



New York State Education Department

***2011 Site Visit Protocol for New York State Charter Schools
Authorized by the Board of Regents***

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Overview and Purpose of the Site Visit

The primary purpose for site visits conducted by the New York State Education Department (SED) to charter schools authorized by the Board of Regents is to gather and document evidence about the school's performance, implementation of the educational and organizational program outlined in its charter, and compliance with laws and regulations. The observational findings from these visits will be documented in a subsequent site visit report. The information provided in the report may be used by the school to inform and improve its instructional and operational practice.

Site visits are usually completed in one day, but may be expanded due to the size, location, or specific conditions of a particular school. Teams vary in size, but usually consist of two to four members. Team members will interview teachers, administrators, board of trustee members, parents, and students (if age-appropriate). They will also visit classrooms to observe instruction and review documents and materials.

There are three guiding questions that will serve as lenses to direct our review and subsequent feedback to the school:

- Is the school faithful to the terms of its charter?
- Is the school educationally sound?
- Is the school fiscally sound and organizationally viable?

SED assumes that the school leader will act as the coordinator and liaison for site visits. However, the school has the option of designating another person to assume this role.

The following represents a general overview of the site visit, as well as some of the required documents to be made available before and during the visit.

Conducting the Site Visit

The visit and the resulting report are guided by the following structure:

A. Introduction and morning orientation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team introduces itself to the school leadership. • Team establishes the purpose and goals for the visit. • Team reviews the Code of Conduct with school administrator. • The schedule for the day is reviewed and focus group assignments are finalized. • 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
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Site visit team members may participate in a combination of focus group interviews, classroom visits, document review, and additional information gathering depending on specifics of the school visit. • Conversations with focus groups will be informed by the site visit protocol. • Classroom observations will be guided by the school’s mission and the key elements of its educational program.
C. Focus group interviews
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. • All focus group interviews are facilitated by a member of the site visit team. • The team member introduces him/herself, and establishes the context for the visit. • He/She sets the norms for the conversation, establishes the time frame, and lets the group know that questions asked are drawn from a set pool of focus group questions. • Introductions around the table, as feasible. • The team member facilitates the conversation, opening with common questions asked of all groups at all schools. Questioning may then become more specific and tailored to the specific school context. Whenever possible the team member will guide the focus group members to ground their answers with specific evidence and data. • The team members take notes and ask follow-up questions, as appropriate. • The team members thank the focus group for their participation and end the focus group on time.
D. Classroom observations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School leadership informs school staff that the site visit team will be in classrooms during the day of the visit. • Collectively, the team visits as many classrooms as possible during the day of the visit, including, as time permits, each grade level, each subject area, and large group and hallway settings.. • Team members should see at least one opening of a lesson, one closing of a lesson, and a few transitions between lessons. • It is best if only one visitor at a time is in a classroom. • 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.
- Classroom visitors will take notes.

E. Team organization and reflection

- Team members are reminded to refrain from judgment and ground comments in evidence, observations, and data.
- The team conducts a debriefing of the day, structured by the charter agreement, performance plan, School Improvement Grant, classroom observations, focus group responses and/or document review, as applicable.
- Site visit team members gather additional evidence and data to fill in gaps through follow-up conversations with key school staff.
- The team creates initial preliminary findings and outlines the next steps of reviewing the resulting site visit report.

F. School community report out/debrief

- The team thanks school leadership for hosting the site visit team and outlines the timeline for preparing and issuing the resulting site visit report.
- The team leader shares the team's initial findings, structured by classroom observations, focus group responses and document review.

G. Site visit report

- The team drafts the site visit report.
- Members review the report to ensure that it is factually accurate and reflects the collective findings of the team on the day of the visit. Corrections and suggestions for improvement are incorporated according to consensus.
- The team reviews and issues the final report to the school and Board leadership.
- School leadership may prepare a response to the site visit report that is submitted in writing to SED and becomes a permanent part of the school's record.

Required Documentation

Due to the time constraints of a one-day site visit, it is impossible to thoroughly review large quantities of data and evidence. However, if there are items that the school would like to make available to the site visit team that are not listed below, they may be provided. There is no need to run more than one copy of any documentation. While on-site, a member of the SED team may ask to borrow copies of documents to be used in writing the site visit report. Modifications to the lists below may be made by the site visit team leader in consultation with the school leader.

