



## Customer Service Guide

## **Introduction**

Effective interpersonal communication is vital in education. It is the essence of teaching. It is also the most important element of parent involvement and the satisfaction of our “customers” plays a role in student achievement. Also, the way in which people are greeted, treated and informed will have an impact on enrolment.

This guide is intended to present the Greater Essex County District School Board’s customer service philosophy and offer practical tips for excellent customer service.

By accepting and implementing these suggestions you will help maintain the excellent reputation of the Greater Essex County District School Board while reducing your job stress and improving your time management.

### **Who are our “customers”?**

- Parents / guardians
- Students
- Co-workers
- Community partners
- Taxpayers of Ontario



Excellent communication and co-operation among employees of the Board establishes the conditions for outstanding external customer service.

### **Who is responsible for providing customer service?**

- All GECD SB Staff
  - Regardless of an assigned role, our goal is for everyone to provide exceptional customer service.
  - Consider the circumstances in which you have contact with “customers” and how your attitude, behavior and performance could impact customer satisfaction.
- Students
- Contractors

### **GECD SB Customer Service principles:**

- As a publicly-funded organization, transparency and responsiveness are essential. Anyone from any of our “customer” groups should be able to easily locate and connect with the person they need to contact, in person, by phone or via e-mail in a reasonable amount of time.

- We are committed to student achievement and public scrutiny of the success and safety of each student in our Board is welcomed and encouraged to strengthen our accountability.
- GECD SB employees are also concerned with and dedicated to the success of the neighbourhoods and communities we serve. We accept that it is our responsibility to provide lessons in citizenship and positive relationships enabling each student to be a meaningful participant in the life of their community. We can do this most effectively by providing a good example and modelling appropriate behavior.

### **A culture of customer service in the GECD SB**

Every visitor, parent / guardian and member of the community should feel comfortable and welcomed at our schools and Board facilities.

This begins with clear and consistent signage at the point of arrival. Through our Safe Welcome Program, standardized signage has been developed to describe school entry procedures and provide directions inside the building to all visitors.\*

Any complementary signs throughout the building (i.e. “To the Gym”) should be presented in the same fashion and be strategically placed. Facility Services can assist in the production and placement of any additional school signage.

This is just the introduction to a fully-welcoming, customer-focused environment. It must be sustained throughout the building by all staff with a constant commitment to being responsive to both our external and internal “customers”.

\* See Appendix 1

Outstanding customer service requires a basic understanding of what “customers” want and need.

- Everyone wants to feel welcomed and important. They need to receive timely and helpful responses to questions and, if possible, swift resolutions to their problems or inquiries.
- People want to be understood – to feel that their opinions and needs are worth listening to and being acted upon. In situations that cannot produce an immediate resolution, the way in which an individual is treated in the attempt to resolve the issue will create a strong impression about the quality of customer service provided.

- An individual with a concern or a problem needs to know that you care about reaching a resolution.



There does not have to be a winner and a loser in a conflict. Some solutions can satisfy both party's needs. Differing needs are not necessarily irreconcilable.

**ABC's of Excellent Customer Service:**

- A** Appearance - yours and your workplace (first impressions are important)
- B** Behavior - how you interact with the customer and how you handle conflict
- C** Communication – written, oral and electronic

How you say what you say is a very meaningful part of communication. Body language, tone of voice and the choice of words can create perceptions that may alter the meaning or intent of a statement.



Since a significant portion of a message can be relayed through non-verbal communication, e-mail should not be the medium of choice to carry out an exchange regarding an emotional, contentious or highly confrontational issue.

**Customer Service Attributes**

1. A commitment to caring for coworkers, students, parents / guardians and the community
2. A willingness to be flexible
3. Listening
4. A work ethic supporting The Mission of the GECDSD\*
5. An eagerness to learn and improve
6. Self-motivation and goal-oriented
7. Excellent communication skills

8. Providing all available resources



Soliciting feedback and following up to ensure that service has been delivered to the customer's satisfaction fosters trust.

