



Ongoing Oversight and Evaluation

Site visits provide authorizers with a mechanism for verifying and corroborating information collected through reports, gauging the culture and climate of a school, gathering evidence of performance from a range of perspectives, and demonstrating the commitment of the authorizer to authentic accountability.

The Value of Quality On-Site School Reviews: Seeing Is Believing

Rebecca Wolf DiBiase

The charter school concept is built on the premise that in return for freedom, charter schools are held accountable to promises made in their charter. It is the authorizer's role to ensure that charter schools uphold their end of the agreement by providing appropriate oversight of each charter school.

The term "oversight" sounds simple enough. Those performing the task, however, are acutely aware of its complexity. Monitoring and evaluating whether a charter school is in compliance with statutory and regulatory requirements and performing financially, organizationally, and academically requires the authorizer to examine a host of information about an individual school. Some of this information is reported by the school itself; vehicles such as self-reports, testing data, and financial audits detail indicators of the academic and organizational health of a school. While such documentation gives important information on how a school is performing, many authorizers have found that "seeing is believing" and have incorporated on-site reviews, or site visits, into their charter school oversight process.

The benefits of on-site reviews are many. Site visits provide authorizers with a mechanism for verifying and corroborating information collected through reports, gauging the culture and climate of a school, gathering evidence of performance from a range of perspectives, and demonstrating the commitment of the authorizer to authentic accountability. To achieve these purposes, a site visit must be much more than a passing drop-in or a compliance check. Rather, a quality site visit takes a holistic look at the school to determine how it is performing academically and organizationally and the extent to which it is serving the students who are enrolled.

There are a variety of models of how on-site reviews may be conducted and how they fit into the larger system of authorizer oversight. This Issue Brief will examine the key components of a quality on-site review as well as discuss choices to consider when designing school visits into a charter school oversight system.

The Core Components of a Quality On-site Review

A few key principles are central to planning and executing a quality site visit. These include creating a protocol to articulate the purpose and expectations for the visit; finding and training appropriate visitors; gathering data from a wide array of stakeholders; basing all findings and judgments on clear

evidence; and documenting this evidence in a report for the benefit of the school, the authorizer, and the public.

Clear Protocol and Expectations

Authorizers will find that clearly articulating both the purpose of the on-site visit and the expectations for what a site visit will look like and what type of evidence they will seek helps both the visiting team and the school. This is best done through issuing a *protocol* that is consistent for all site visits and sets forth the purpose and expectations for the visit in terms of both process and substance—the structure of the visit and the criteria/questions that will guide the time at the school. A site visit protocol may include the following:

Purpose of the Visit: A protocol should clearly explain the purpose of the site visit, how it fits into the larger system of oversight, and what the final outcome of the visit will be. For example, a school may view a visit by its authorizer as punitive in nature rather than a key component of charter school accountability. Understanding the purpose of the visit is important to setting a productive tone for both the school and visiting team.

Guiding Criteria or Questions: The criteria for each visit should be clear to the school and the public. What is the authorizer ultimately looking to find when visiting a school? What are the key questions that the team will attempt to answer? What are the criteria and indicators by which the school will be measured on this review? If a school understands the standards to which an authorizer is holding it, then it can gather and present data that show its strengths in these areas.

Defining the criteria also helps focus team members on what is most important. Schools are complex organizations. If team members do not have a clear understanding of the evidence they are looking for when they enter the building, there is the potential for visitors to get bogged down in each and every aspect of the school. As a result, the team will have less than complete information at the end of the visit.

Schedule/Expected Interviews:

A schedule provides a general framework for how time at the school will be spent (see Example 1). This helps direct the visit and allows for better planning. For example, the protocol should identify which stakeholders will be interviewed during the visit. This information may be especially important if interviewees include members who are not employed in the school building, such as parents, Trustees, or community partners. While the actual schedule will be particular to each school's start time, programmatic offerings, and class schedules, the sample schedule gives the school an idea in advance of what the visit will hold for its community.