Checklist – <u>pre-visit</u> documentation – due to SED electronically prior to the visit <i>If materials are available on the school's website, the link may be provided in lieu of sending the documents.</i>	Submitted?
1. Directions to the school, including telephone number and any necessary parking instructions.	
2. A map of the school with corresponding teacher room assignments or marked with teacher names.	
3. A chart of the names of Board of trustees members, their terms and committee assignments.	
4. School organizational chart with titles and names that shows reporting structures.	
5. School staff and leadership team roster that includes administrator and teacher names, number of years of teaching and/or administrative experience, number of years at the school, and subject and/or grade taught or administrative role.	
6. A master class schedule for the day of the visit that clearly indicates the subjects taught and times, teachers, and room assignments for all classes.	
7. School calendar.	
8. Evaluation form templates for school leader and teachers, and the self-evaluation form for the Board of trustees.	
9. Summaries of parent, teacher, and student satisfaction surveys over the past three years.	
10. Waiting lists for all grade levels	
11. Sample public notice of Board of trustees meeting.	
12. Board of trustees meeting minutes and financial reports for the past twelve months.	
13. Complaints received by the Board of trustees over the past twelve months and their corresponding resolution.	
11. Evidence of current insurance coverage.	
12. A short (1-3 paragraphs, no more than one page) description of current instructional practices. This document should answer the question, “ <i>What should site visitors expect to see in their classroom observations?</i> ”	
13. Any other documentation that helps to tell the story of your school to an external team of	

visitors. Existing documents, including strategic plans and school improvement plans, are examples of documentation that might be provided.	
14. A description/evidence of dissemination activities/plans (if appropriate).	
15. CSP grant documents , if applicable, as requested by SED site visit team leader.	

Checklist - <i>on-site</i> documentation - available in the site visit team's meeting space or readily accessible.	Organized for the team?
1. Any relevant samples of student performance assessments such as portfolios, if applicable.	
2. Personnel policies /faculty handbook	
3. Student handbook	
4. Teachers should have available copies of handouts and lesson plans to distribute to site visitors who observe their classrooms.	
5. Lists of staff, parents and students for the focus groups , and a brief explanation of how they were recruited. e.g., where and when it was publicized, how many volunteered, and how the final participants were chosen?	
6. CSP grant documents , if applicable, as requested by SED site visit team leader.	

Reporting

At the end of the on-site visit, the team leader shares the team's initial findings with the school in a brief report-out. The team leader's statements do not make suggestions for improvement or direct the school to change operations or programs. Rather, the findings are statements of fact, grounded in evidence and data collected throughout the day.

After the visit, the SED team prepares a written report that includes the team's findings and the evidence to support those findings. If the school chooses, a response to the site visit report may be submitted in writing to SED. This response and the site visit report become a part of the school's permanent record, and become a part of the pool of evidence used to determine a school's performance.

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.

A. School Leadership

- Describe the school's mission and purposes, and how they are realized in the operation of the school.
- How is the curriculum developed, how is its effectiveness evaluated, and how is it revised?
- Describe the school's academic program in terms of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
- What are the school's academic priorities?
- What is the school's strategy for improvement in these priority areas, and how does the school support teachers in their implementation of these strategies?
- If previous school improvement efforts have failed, what do you believe to be the cause?
- How is the effectiveness of your performance evaluated?
- Describe the process for supervision and evaluation of teachers. What are your expectations for what constitutes excellent instruction?
- What are the school's greatest strengths and challenges?
- Describe your relationship with the Board of trustees.
- Describe the roles of each member of the administrative team.

B. Teachers

- Describe the school's mission and purposes, and how they are realized in the operation of the school.
- Describe the school's curriculum. How was it developed? How is its effectiveness evaluated, and how is it revised?
- How is it ensured that teachers stay on track regarding curriculum pacing?
- What assessments do you use to track student learning?
- What are the school's academic priorities? How were these priorities determined?
- What are the school's strategies for improvement in these areas, and what support do you receive in implementing these strategies?
- If previous school improvement efforts have failed, what do you believe to be the cause?
- How does the school review your performance?
- What are the expectations for what constitutes excellent instruction at this school?
- Are you required to follow any specific formats or procedures in your teaching and lesson planning?
- Do you submit lesson plans for review? If so, do you receive feedback on them?
- What professional development and other forms of support are made available to you?

- Describe the working relationships (collaborations) between teachers.
- What, if anything, is your role in the school beyond classroom instruction?
- What information do you provide to parents and how do you communicate it?

Special Education

- What kinds of instructional supports and services are made available to special education students at this school?
- What types of accommodations and modifications are being made in the regular education classroom for students with diverse learning needs?
- What ancillary academic supports and services are available to all students?
- What have been the outcomes for students with disabilities in terms of promotion, graduation, and NYS assessment program passing rates? What is their progress on internal assessments?

English Language Learners

- What English language support services do ELL students receive and how are those services delivered?
- How does your school implement structured English immersion in the regular education classrooms?
- What have been the outcomes for ELL students in terms of promotion, graduation, and NYS assessment program passing rates? What is their progress on internal assessments?

C. Students

- What is the mission of the school?
- How long have you attended school here?
- Tell us what it's like to be a student here.
- How does this school compare with others you've attended?
- What happens if someone misbehaves?
- How do you get help if you need it?
- How safe is your school?
- Do you find the work challenging?
- What would you like to change about this school?

D. Families

- Describe the school's mission and purposes, and what it means to your family.
- Why did you choose to send your child(ren) to this school?
- What is the school's mission?
- What does the school expect of your children academically?
- If previous school improvement efforts have failed, what do you believe to be the cause?
- Is the school a safe place?
- What does the school do to support your child(ren)?
- What is your role/involvement in the school?
- What information does the school provide to you about your child's learning and how is it communicated?
- What are the school's biggest successes and challenges?