### **Customer service challenges**



*Main office administrative personnel (secretaries & clerks) are usually the first to engage disgruntled or angry "customers".*

*Outstanding customer service representatives see complaints as opportunities, since a favourable resolution enhances the school's and the Board's credibility and reputation as well as the value of the individual employee.*

1. Simultaneously managing a "customer's" concern(s) and the other requirements of the job.
2. Encountering angry "customers" when things go wrong.
3. Coordinating with other departments and individuals throughout the Board to meet the "customer's" needs.
4. Balancing "customer" needs and the Board's policies and procedures, especially when they conflict.
5. Language barriers
6. Socio-economic factors (i.e. transportation, access to technology, etc.)
7. Having the necessary time and training to understand new policies and procedures.
8. Some people, regardless of your friendly attitude and understanding manner, will not be appeased until they get their way, even when that is clearly unreasonable or impossible.

### **First Impressions are lasting impressions**

On the outside, does your school or work location have:

- clearly marked visitor and other designated parking spaces near the front entrance?
- well-kept grounds free of trash and debris?

- A plainly marked entrance?
- A clean and appealing front entrance / lobby area?
- Consistent directional signage?

On the inside, do you have:

- A clean and tidy front office?
- Reading material about the school / Board for “customers” who may have to wait?
- Attractive, colourful displays of student work?
- Welcoming and presentable staff who greet all “customers”?
- Visitor badges?
- Promptly (within 3 rings) and professionally answered phones?
- Well informed staff with up-to-date basic information readily accessible?

### ***Executing outstanding customer service***

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#### **Friendly & Approachable**

Utilize the 15-1 rule: Make eye contact – acknowledge someone at 15 feet from you. When the gap closes to 5 feet, smile and extend a friendly greeting. Be aware of your body language, especially if you are tired or having a bad day.

#### **Empathy & Knowledge**

Provide your “customer” with the type of treatment that you would want in a similar circumstance.

Learn effective customer service skills and techniques for dealing with difficult people in specific situation. (see page 7 – Dealing with Difficult People)

#### **Fairness & Equity**

Greet all visitors in the same fashion regardless of their outward appearance or disposition and promptly offer assistance. More than one “customer” may be witnessing the interaction and we must demonstrate in both actions and attitude that everyone will be treated equally and without prejudice.

#### **Calm & Controlled**

Earn control over each interaction by initiating contact with the “customer”. Even if you are occupied with other tasks or “customers” a calm demeanor will instill confidence in your ability to handle their concern.

## Information and Communication

“Customers” need and want information about Board or Ministry policies and procedures. Be able to access the information yourself in a timely fashion or be prepared to clearly explain how and where it can be found.



Basic information about the GECD SB can be found on our website [www.publicboard.ca](http://www.publicboard.ca) Information about the Ontario Ministry of Education can be obtained at [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/)

## “Customer” conversations

When speaking with a “customer” (in person or on the telephone):

- Be an active listener. By focusing your attention on what the speaker is saying you create mutual understanding. Demonstrate you are engaged in the conversation with brief interjections, but do not interrupt unless it is necessary. To clarify you may repeat the speaker’s own words in response (this allows the speaker to know you have heard what they said – or allows them to attempt a better explanation).
- Put down other work.
- Have a pen and paper handy for notes, if necessary.
- Get as much information about the person’s situation as possible.



Emotions are contagious! Cheerfulness is more easily transmitted than negative emotions.

## Dealing with Difficult People



Recognize that you may be interacting with a person who is having the worst part of a bad day. It is natural for someone to project their anger or frustration on you. Give each “customer” appropriate consideration (some benefit of the doubt).

**If a caller is swearing or using offensive language:**

- Interrupt immediately and assure them you want to help.

- Address the language directly and keep control. Say in a calm tone of voice, “Excuse me, I want to help, but not if you continue to speak with me in that manner.” Then follow up with questions to identify the problem.
- If the offensive language continues, remain calm and polite while telling the caller you will have to end the call. Then hang up the phone, gently. Report the incident to your supervisor.

**If a visitor appears physically hostile or aggressive:**

- Use common sense and call 911 if the person presents an imminent danger. It’s a good idea to work out with your supervisor how to handle particularly difficult interactions ahead of time. Be sure to know what to do if your supervisor is away at the time of a future situation.
- Remain calm but don’t remain alone, always have a witness. Don’t hesitate to call a co-worker or emergency contacts.
- Ask the person to sit down (if possible). Repeat that you want to help and find a solution, but that you aren’t able to help unless you can have a reasonable discussion. Be aware of your surroundings. If you suspect the visitor is “playing to an audience,” try removing the audience but keep your witness.
- You may need to involve your supervisor, especially if you find yourself unable to handle the situation in a calm, detached manner or the hostility escalates.