Requested School Documents: The visiting team may need to review documents, either before or during the visit, that are not readily available in the authorizer's files. Such documents may include class schedules, curricular documents, teacher rosters, or professional development plans. A protocol that lists document requests gives the school ample time to gather and arrange data for the team.

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The **Authorizer Issue Briefs** are a publication of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, a non-profit, non-partisan membership organization that promotes the establishment and operation of quality charter schools through responsible oversight in the public interest. They are supported by and are one product of a three-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education for *Building Excellence in Charter School Authorizing: Ensuring Accountability at Scale (BECSA II)*. NACSA broadly disseminates each Issue Brief in print and electronic forms. Additional print copies are available by request.

Sample Interview Questions: It is helpful for both the school and team members to know the types of questions visitors will be asking (see Example 2). Team members can use sample questions to focus interviews on the standards of the visit. In a school where there are multiple interviews happening simultaneously, teams can choose to pick a few key questions from the list to ask each constituent so that consistent evidence can be gathered from each person.

Visitor Expectations: Authorizers should consider including additional elements in a site visit protocol to the benefit of all participants: a Code of Conduct defining the

expected behavior and tone of the visiting members, a timeline of steps in the process such as when documents are due or when the final schedule should be set, or frequently asked questions covering such issues as the duties of a site visitor and the charter school.

A protocol serves many purposes, but one of its most functional roles is to help all parties understand the process. Schools are well aware that the visit may have real consequences. Few schools will approach a visit by their authorizer without some apprehension. Clarity and transparency will help dispel some of this anxiety.

Example 1–Schedule: The Massachusetts Department of Education’s Charter School Office provides a sample schedule in its site visit protocol that gives a general guideline of how its one-day reviews, conducted in a school’s second and third year of operation, will proceed. The schedule includes time blocks for meetings with a school’s governing board and administration; focus groups with parents, students, and teachers; classroom visits; and document review. The schedule provides for the collection of data from a wide array of sources and is flexible enough to be changed according to each school’s particular needs. Following is the sample schedule:

Time	Team Member A	Team Member B	Team Member C	Team Member D	Team Member E
7:30 a.m.	Team Meeting and Orientation				
8:00-9:00	Meet with Board of Trustees				
9:00-10:00	Meet with Administration				
10:00-11:15	Classroom Visits	Classroom Visits	Classroom Visits	Classroom Visits	Classroom Visits
11:15-12:00	Student Focus Group	Student Focus Group	Class Visits	Parent Focus Group	Parent Focus Group
12:00-1:00	Lunch with Teachers				
1:00-1:30	Initial Team Discussion				
1:30-2:30	Additional Fact Finding	Additional Fact Finding	Additional Fact Finding	Document Review	Document Review
2:30-4:00	Team Work Time				
4:00-4:30	Presentation of general observations and findings to school leaders				

Example 2–Sample Interview Questions: The Mayor of Indianapolis authorizes schools in the city of Indianapolis. As part of its oversight of schools, the mayor’s office conducts visits throughout the life of the charter. In its Charter School Site Visit Protocol, team members are given a list of relevant and useful questions that may be used in each focus group during the day. There are sample questions for Board members, parents, students, teachers, the executive director or head of school, the principal or instructional leader, curriculum specialists, and business manager. Sample questions are provided for the different areas of inquiry, both organizational and academic, and are specific to the group being interviewed. You can view the Charter School Site Visit Protocol at: http://www6.indygov.org/mayor/charter/accountability_report/pdf/expert_site_visit.pdf

Pre-visit Document Review

Site visit teams that review relevant documents, such as test scores, demographic information, annual reports, past site visit reports, charter application, and financial data prior to the visit will come into a school better prepared to carry out the purposes of the visit. This preparation gives context to the school and allows visitors to think of probing questions particular to this organization's situation. One external review company has team members prepare for visits by outlining initial hypotheses and additional questions for each area of inquiry based on the documents that were provided.¹ An appropriately prepared team will ask better questions and likely find more robust evidence.

