A Volunteer’s Perspective
Vanessa W., Liaison, Massachusetts Bay Team

“I had an opportunity to create a Plan for Success for the first time last year. I was initially skeptical about how the plan would help my student and her host family, mostly because I wasn’t sure how it would improve the current circumstances. So, I decided to ask more experienced AFS support volunteers for their advice and feedback, and I gathered as much information as I could from the AFS Wiki site. (I am very fortunate to have some remarkable people who are willing to help whenever I have any questions.) I decided to take a collaborative approach and used the development of the Plan to encourage open dialogue, first with the student and then with her and her host parents together. I was pleasantly surprised that everyone wanted to participate in the Plan, so the goals included the student, her host parents and me, and how we would all work together to improve things. I also believe that the host parents were truly amazing, especially considering that it was their first time hosting an AFS student. I learned a lot from them and the student in this process.

I think that focusing on the actionable goals helps to avoid negativity. When problems arise, it is often very emotional for everyone and it’s easy to get all the issues lumped together which isn’t very productive. While it’s important for everyone to feel comfortable so that they can express their feelings, if the conversation can be redirected so that we end up talking about what we can do to improve the situation, then the discussions tend to be more positive. It was also difficult for me to remain neutral at times, but I recognized that my role was to acknowledge what everyone was saying and then keeping us all on track in terms of developing the Plan. This experience taught me that the Plan for Success is a “living” document that needs everyone’s time, attention, energy, participation and hard work in order to create the desired outcome(s). I also think that it creates a framework for communication that allows for positive reinforcement rather than taking a punitive approach with problems that may arise with a student. I followed up with the student and her host parents for a couple of months before I felt confident that things were improving for them.”