parent-friendly. For development of these assessment tools, the WCSD relied heavily on a family-friendly partnership school rating scale developed by the Ohio Department of Education (2014) and on strategies for effective family-school-community partnerships (Carter, 2003) to create a tool tailored to the specific school district. Data obtained from the COFE's use of these family-friendly school assessment tools are reported to schools to improve welcoming environments for families.

The WCSD family-friendly assessment tools focus on school walk-throughs (17 items), schools' websites (11 items), and phone surveys to assess welcoming/friendliness of the school (10 items). Scales for all tools allow three possible ratings: High Quality Practice (3 points), Emerging Practice (2 points), or Low-Quality Practice (1 point). Table 1 shows items included in the walk-through rating scale, website rating scale, and phone survey.

Table 1

*School Walk-Through Items (17 items)*

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## Signage/Visual Communication (9 items)

1. Entrance to the front office is clearly marked.
2. Welcome signs are displayed in all appropriate languages (demographics).
3. There is a visitor policy/sign written in friendly language that requires check-in upon entering and wearing a visitor I.D.
6. There is a campus map posted in a remote location.
8. A suggestion box is prominently displayed in high parent traffic areas.
11. Upcoming events for family participation are posted in families' languages and in areas available to visitors.
13. There is a school mission statement posted in a visible area.
14. There is evidence of student learning posted on campus, multi-purpose room or where there is a space available for all grade levels.
16. There is a clearly marked designated area for visitor parking.

## Resource Availability (5 items)

7. New families are provided with school information in one packet, calendar, school schedule, etc.
9. An area exists in the school where parents can go for information such as school rules school schedule, etc.
10. Infinite Campus Parent Portal is functional, visible and accessible for families' access computers, books, and other materials.
12. There is evidence that information about partnerships with surrounding community and local businesses is made available to families.
17. Only high schools. School has a college and career center.

## Staff Helpfulness (2 items)

4. Front desk staff includes individual(s) fluent in the parents' home languages.
5. Office staff is helpful, friendly, and professional. They are informed about school policies and procedures.

## Cleanliness (1 item)

15. Campus is clean and free of litter.
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As Table 1 shows, the walk-through rating scale consisted of 17 items. Of these, nine are related to school signage and visual communication for visitors. Five items are related to resource availability and two items assessed staff helpfulness. There was one item related to overall cleanliness.

Items related to website ratings are shown in detail in Table 2. Areas assessed here included items related to information (8 items) and ease of use (3 items). Items from the phone survey are outlined in Table 3. These included items about how informative staff were (6 items), their responsiveness (3 items), and how positive the overall experience was.

Table 2

*School Website Items (11 items)*

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Informative (8 items)

3. Information is current and updated.
4. Website includes a link to Infinite Campus Parent Portal.
5. A school calendar with information/events is posted.
6. The website includes a Parent Resource Section.
7. Contact information on staff is available.
8. Website includes a Frequently Asked Questions section.
9. School location, hours and link to mapping program are posted.
10. Current District and/or School e-Newsletter is available with links to past issues.

Easiness of Use (3 items)

1. Site is easy to navigate.
2. Information is easy to understand.
11. Information on website is available in more than one language.



Table 3  
*School Phone Survey Items (10 items)*

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Informative Staff (6 items)

1. Office staff identifies themselves when answering the phone.
3. Answer to question: “What are your school hours?”
4. Answer to question: “What do I need in order to register my child in your school?”
5. Answer to question: “If I wanted more information about your school, how would I get it?”
6. Staff is knowledgeable about school policies and procedures.
8. School voicemail has instructions in more than one language.

Responsiveness (3 items)

2. Office staff answers phone call in a helpful, friendly, and professional manner.
9. A voicemail or recording is available.
10. Messages left on voicemail are returned within next business day of call.

Overall Positive Experience (1 item)

7. Phone call was a positive experience.
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The walk-through rating scale, website rating scale, and phone survey were evaluated by an associate professor with expertise in family involvement/family engagement, and by a teacher in the participating school district to determine the extent to which they gauged family-friendliness. Overall, the two evaluators expressed a view that most items were straightforward and non-overlapping. The evaluators also concluded that the items contributed collectively to assessing the family-friendly nature of schools. The two evaluators made minor editing suggestions, which led the creators to make small adjustments to the items contained in the three assessment tools.