Choosing and Training Visitors

Appropriately staffing visits is critical to the overall effectiveness of the site visit. Authorizers must first find visitors that have the expertise needed to find evidence for the different criteria. For instance, in visits that evaluate both the academic and organizational program of the school, visitors with those varying areas of expertise should be included. While an organizational change consultant may know a fair amount about how school administration works, they may know very little about curriculum or teaching. Authorizers should also consider the particular mission or make-up of a school when choosing visitors, including demographics and grade-level expertise. Mission elements matter as well: an elementary school focused on the integration of music and arts in the classroom may necessitate a visitor with experience in very different areas than a school serving former out-of-school youth.

A key visitor on an on-site review is the team leader. This person is in contact with the school leadership regarding scheduling prior to the visit, moves the conversations along according to the protocol and schedule, and is ultimately responsible that the information

sought has been gathered. They act as the face of the team to the school and set the tone for the visit. Some authorizers use a member of their own staff to fill this role because he or she has a deep understanding of the protocol and purpose of the visit. Other authorizers use external consultants for this role and provide this position with additional training.

Once visitors are chosen, authorizers should provide training on the process and protocol of the site visit. This training adds to consistency in implementation of the protocol and helps focus each visitor on the particular criteria for the visit at hand. Training for visitors can take multiple forms ranging from full day trainings to a few hour conference call to a brief meeting before the start of the visit. While more extensive training is ideal, this is clearly a financial consideration for authorizers as trainings can be costly.

Stakeholder Input

Interviews are the crux of an on-site review and provide key pieces of data. Teachers, administrators, parents, governing board members, and students should, to the greatest extent possible, be involved in discussions during the visit. When appropriate, community partners or management companies should be included in the interview schedule as well. Involving each of these groups serves multiple purposes: it provides the team with a large pool of information, allows for verification of facts from different perspectives, and creates an environment where the whole school community feels heard.

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Structuring interviews is a critical chore for the site visit team. In many schools, the size of the faculty makes it difficult to talk with each individual, so the team must strategically choose which members of the faculty to interview, covering a range of grade levels and teacher longevity at the school. In addition, team members should communicate a high level of confidentiality to interviewees so that they feel free to speak openly in a confidential environment.

Evidence-Based Findings

All conclusions from the visit must be based on evidence collected and corroborated throughout the time at the school. “Evidence-based decision-making” is arguably the most important element of an on-site review. “The visiting team must build a base of evidence for each of its findings that would reasonably lead another set of individuals to come to a similar judgment of the school.”²

In order to present the most accurate and complete picture of the school, visitors need to enter the building committed to the practice of evidence-based decision-making. The team must focus on gathering enough evidence from enough different sources so that consistent verification outweighs any outlying comment. This approach also helps check any sort of bias that an individual team member might unwittingly bring into the building.

Many authorizers require that the site visit team finalize all of the major findings prior to the end of the visit. This requirement supports a consensus model of decision-making and helps ensure that findings have sufficient evidence and that team members agree.

Example 3—Report of Findings: Official site visit reports help increase accountability. The important information collected during the day is documented and available throughout the life of the school. Some authorizers have made the findings from on-site reviews available and easily accessible to the public. The State University of New York’s Charter School Institute posts each of its Charter School Visit Reports online. This increases both the school and the authorizer’s transparency. To view these reports, visit www.newyorkcharters.org/charterny/institutereports.asp

Report of Findings

The team’s findings should serve as the basis for a written report. Authorizers use different techniques for site visit report writing, ranging from bulleted lists of findings to a full narrative. Depending on the chosen method, some teams may leave the school with a final report written, while others leave with findings that the designated team writer later fleshes out with supporting evidence and narrative.

As the final report documents important information for an authorizer’s oversight of a charter school, it is good to provide an opportunity for schools to respond to the team’s findings in writing. Some authorizers require a written response or a plan be submitted directly related to the team’s conclusions while others let schools choose whether they will respond.