E. Board of Trustees

- Describe the school's mission and purposes, and how they are realized in the operation of the school.
- Describe the role and responsibilities of the board. What areas or decisions are outside the scope of this role?
- What are the criteria you use to determine whether the school is successful?

- How do you gather information to determine whether these criteria have been met?
- How does the board evaluate the performance of the school leader?
- What are the school’s greatest current challenges? What strategies are being employed to meet these challenges?
- How are new board members identified, recruited, selected, and oriented?
- How does the Board evaluate its own effectiveness?

Example of a Site Visit Schedule

Time	Team Member A	Team Member B	Team Member C
7:30 – 8:00	SED Team Meeting: Orientation to the Process		
8:00 – 9:00	Focus Group – School Leaders		
9:00 – 10:30	Class Visits	Class Visits	Class Visits
10:30 – 11:30	Focus Group - Parents	Focus Group - Students	Focus Group - Teachers
11:30 – 12:30	Focus Group – Board of Trustees		
12:30 to 2:00	Initial SED Team Discussion/Team Lunch		
2:00 to 3:00	Class Visits		
3:00 to 3:30	Team Discussion		
3:30 to 4:00	Presentation of General Observations and Preliminary Findings		

Responsibilities of the School Leader

Pre-Visit
<ul style="list-style-type: none">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.B. Work quickly after the scheduling letter from SED arrives to confirm the date 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.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.D. Review the document preparation list and gather the information the site visit team needs before the visit and while on-site.E. Identify a secure place that can serve as a meeting room for the team throughout the day.F. Send pre-visit documents from the checklist to SED electronically. These documents will be used to build the preparation binders for the site visit team members and to help the team leader organize for the visit.G. 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.H. Assemble and organize on-site documentation as listed in “Required Documentation.”
Day of Visit
<ul style="list-style-type: none">A. Meet with SED site visit team for orientation.B. Ensure coordination of focus group interview sessions.C. Meet with SED site visit team for debriefing session to go over initial findings. Ensure that interested Board of trustees members and school leaders are available for this meeting.
After the Visit
<ul style="list-style-type: none">A. Review site visit report. Disseminate and discuss findings with constituent groups.B. School Leader may prepare a written response to be sent to SED.C. School should continue to implement components of school improvement plans, as well as address issues or concerns from the site visit report.

NYS Education Department (SED) & School Work Flow and Timelines

Pre-Visit	Timeline
SED: sends out scheduling letter to schools electronically. Pre-visit document request is attached.	Prior to visit
SCHOOL: confirms proposed date for site visit.	As soon as possible upon receipt
SCHOOL: prepares pre-visit documents and sends electronically to SED.	As soon as possible upon receipt
SED: prepares the prep binders for the site visit team.	One week prior to the visit
SCHOOL: makes arrangements for Board of trustees members, teachers, the leadership team, parents, and students to participate in focus group interviews on the day of the visit, and arranges for a secure space for the site visit team to meet.	On-going prior to visit
SCHOOL: finalizes, with SED, the schedule for the day of the visit.	One week prior to visit
SCHOOL: gathers on-site documents for the site visit team.	Ongoing
Day of the Visit	Timeline
SED site visit team: conducts focus group interviews, classroom observations, document review, and team work time.	1 full day
SED site visit team: presents the initial findings of the site visit. This meeting is open to school leadership and Board of trustees members.	30 minutes, at the end of the visit
After the Visit	Timeline
SED site visit team leader: with input from team members, creates a draft site visit report, with evidence-based findings.	One to two weeks after the visit
SED site visit team: reviews the draft report to ensure that it is factually accurate and reflects the collective findings of the team on the day of the visit. The team incorporates corrections and suggestions for improvement.	Two weeks after the visit
SED: issues the final site visit report to the school and Board leadership.	Three to four weeks after the visit
School leadership: may prepare a written response to the site visit report that becomes a permanent part of the school's record.	As soon as possible after the final report is issued.

Code of Conduct for SED Site visit Team Members

A. Carry out work with integrity.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• School personnel may be apprehensive, so treat all those you meet with courtesy and sensitivity, and try to minimize stress.• Try to allay anxiety by displaying respect, valuing opinions, and showing an interest in what every individual says.• Focus your attention and questions on topics that will reveal how well students are learning.• Assure confidentiality.• 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.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 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.• Under no circumstances criticize the work of a teacher, or anyone else involved with the school during the course of an observation period or focus group.• Observations are confidential to the teacher and team.• Try to understand what teachers are doing and why.
C. Be objective, base judgments on evidence not opinion.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Judgments must be robust, fully supported by evidence, and defensible.• Judgments must be reliable in that others would make the same judgment from the same evidence.• Judgments must be based on evidence gathered in the context of the school, not in comparison to personal preference or opinion.• An individual's perception can be evidence, especially if 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.

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