## Context

Nevada’s Washoe County School District schools were invited to participate in this exploratory study and 31 schools agreed to participate during the 2014-2015 school year. The initiative to assess family-friendliness in WCSD was implemented for the first time in 2005, using only the walk-through assessment tool. Iterations of the assessment tool items evolved each year through discussions within the Department of Family-School Partnerships and the District’s Council of Family Engagement, which includes representatives from the community,

teachers, parents, representatives from higher education, and representatives from the Department of Family-School Partnerships. Inter-rater reliability of the walk-through rating scale was examined for four years prior to the present study (Talavera et al., 2014). Overall, the walk-through rating scale's inter-rater reliability indices ranged from moderate (Cohen's  $\kappa = .282$ ) to very good (Cohen's  $\kappa = 1$ ) across the four years for at least 13 of the 17 items (Talavera et al., 2014).

**Procedure.** Two weeks before the start of this exploratory study, the WCSD Family-School Partnerships Coordinator shared the walk-through rating scale, website rating scale, and phone survey with area principals and superintendents, as agreed during planning meetings. Schools were invited to ask questions about the rating scales and survey. Schools were also given the date, but not the time, that two raters would complete the two rating scales and surveys at their site.

**Raters.** The raters in this exploratory study were 10 members of the family-friendly subcommittee of the district's Council on Family Engagement. They were volunteers at the district and were familiar with the district's family-friendly school efforts. Eight raters rated three schools and two raters rated four schools during the rating period of 6 weeks.

**Training.** The family-friendly schools training designed to discuss each item on the rating scales and phone survey was conducted by the coordinator from the Department of Family-School Partnerships in the district. The training information was included in a PowerPoint presentation and handouts. The coordinator began with school etiquette and courtesy reminders. She then provided step-by-step instructions for what raters should do upon arriving. Next, the coordinator reviewed each item on the walk-through rating scale, the website rating scale, and the phone survey. For each item, she discussed what High Quality Practice (3 points), Emerging Quality Practice (2 points), and Low Quality Practice (1 point) means. For example, for the first item on the walk-through rating scale, "Entrance to the front office is clearly marked," she addressed High Quality Practice by including a picture of a welcome sign that clearly indicated the entrance to a school's front office. Next, she discussed an example of Emerging Practice by showing a picture of a sign to the front office that was obstructed or not clearly visible. Finally, as an example of a Low Quality Practice, she showed a picture where the entrance to the front office was not marked at all. This pattern of introducing the item, showing an image, and discussing High Quality Practice, Emerging Practice, and Low Quality Practice continued for all items and included participation from trainees. The training concluded with instructions on what to do upon departing the school and how to submit completed ratings within one week of finishing the three assessments.

**Rating Process.** Two raters were assigned randomly to each of the 31 sites. Raters used the walk-through rating scale, the website rating scale, and the phone survey for each site. Upon arrival at the site, the rater introduced herself, asked for a map of the school, and asked about any testing or areas that needed to be avoided during the tour. Next, the rater followed the school's check-in procedures and began using the walk-through rating scale. Once the walk-through was completed, the rater returned to the office to sign out. The phone survey was completed during

school hours and the website rating scale was done before or after completing the walk-through. The walk-through rating scale, the website rating scale, and the phone survey were completed in no pre-determined order, but on the same day. Within one week of completing assessments, each rater sent a report to the Coordinator.

**Reports to schools.** The Coordinator compiled all of ratings, then averaged the rating dyad's scores. Approximately three months after sending initial emails to area principals and superintendents, the Family-School Partnerships Coordinator sent a confidential electronic score report. The score report included a school's average score on each item of the walk-through rating scale, the website rating scale, and the phone survey. An average score of 3 suggested identification of high-quality school practices and an average score of 1 suggested identification of low-quality practices. The report also included recommendations by the Coordinator and her committee on promoting family-friendly environments. For example, if a walk-through showed there was no area of the school parking lot designated for "visitor parking," the recommendation was to address this problem by designating such an area in the parking lot.

## Results

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine inter-rater reliability of an available family-friendly school assessment tool. As mentioned above, the walk-through rating scale, website rating scale, and phone survey were completed by two raters per site. Percent agreements and Cohen's kappa were used for calculating inter-rater reliability (IRR). Despite rater training, coding was not straightforward and high reliability was not expected (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). Intended only for two raters, Cohen's kappa is a statistical measure that evaluates observer agreement for categorical data (Landis & Koch, 1977). A kappa statistic above .81 is considered almost perfect; a statistic of .20 to .40 is considered fair; a statistic of < 0.00 is considered poor (Landis & Koch, 1977). Percent agreement indicates the total average number of agreements across raters per item with higher averages indicating greater agreement. Table 4 shows the IRR indices obtained.