Authorizers should consider the accessibility of such reports in terms of the school community and public (see Example 3). Sharing the important findings with the school’s stakeholders and larger community supports charter school transparency and accountability.

Variables and Options

In designing and implementing quality site visits, there are a host of other issues for an authorizer to consider in relation to their needs and oversight philosophy. These include decisions around when visits will take place, whether to use paid visitors, and whether authorizers should be participants on each of these visits.

Length of Visit and Frequency

The choice in the length of a visit depends on the depth of data expected to be collected. Typically, the more time spent at a school, the more extensive and complete the information is.

Current authorizers use a variety of lengths, ranging from one to four days, and many

combine longer and shorter visits throughout the life of the charter. A combination of visits allows for the collection of a wide range of information but keeps the process reasonable for both the school and the authorizer.

The frequency of visits can be an important factor in determining length. If an authorizer conducts visits annually, each visit can follow up on the previous one, making a one day visit more feasible. If on-site reviews are conducted only once over the term of the charter, a longer review is probably needed.

Volunteers and Consultants

Good visitors are a critical part an on-site review. For some authorizers, this means hiring independent consultants or a company in the business of conducting school evaluations. There are some clear benefits to hiring consultants or contracting with a company, including freeing up some of the authorizer's time, allowing for an external perspective, and gaining the experience and infrastructure of a company who can hire and train strong team members. However, it is difficult for some authorizers to find the funds to pay for these services.

In response, some authorizers have chosen to use volunteers (see Example 4), trained and led by either a paid consultant or a member of the authorizer staff. In return, visitors are offered a chance to get an in-depth look at what a school is doing, understand more fully the process of accountability for charter schools, or even receive professional development points/ continuing education credits that can be used toward re-certification. Authorizers can attract volunteers from a wide pool including areas of unique expertise beyond just those of evalua-

Example 4: The Colorado League of Charter Schools (League), while not a chartering entity, works with districts throughout Colorado who do authorize charter schools to help them implement a rigorous and useful accountability system. This includes a two and a half day on-site visit conducted at the school in its third or fourth year of operation. The visit is conducted as a peer review, staffed by teachers, school leaders, and business managers. While the team leader is given a stipend, the rest of the visitors are volunteers. Those who are interested or eligible receive continuing education credits and when one of the volunteers is a teacher, the League provides substitute pay to that individual's school. Travel, food and lodging are provided for the whole team. To find out more, visit www.coloradoleague.org/accountability_programs.html

tion or educational consultants. There are drawbacks to using volunteers, including the limit it puts on the time one can expect them to give.

Authorizer participation

The participation of the authorizer on a visit varies between chartering entities. Some authorizers participate in all visits (see Example 5), allowing them to ensure that the protocol is adhered to as well as get a first hand look at the performance of the school. This participation ranges from monitoring the team in their deliberations to an active involvement in the interviews and generation of findings. On the other hand, some authorizers use a completely external review component in their oversight process to ensure a varied perspective on the school.

Formative and Summative Evaluations

Whether an evaluation is formative or summative is a matter of both purpose and timing. Formative evaluation is a method of judging a program even as its activities are still forming while summative evaluation

Example 5: On-site reviews are an important part of the oversight functions of the District of Columbia Public Charter School Board (DCPCSB). Visits to DCPCSB authorized schools occur yearly and the visitors, including the team leader, are made up of external consultants that receive training from members of the DCPCSB staff. However, different than external review processes for other authorizers, each visit to these DC charter schools includes the participation of a member of the authorizer staff. This person's role is to monitor the site visit process to ensure that it goes according to the purpose and protocol of the visit.

focuses on assessing programs at the end of their activities.³ In a much less technical sense, these two concepts factor an authorizer's decision of when to perform on-site reviews in the life of a school's charter (see Example 6). Some authorizers conduct their longest and most involved evaluations during the "adolescent years" of the charter. This approach gives a school detailed and rich feedback early in its existence, which it can use to focus its efforts. Other authorizers time the lengthiest visits at the end of the school's charter to get as complete a picture as possible of the school's performance at the time of the critical renewal decision. Timing of the visit plays an important role in how schools and authorizers are able to use the visits for their respective purposes.

