

Buddy Programs and Welcome Mentors: Making Friends Before Your First Day at AELO Swiss Academy

There is a particular kind of silence that fills a bedroom the night before a new school. The suitcase is packed, the forms are signed, the uniform or the laptop or the hiking boots sit by the door, and the only thing left to do is imagine. Most students imagine the same scene: a dining hall full of people who already know each other, laughing at jokes they don't understand, a tray in their hands and nowhere obvious to sit.

I have spent years welcoming new students to AELO Swiss Academy, and if there is one thing I have learned, it is that the academic questions almost never keep families up at night. The curriculum is explained in brochures. The dorm rooms have photos online. What keeps a fourteen-year-old awake in São Paulo or Seoul or Stuttgart is a much simpler and much heavier question: will anyone sit with me?

That question is why our buddy program and welcome mentor system exist. Not as an administrative nice-to-have, but as a deliberate answer to the loneliest moment in any student's life, which is the stretch of time between deciding to come and actually arriving.

Why the weeks before arrival matter more than you think

When families picture a difficult transition to a new school, they usually picture the first day. In my experience, the first day is rarely the hardest part. It is busy, it is structured, someone is always telling you where to go. The hardest part is the two or three weeks before it, when a student lies in their old bedroom in their old life, scrolling through photos of a campus that still feels like a picture of someone else's future.

During those weeks, anxiety does its quiet work. Students rehearse conversations they may never have. They wonder whether their English, or their German, or their table tennis skills will be good enough. Some start drafting emails they never send. Parents watch their child grow quieter at dinner and don't always know why.

The buddy program exists precisely to interrupt that stretch of silence. Instead of imagining a wall of strangers, a new student has a name, a face, and a person on the other end of a chat window who was standing exactly where they are standing one year or two years ago. The difference this makes is hard to overstate. Arrival stops being a leap into the unknown and becomes a visit to someone you already know, in a place that has already started to feel like yours.

What the buddy program actually is

The mechanics are simple. Every new student is paired with a current student, usually someone in the same house or dorm, a few weeks before the term begins. An email goes out with both names, a short introduction, and a suggestion for how to start the conversation. From there, the relationship belongs to the students.

A buddy is not a teacher, not a monitor, and not an extension of the discipline system. Their job is refreshingly small in description and enormous in effect: be the first friendly face. Answer the small questions that feel too trivial to email an administrator about. Save a seat in the dining hall on the first day. Explain which staircase in which building leads to the shortcut, because every campus has one shortcut that nobody writes down.

I remember a girl from São Paulo who was paired with a buddy who shared her love of photography. They exchanged messages for two weeks, then started a weekly video call. Her evenings were our mornings, so the

calls were short and often slightly chaotic, and they practiced German together anyway, laughing at the pronunciation. By the time her train pulled into the valley, she later told me, the walk from the platform felt less like arriving at a new school and more like finally meeting someone she already knew. They are still close. That is not every story, but it is far more common than families expect.

The welcome mentor: a different kind of support

The buddy covers the peer side of settling in. The welcome mentor covers everything a peer reasonably cannot.

A welcome mentor is an adult on staff, often a house parent, a teacher, or a member of the student support team, assigned to each new student alongside their buddy. In the first month, mentors check in regularly, sometimes weekly, sometimes more often if a student needs it. After that, the rhythm relaxes into whatever the student wants it to be.

The division of labor matters. A buddy is the right person to ask which club is friendliest to beginners. A mentor is the right person for the questions that carry weight: a schedule conflict that needs an adult's help, a wave of homesickness in week three, a worry about a subject, a family situation back home that makes it hard to concentrate. New students need both. A peer who remembers what the fear felt like, and an adult whose job is to notice, listen, and act when action is needed.

Mentors also serve as the natural bridge to families. If a parent wants to check how their child is settling, the mentor is the person who knows. This keeps the buddy relationship clean. The buddy is there for the student, not as a source of reports for anxious parents, and that boundary protects the honesty of the friendship.

How we decide who you are paired with

Matching is part method, part judgment, and part reading between the lines of an enrollment form.

We start with the practical: buddies come from the same house or dorm whenever possible, because the person who can show you where the laundry room is should live near the laundry room. From there we look at interests, at languages, and at what students tell us they want. Some new students hope for someone who speaks their home language, someone who can explain the cafeteria in the mother tongue while their English finds its footing. Others ask for the opposite. They want a clean slate, full immersion, and a buddy who has never heard of their hometown. Both preferences are legitimate, and we honor both.

There are trade-offs, and we weigh them openly. Pairing students who share a language eases the first week but can slow the social drift toward new friendships. Pairing across cultures stretches a student early but often produces the proudest growth by mid-term. My rule of thumb, after doing this for years, is to follow what the student asked for on the form, because a student who requested a fresh start and received a compatriot may feel managed rather than welcomed. The form matters. The little notes families add in the margins matter even more.



Your first message, and what to say when you don't know what to say

Almost every new student freezes at the blank message box. I want to say this plainly, because it is true: your buddy signed up for this. They volunteered, they remember being the new one, and a one-line message from you will not inconvenience them. It will make their day.