Table 4.  
*IRR Indices*

	% Agreement	Cohen's $\kappa$
<b>Walk Through</b>		
1. Entrance to the front office is clearly marked.	87.1	.652
2. Welcome signs are displayed in all appropriate languages (demographics).	71.0	.536
3. There is a visitor policy/sign written in friendly language that requires check-in upon entering and wearing a visitor I.D.	64.5	.282
4. Front desk staff includes individual(s) fluent in the parents' home languages.	93.5	.818
5. Office staff is helpful, friendly, and professional. They are informed about school policies and procedures.	100.0	1.000
6. There is a campus map posted in a remote location.	87.1	.742
7. New families are provided with school information in one packet, calendar, school schedule, etc.	80.6	.599
8. A suggestion box is prominently displayed in high parent traffic areas.	83.9	.728
9. An area exists in the school where parents can go for information such as school rules, school schedule, etc.	93.5	.769
10. Infinite Campus Parent Portal is functional, visible and accessible for families' access to computers, books, and other materials.	83.9	.561
11. Upcoming events for family participation are posted in families' languages and are in areas accessible to visitors.	80.6	.429
12. There is evidence that information about partnerships with surrounding community and local businesses is made available to families.	83.9	.644
13. There is a school mission statement posted in a visible area.	93.5	.883
14. There is evidence of student learning posted on campus, multi-purpose room or where there is a space available for all grade levels.	87.1	.449

15. Campus is clean and free of litter.	100.0	1.000
16. There is a clearly marked designated area for visitor parking.	80.6	.682
17. Only high schools. School has a college and career center.	100.0	1.000
 Website		
1. Site is easy to navigate.	100.0	1.000
2. Information is easy to understand.	96.8	.652
3. Information is current and updated.	93.5	.713
4. Website includes a link to Infinite Campus Parent Portal.	96.8	.843
5. A school calendar with information/events is posted.	87.1	.532
6. The website includes a Parent Resource Section.	77.4	.589
7. Contact information on staff is available.	90.3	.737
8. Website includes a Frequently Asked Questions section.	67.7	.454
9. School location, hours and link to mapping program are posted.	87.1	.735
10. Current District and/or School e-Newsletter is available with links to past issues.	64.5	.400
11. Information on website is available in more than one language.	77.4	.632
 Phone		
1. Office staff identifies themselves when answering the phone.	67.7	-.183
2. Office staff answers phone call in a helpful, friendly, and professional manner.	83.9	.644
3. Answer to question: "What are your school hours?"	74.2	.439
4. Answer to question: "What do I need in order to register my child in your school?"	41.9	-.172
5. Answer to question: "If I wanted more information about your school, how would I get it?"	74.2	.419
6. Staff is knowledgeable about school policies and procedures.	90.3	.784
7. Phone call was a positive experience.	93.5	.852
8. School voicemail has instructions in more than one language.	83.9	.655

9. A voicemail or recording is available.	93.5	.868
10. Messages left on voicemail are returned within next business day of call.	87.1	.741

Table 4 shows that the average pairwise percent agreement for the walk-through rating scale was 86%. Metrics of IRR indicated good agreement based on recommendations by Landis and Koch (1977; Cohen's  $\kappa = .697$ ). Website ratings were similar, with an observed percent agreement of 85%, and Cohen's  $\kappa = .672$ . Inter-rater reliability for the phone items was moderate (percent agreement = 79%; Cohen's  $\kappa = .505$ ). However, given that different raters may have had differing experiences when calling the schools (e.g., speaking to different people at different times of the school day), these lower metrics of IRR can be partially explained.

### Discussion

While this study focused on a formal educational setting, its findings demonstrate the ability to achieve high inter-rater reliability in rating family friendliness of a formal educational setting. While focused in a formal educational setting, these findings used a tool that could be extrapolated and used in other educational settings to understand involvement of families and individuals in specific programs. By reviewing the physical environment, staff telephone customer service, and website navigability, many different types of organizations including schools and FLE settings can find ways to better improve their welcoming and family-friendliness to increase involvement of target audiences.

### IRR of Family-Friendly Assessment Tools

This exploratory study provided insight on inter-rater reliability of family-friendly assessment tools a school district located in Nevada uses to gauge family-friendliness. Overall, results revealed high levels of IRR on scoring of items on the walk-through rating scale and the website rating scale, along with moderate IRR on scoring of the phone surveys. Findings suggest that two assessment tools (the walk-through rating scale and the website rating scale) may serve as helpful instruments for assessing family-friendliness. One reason these two rating scales may have yielded better IRR results than the phone surveys did might be the degree of objectivity involved in the rating of most items in the walk-through rating scale and all items on the website rating scale. Factors such as signage/visual communication, resource availability for families, informative quality of websites, and website ease of use may be susceptible to being rated more objectively than are factors that assume human interaction, such as the extent to which staff members are informative or responsive over the course of phone conversations. While physical aspects of location or a website can be visited and revisited at will as raters may ponder their scores, a phone conversation with staff is by nature a one-time experience that cannot be repeated. Therefore, items whose ratings depend on human interaction may have been rated less

objectively in part because of the impossibility that raters could re-examine their phone experiences in the same ways they could a physical environment or website.

