



# New York State Education Department

*2013 Site Visit Protocol for New York State Charter Schools  
Authorized by the Board of Regents*

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### **Overview and Purpose of the Charter Full Site-Visit**

The primary purpose for the full site-visit to charter schools authorized by the Board of Regents is to assess progress toward meeting academic, operational, and fiscal performance benchmarks. The school's performance goals and the CSO's standards provide the analytic framework used to hold schools accountable for performance. The visit will identify strengths and areas for growth but does not include recommendations to the school.

The school's performance will be assessed in three areas:

1. The school's academic success and ability to operate in an educationally sound manner;
2. The school's organizational viability and its ability to operate in a fiscally sound manner; and
3. The school's faithfulness to the terms of its charter and adherence to the applicable laws and regulations.

The site-visits and subsequent reports are not intended to provide technical assistance or other advice. The visit is also not intended to directly assist schools in making decisions about how to improve academic programs or operations. Rather, the purpose of the visit is to gather and document evidence about the school's performance for accountability purposes; to ascertain if the school is in compliance with law and regulation as well as with its charter.

## **Conducting the Charter School Full Site-Visit**

### **A. Introduction and morning orientation**

- Team introduces itself to the school leadership.
- Team reviews the purpose and goals for the visit.
- Team reviews the Code of Conduct with school administrator.
- School leadership briefly orients the team to the building and establishes context for classroom visits.

### **B. Site visit team conducts focus group interviews, classroom visits, document review, and additional information gathering**

- Site-visit team members may participate in a combination of focus group interviews, classroom visits, and additional information gathering depending on specifics of the school program.
- Conversations with focus groups will be informed by a standard set of questions, concerns drawn from the review of the charter documents, as well as other sources of information.
- Classroom observations will be guided by a standardized observation tool and rubric that considers classroom management, instructional practice and the school's mission and the key elements of its educational program.

### **C. Focus group interviews**

- All members of a focus group population should be made aware of the opportunity to participate in the interviews; individuals (except for students) should not be hand-picked. Students in grades lower than third should generally not be interviewed.
- If possible, all site visit team members may attend the Board of Trustees and the school leader's focus group interviews.
- If possible, all Board of Trustees members and school leaders should attend their relevant focus groups.
- All focus group interviews are facilitated by a member of the site-visit team, who introduces him/herself, facilitates introductions around the table, and establishes the context for the visit.
- The team member facilitates the conversation, opening with common questions asked of all groups. Whenever possible the team member will guide the focus group members to ground their answers with specific evidence and data. Other team members participate as appropriate.

### **D. Classroom observations**

- School leadership informs school staff that the site-visit team will be in classrooms during the day(s) of the visit, and that they will be taking notes.
- Collectively, the team visits as many classrooms as possible during the day(s) of the visit, including, as time permits, each grade level, each subject area, and large group and hallway settings.
- Classroom visitors will not be disruptive to classroom activities. Visitors will not interrupt the lesson, and will take cues from the teachers and students as to where to sit and, if it is appropriate, to talk with students.

### **E. Team organization and reflection**

- Team members are reminded to refrain from judgment and ground comments in evidence, observations, and data.
- Site-visit team members gather additional evidence and data to fill in gaps through follow-up conversations with key school staff, as needed.
- The team creates initial preliminary findings and outlines the next steps of reviewing the resulting site-visit report.

### **F. Site-visit report**

- The team drafts the site-visit report that includes the team’s findings and the evidence to support those findings.
- The report includes findings based on classroom observations, focus group responses and document review. The findings are statements of fact, grounded in evidence and data collected throughout the day.
- The team reviews and issues the draft report to the school and board leadership for factual corrections only.
- Factual corrections are made by the CSO and the final report is issued to the school.