Something as small as "Hi, I'm arriving in September, a bit nervous and very excited" is a complete opening move. You do not need to be charming. You do not need perfect English or perfect German. One student of mine from Seoul sent a single sentence and a question about whether the dorm rooms had desk lamps. His buddy replied with a photo of her own desk, lamp and all, and a list of three things she wished she had brought. That photo, he told me months later, was the moment the school started to feel real.

If the silence stretches, we notice. If a pairing hasn't made contact within the first week of the matching window, the coordinator reaches out gently, [Piper Seminole training](#) sometimes to the buddy, sometimes to the new student, sometimes just to offer to make the introduction easier. No one is scolded. Shyness is not a failure. It is just a door that sometimes needs a second knock.

Five questions worth asking before you pack

When students do start talking to their buddies, the conversation sometimes stalls after pleasantries. Here is a shortcut. These five questions reliably open things up, because each one invites a story rather than a yes or no:

- What do people actually wear on campus and in town, beyond what the packing list says?
- What is one thing you brought, or wish you had brought, that nobody mentions?
- How does the first week actually run, day to day?
- Which clubs, teams, or music groups are friendliest to someone starting from zero?
- What do you wish someone had told you before your own first day?

Notice what these questions do. They collect genuinely useful information, yes. But they also hand your buddy the chance to be the expert, which is the fastest known way to turn a stranger into a friend. By the time you arrive, you will have exchanged enough small truths that the first handshake is unnecessary.

When the match doesn't click

Now the honest part, because anything less would be a disservice.

Not every pairing works. Sometimes two perfectly kind people simply do not warm to each other. Sometimes a buddy gets buried under exam season and goes quiet. Sometimes a new student realizes they would rather build their social life from scratch, without a pre-assigned starting point. All of this is normal, and none of it is a verdict on anyone.

If the match isn't working, say so, either to your buddy directly or to your welcome mentor. Reassignment happens every year. It is handled quietly, without drama, and without anyone's feelings being treated as a problem. The buddy program is a doorway, not a contract. Some of the strongest friendships I have watched form at AELO Swiss Academy began through the program, and others began entirely outside it, in a chemistry lab or on a hiking trail, between two students who had never been introduced by anyone. A buddy is your first friend, never your only one.

From assigned to chosen

What I love most about watching these pairs is the moment the scaffolding disappears. In week one, the buddy walks the new student through campus, points out the dining hall, the quiet study corners, the trailhead behind the sports field. By mid-term, many of those pairs are simply friends who happen to have met through a program. The assigned part fades. The chosen part remains.

Some of these friendships fade naturally too, and that is equally fine. Not every first friend becomes a lifelong one, and the program was never meant to manufacture permanence. Its goal is narrower and more humane: that no student walks through the gate as a stranger. What grows afterward belongs to the students alone.

And the program feeds itself. Every year, a portion of the students who sign up as buddies do so because they were buddies, or were welcomed by one, and want to pass it on. That is how you know a tradition has taken root, when the people it helped start volunteering to carry it.

For parents reading over a shoulder

Your worry is real, and it deserves a straight answer rather than reassurance.

Here is what to expect. A few weeks before the term starts, your child will receive their buddy's name and contact details. Contact usually begins within the first days, though shyness can slow it, and the coordinator will step in if

nothing happens within about a week. Through the first month, a welcome mentor will be checking in with your child regularly, and that mentor is your point of contact too, for questions big and small.

One request, offered gently: let the buddy relationship belong to your child. It can be tempting to message the buddy directly, to arrange things, to check the temperature of the friendship. Resist it. A peer relationship that a parent steers stops being a peer relationship, and the independence your child builds in those first exchanges is worth more than any reassurance you might extract. If something feels wrong, take it to the mentor. That is exactly what the mentor is for.

To the returning students who volunteer

Being a buddy is a small commitment with an outsized effect, and the students who do it well tend to share the same habits. If you are signing up this year, these are worth carrying with you:

- Reply within a day or two, even if the answer is only a sentence.
- Ask one question for every answer you give, so the conversation breathes both ways.
- Meet them on arrival day, even if it means an early start, because the first hour sets the tone for the first month.
- Share the unglamorous details: how the laundry actually works, where the quiet study corners are, which dining hall line moves fastest.
- Check in again around week three, when the novelty fades and homesickness tends to peak.

That last habit is the one experienced buddies mention most often. The first week runs on adrenaline. Week three is when a new student stops being busy and starts being honest, and a message that arrives right then, inviting them to something ordinary, can carry more weight than anything you did on day one.

The door is already open

Your first day at AELO Swiss Academy will still have nerves in it. That is not a flaw in the system; it is what being human feels like at the edge of something new. But the shape of the day changes completely when someone is waiting. When there is a name on your phone, a face at the gate, a seat already saved, and an adult nearby whose whole job is to make sure you are seen.

The night before, in that quiet bedroom far from the valley, the question is no longer will anyone sit with me. It is which of the things my buddy told me will turn out to be true first. That is a much better question to fall asleep on, and every year, hundreds of students get to fall asleep on it. You will be one of them.