IRR indices obtained across assessment tools might provide insights on areas where educational settings may be attempting to foster family-friendliness along with potential areas for growth. For example, four of the assessment items reported 100% inter-rater reliability agreement. These were related to availability of helpful and informative staff at the site, school cleanliness, availability of college and career centers at high schools, and ease of navigating the websites. With respect to areas for improvement, results showed that some areas receiving low IRR agreement might also deserve the district's attention. These areas included use of a visitor policy/sign written in friendly language that requires check-in upon arrival; the need for websites that direct families to e-Newsletters and links to past issues; and, guidance needed by staff for advising families through children's school registration. All these are areas specific to formal educational settings but would also apply to many other settings.

### **Implications for FLE**

By examining the welcoming nature and family-friendliness of the physical environment, the staff's ability to provide information via phone calls, and website navigability, many different types of organization could learn much about current strengths along with areas for growth. Building trust and rapport with a target audience is a critical step for FLE that starts within the planning process (Ballard & Taylor, 2012; Darling & Cassidy, 2014; Wiley & Ebata, 2004). Therefore, strategically and intentionally evaluating a program's structural characteristics and/or situational factors including timing, audience, teaching space, and e-learning can play roles in facilitating participation with many formal, nonformal, and informal educational settings (Darling & Cassidy, 2014). Current results revealed high levels of IRR on scoring of items on the walk-through rating scale and the website rating scale. As discussed by Darling and Cassidy (2014), both of these are considered key structural characteristics for any educational setting. Educators in all types of setting could adapt these scales for use within their organizations to gain insights on perspectives of their target audiences.

Use of the walk-through rating scale could be particularly helpful in teaching spaces, which are one element that all educational settings must be aware of during the planning process. As discussed by Duncan and Goddard (2017), educators must be aware of barriers and perceptions of the target audience relevant to a specific teaching space in order to plan accordingly. Related to family involvement in education, previous experiences within that environment can hinder family members' ability to fully engage with activities (Foundation for Child Development, 2009). Using the environmental rating scale for walk-through analysis would give organizations and educators unique views into participants' perspectives on their physical environments and teaching spaces.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

One major limitation of this study is the numbers of raters at each site: each school had only two raters. Although raters were carefully trained to use the assessment tools, having more raters at each school would have strengthened the exploratory research design. Future studies would benefit from participation of three to five raters per school. Detailed information on each rater's relationship to the schools, along with other demographic information, would have provided better understanding of raters' qualifications to rate items and perceptions of the school being rated.

Finally, the items that reported the least inter-rater reliability were those related to phone calls. However, one factor that may have influenced these results is that some rater dyads reported speaking on the telephone to different people from the same school. Families do not always get the same persons on the phone when calling schools, which means that talking to whoever answers the phone is realistic to assessing family-friendliness of schools. Although schools may consider training all staff who answer the phone on responses to frequently asked questions from families, this may not be possible depending on the numbers of staff members available to answer phones. Future studies may advise raters to try to speak with the same person on the phone if possible. Otherwise, rater dyads should try to speak to people in similar hierarchical positions within the school: for example, teacher assistant and school volunteer; office clerk and school secretary; assistant to the principal and vice principal.

As with most exploratory studies, this research opens new avenues for future investigations in the field that use this specific tool. Adapting the tool and replicating the study in informal and nonformal educational settings would provide more resources for practitioners in those settings to understand perceptions of their target audience, which is important to long-term success of any educational program (Darling & Cassidy, 2014; Duncan & Goddard, 2017). As programs begin to understand how participants view the physical and digital spaces, they are much more able to meet the needs of current participants and to work to further improve the involvement of others in the community.

### **Conclusion**

While the importance of family involvement is well documented in the extant literature, scholars have not used empirical data to explore the notion of family-friendly schools and there is little research related to FLE educational settings. This study provides an empirical starting point by examining inter-rater reliability of one school district's family-friendly school assessment tools. Two of the three tools used, namely the walk-through rating scale and the website rating scale, reported good inter-rater reliability indices. Four of the assessment items also reported perfect inter-rater reliability agreement. Despite its limitations, this exploratory study suggests the rating scales examined here may be tools for better understanding the strengths and areas of improvement for any educational setting where there is interest in assessing family-friendliness and increasing families' involvement.



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