## **Example of a Charter School Full Site-Visit Schedule**

### **Day One**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Location</b>
8:00 – 9:00 a.m.	Arrive at school, meet principal, orientation to school	School building
9:00 – 10:00 a.m.	Board of Trustees Focus Group	Library
10:00 – 11:30 a.m.	Classroom Visits	School wide
11:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.	School Leaders Focus Group	Library
12:30 – 2:00 p.m.	Team Time (including lunch)	Conference Room
2:00 – 3:30 p.m.	Classroom visits	School wide
3:30 – 4:30 p.m.	Parent Focus Group	Library

### **Day Two**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Location</b>
8:00 -9:30 a.m.	Classroom Visits	School wide
9:30 – 10:30 a.m.	Teacher Focus Group	Library
10:30 – 11:30 a.m.	Student Focus Group	Library
11:30 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.	Team Time (including lunch))	Conference Room
1:00 – 2:00 p.m.	School Leaders Follow Up (if needed)	Library
2:00 – 3:30 p.m.	Classroom visits	
3:30 –3:45 p.m.	Team Time	Conference Room
3:45p.m.	Closure with Leadership Team	Library

## **Focus Group Questions**

The following are examples of questions that may be asked of particular focus groups. The team might also have specific questions based upon the review of documents before the visit and on evidence gathered during the day.

<b>A. School Leadership</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Describe the mission and key design elements at the school and how they are being implemented.</li><li>2. Describe the administrative structure at the school, including the positions, roles and responsibilities.</li><li>3. Describe the process for evaluating teachers. What mechanisms does the school use to support teachers and provide for teacher collaboration?</li><li>4. How is the effectiveness of your performance evaluated?</li><li>5. How is the curriculum developed? What procedures are used to review and update it? What are the expectations for the use of lesson and unit plans?</li><li>6. Describe the instructional practices we will see in classroom observations today.</li><li>7. What is the school's strategy for supporting the learning needs of all students?</li><li>8. Talk about the use of data at the school. What assessments are administered and how are the results used?</li><li>9. What is the school's approach to student behavior management and the expectations for classrooms?</li><li>10. In what ways does the school communicate with parents/families?</li></ol>
<b>B. Teachers</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Describe the mission and key design elements at the school and how they are being implemented.</li><li>2. How is the curriculum developed? What procedures are used to review and update it? What assessments do you use to track student learning?</li><li>3. Are you required to follow any specific formats or procedures in your teaching and lesson planning?</li><li>4. Do you submit lesson plans for review? If so, do you receive feedback on them?</li><li>5. What types of instructional supports, accommodations and modifications are being made in the regular education classroom for students with diverse learning needs?</li><li>6. What professional development and other forms of support are made available to you?</li><li>7. Describe the working relationships (collaborations) between teachers.</li><li>8. Describe how data is used at the school and in your classroom.</li><li>9. How does the school review your performance?</li><li>10. What information do you provide to parents/families and how do you communicate it?</li></ol>

**C. Students**

1. What is the mission of this school?
2. Tell us what it's like to be a student here.
3. How does this school compare with others you've attended?
4. What does the school do to help you feel safe?
5. How do teachers challenge you and your classmates to work hard? What do you do if you need extra help academically?
6. Who do you go to if you do if you need help personally/emotionally?
7. What are the expectations for student behavior in the classrooms?
8. How do you know how well you are doing academically?
9. Has the school contacted your parents/families, why?

**D. Families**

1. Why did you choose to send your child(ren) to this school?
2. What is the school's mission?
3. What does the school expect of your children academically?
4. Is the school a safe place?
5. What does the school do to support your child(ren)?
6. What is your role/involvement in the school?
7. How does the school communicate with you? Does the school ask you for feedback and input?
8. What information does the school provide to you about your child's learning, strengths and needs? Does the school share information about community resources and opportunities?