The Ontario Ministry of Education Special Education document, “**Shared Solutions**” (<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/shared.pdf>) has a great deal of useful, general information and ideas about dealing with difficult people – see *pages 10-12, 21-23 & 28-35*)

## **Cultural Awareness**

It is important to remember that some behaviours are culturally based and that this can add to communication difficulties when a situation is emotionally charged. Well-documented cultural differences exist in both verbal and non-verbal communication. Volume, tone of voice, response time, maintaining or avoiding eye contact, increasing or decreasing the physical space between speakers, and gesturing during oral communication may all be culturally influenced to some extent. In some cultures, increased volume signals heightened conflict, whereas in other

cultures, changes in the amount of physical space between speakers may indicate rising tension. (Source: “Shared Solutions” – Ont. Ministry of Education)

## **Your Telephone**

Your telephone is a powerful tool in providing customer service. Before someone even speaks with a person, a profound impression is left with the caller when:

- The phone is: answered / not answered promptly (within 3 rings is generally accepted as prompt)
- Your network message (the recorded welcome people receive through the automated network) is / is not: brief, up to date, clear and presented in a friendly fashion.

Once you have a “customer” on the phone:

- Use a standard greeting. (i.e. “Hello, ABC Public School. This is Stella. How can I help you?”)
- Be aware of how loud or softly you might be speaking.
- Smile! The caller cannot see you, but the act of smiling will transmit a welcoming, friendly tone in your voice.
- Speak clearly and distinctly.
- Listen actively to what the person is saying.
- If it is necessary to put someone on “hold” do so politely and, if necessary, check back with the caller every 30-45 seconds.
- If a caller indicated a need to speak with someone immediately, ask the nature of the emergency – if it is legitimate (some may only seem like emergencies to the caller) place the caller on “hold” and make necessary arrangements to get the person requested / needed to the phone.
- Forward calls / message promptly to the intended person.



Let callers know that you understand their concern and if necessary transfer them to someone who has the authority to deal with such concerns. Allow the client to exhaust their options as they pursue a satisfactory outcome.

## **Your Website / Social Media**

Your webpage can create an important impression. Its state of organization, the accuracy of the information, the quality of the content and how up-to-date everything is will reflect well / poorly on your school.

Your webpage could be the first place someone goes for information!

Review the site on a regular basis – update, change, refresh or correct anything not current or accurate.

Is your site enjoyable to visit?

Are the links intuitive (is that where you would look to find the information you want)?

How do the images complement the information?

Will a regular visitor often see something fresh on the site?

Social media provides additional opportunities to offer service to your community. For instance, changes to scheduled activities or events can be immediately shared with followers, avoiding inconvenience for families / guests and unnecessary disruption for the frontline staff due to increased telephone or foot traffic.

Through social media you can quickly and easily share positive news of happenings within your school, building goodwill among your “customers”.



Redundancy in communications is a sound practice. You should never rely on a single communications vehicle to reach your entire audience. For instance, some GECD SB schools use Synrevoice and/or Twitter to notify families that the monthly newsletter has been sent home or has been posted to the website.

### **Evaluate Your Customer Service Skill**

When it comes to interpersonal communications, are you a shooting star or shooting yourself in the foot?

Conduct the following self-evaluation with a co-worker or supervisor to see where you may want to improve these important skills. Rate yourself from 1 to 10, with 10 being the best score you could imagine.

<b>Standard</b>	<b>What I Think</b>	<b>Someone Else’s Score</b>
Eye contact/pleasant tone of voice		
Ability to conceal frustration		
Willingness to offer apology when it isn’t my fault		
Willingness to offer apology when it <i>is</i> my fault		
Ability to handle unreasonable complaints		
Accessibility		
Willingness to make accommodations		
Indirect communication (Body language...etc.)		
Response to criticism		

Attitude		
Total Score – out of 100 points		

**How did you do?**

- 90-100            Congratulations. Consider mentoring others at your workplace.
- 80-89            Not bad. Consider seeking out additional customer service material, or contact the Public Relations Officer for more information and retake the test.
- Below 79        Not good, but thank you for your honesty and courage in taking the self-evaluation. Consider working with your supervisor to devise a plan to improve your interpersonal communications.