On a related point, another important decision that an authorizer needs to make regarding an on-site review, whether internally or externally led, is whether the visit will be

focused exclusively on evaluating the school according to the set questions/criteria or whether the visit will include a component of technical assistance in the form of recommendations. On-site reviews can be strictly evaluative and team members are instructed to avoid giving advice or recommendations to the school. On the flip side, the team could make pointed suggestions and recommendations based on its findings during the visit. An authorizer must decide whether the positives of this practice, which gives the school concrete advice about next steps from those knowledgeable in the field, outweigh the potential drawbacks, including teams giving bad or self-interested advice and/or blurring the lines between the role of oversight and technical assistance.

Conclusion

An authorizer must develop and implement a school review process that works best for its schools and purposes. This Issue Brief identifies the major elements for authorizers to consider when designing site visits into a comprehensive oversight system. Clearly, the cost in terms of time, money and personnel is real and present in the minds of all authorizing agencies and a serious consideration for how on-site reviews can be used. That said, on-site reviews can give the authorizer rich information not available through documents

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Example 6: The Charter School Office at the Massachusetts Department of Education (CSO) and the Charter Schools Institute at the State University of New York (CSI) have very similar processes for overseeing the charter schools they authorize. This includes an accountability system that uses both authorizer led reviews throughout the charter coupled with a review performed by an external evaluation team. A key difference, however, is the timing of the external visit, and therefore the extent to which it is a formative or summative evaluation. Massachusetts charter schools are visited by the external evaluation team once the school has applied for renewal of its charter, usually in year five. While the second and third year one-day visits conducted by the CSO are more formative in nature, these external visits are purposed to provide the most complete and up to date information about the school and its program at the time of renewal.

CSI has structured their visits differently. Under its system, the external review is conducted during a school's third year of operation. As stated in the accompanying reports, "[t]he visit provides an independent assessment of the school's progress and provides recommendations to the school as it prepares to apply for charter renewal in its fifth year of operation." The team is charged to give the school recommendations, allowing the school to address and potentially remedy these problems prior to its application for renewal. At renewal time, the CSI team conducts a summative evaluation of the school's program.

and allow schools to know that accountability is real and active and that the authorizer is both serious and supportive in that role.

About the Author

Rebecca Wolf DiBiase is an independent consultant working with schools and non-profit organizations in the area of organizational leadership and planning. She is a former middle school teacher and has been involved in education reform and charter schools in Massachusetts for seven years. Most recently, she was Director of Accountability in the Charter School Office of the Massachusetts Department of Education. She is currently pursuing her Masters in Public Administration at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

References

Visit the following websites to obtain additional information about the practices highlighted throughout this brief.

Colorado League of Charter Schools
www.coloradoleague.org

DC Public Charter School Board
www.dcpubliccharter.com

Massachusetts Department of Education, Charter School Office
www.doe.mass.edu/charter

Mayor of Indianapolis (IN), Charter School Office
www6.indygov.org/mayor/charter/index.htm

State University of New York, Charter Schools Institute
www.newyorkcharters.org

Endnotes

- 1 Pre-Visit Hypothesis Sheet, SchoolWorks LLC, www.schoolworks.org.
- 2 Massachusetts Renewal Inspection Protocol, p.9, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/pdf/protocol.pdf>.
- 3 Bhola, H. S. 1990. *Evaluating "Literacy for development" projects, programs and campaigns: Evaluation planning, design and implementation, and utilization of evaluation results*. Hamburg, Germany: UNESCO Institute for Education; DSE [German Foundation for International Development]. xii, 306 pages, as quoted by SIL International.

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