**E. Board of Trustees**

1. Describe the mission and key design elements at the school and how they are being implemented.
2. Describe the structure of the board. Are there subcommittees?
3. Describe the role and responsibilities of the board.
4. What are the board's goals or top priorities for the school this year?
5. How do you determine whether the school is successful academically? How do you gather information to monitor progress?
6. How does the board evaluate the performance of the school leader? Is there a formal plan in place? How are other staff held accountable?
7. How does the board evaluate its own effectiveness?
8. Describe how the board sets policy.
9. How does the board know of its legal obligations?

## **Responsibilities of the School Leader**

<b>Pre-visit</b>
<p>A. Review the Site-Visit Protocol and speak with the school leadership team to orient them to the purpose of the site-visit, what their respective roles will be during the day, and what to expect when the team is visiting the school. It is the expectation of the team that all classrooms in the school will be available for observation.</p> <p>B. Work quickly after the scheduling letter from SED arrives to confirm the date(s) of the site-visit. Avoid days when large numbers of teachers or students will be out of the building, i.e., standardized testing days or field trips.</p> <p>C. Inform the Board of trustees, teachers, parents, and students (where appropriate) of the opportunity to participate in a focus group on the day of the visit. Provide documentation of the invitation to participate sent to parents, teachers, etc. to the SED.</p> <p>D. Identify a secure place that can serve as a meeting room for the team throughout the day.</p> <p>E. Provide the team with a map of the school, showing room numbers and teacher names, and class schedules for the day of the visit. The master schedule for the day should clearly indicate subjects taught and times, teachers, and room assignments for all classes.</p> <p>F. The day will generally follow the planned schedule, or it may be modified to meet the particular needs of the school. The schedule needs to be finalized with SED at least one week prior to the visit.</p>
<b>During the On-site Visit</b>
<p>A. Meet with SED site-visit team for orientation.</p> <p>B. Ensure coordination of focus group interview sessions.</p> <p>C. Be available to the team during the site visit to answer questions, provide additional documents, or facilitate the schedule.</p>
<b>After the Visit</b>
<p>A. Review draft site-visit report. Identify factual corrections.</p> <p>B. Send response to request for factual corrections back to the team lead by the deadline set by SED.</p> <p>C. Disseminate final report and discuss findings with constituent groups.</p>

## **Code of Conduct for SED Site-Visit Team Members**

### **A. Carry out work with integrity.**

- School personnel may be apprehensive, so treat all those you meet with courtesy and sensitivity, and try to minimize stress.
- Conduct yourself in a professional manner by displaying respect, valuing opinions, and showing an interest in what every individual says.
- Focus attention and questions on topics that will reveal how well students are learning.
- Assure confidentiality to focus groups.
- Approach the review of a school with a clear understanding of that school's particular mission and educational philosophy.

### **B. Act with the best interests of students and staff in mind.**

- Do not put students or staff in a position where they may have conflicting loyalties.
- Emphasize that students come first and are at the center of the review.
- Wherever possible, work to others' convenience.
- Be supportive and enabling. Evidence given under undue stress is unreliable.
- Avoid criticizing the work of a teacher, or anyone else involved with the school during the course of an observation period or focus group.
- Keep observations confidential to the teacher and team.
- Work to understand teacher actions and decisions, and their reasons for making particular decisions.

### **C. Be objective, base judgments on evidence not opinion.**

- Ensure that judgments are robust, fully supported by evidence, and defensible.
- Ensure that judgments are reliable: others would make the same judgment from the same evidence.
- Ensure that judgments are based on evidence gathered in the context of the school, not in comparison to personal preference or opinion. An individual's perception can be considered evidence, as long as it is supported by others' observations.
- Be prepared to ask questions to establish whether a view is based on opinion or evidence. This applies to team members' judgments as well.
- Discussion with staff and team members is part of the process to create a fair and secure evidence base from which judgments are made. Opinions may help inform discussion but are not part of the evidence.
- The bottom line is whether the evidence is affecting students' learning. If there is no evidence to show that it is, then it isn't an issue.