

Preparing to Host an External Review

Some districts and school-accreditation organizations require that a self-study be accompanied by an external visit as part of a larger system of accountability. During the visit an external review team (ERT) engages in a series of activities designed to understand the school and evaluate its performance in designated focus areas. These activities include student shadowing, classroom observations, interviews, and meetings with students and parents. Additionally, as part of most external visits, schools have the opportunity to make a presentation to and take part in a discussion with the full ERT.

After the visit, the ERT develops a report, which includes commendations and recommendations to the school community and an evaluation of the school's performance in each focus area. The *external review team report* is presented by the ERT orally and in writing to the school community. In some sites, schools are required to or invited to respond in writing to the report.

If a site uses an external review and self-study to assess the quality of school performance, the report may also include the ERT's overall assessment of the school or recommended rating. In such cases the ERT makes final recommendations to the coordinating agency (e.g., the district, state department of education, or regional association or collaborative), but any final decisions about the school or assessments of its quality lay with the coordinating agency, not the team.

Meeting with the External Review Team Chair

Prior to the school visit, representatives from the school, preferably the principal and members of the self-study team, should meet with the chairperson of the ERT. Below are items that the Rhode Island Department of Education recommends be discussed (RI Dept. of Elementary and Secondary Education 1999e).

Logistics

In most sites it is expected that the school be responsible for coordinating the logistics of the team. Visit coordination includes:

- provision of a private, secure in-school workspace or conference room for the duration of the visit;
- provision of meals for the team (continental breakfast, lunch, and dinner, for nights a team works into the evening);
- directions to your school;
- a phone number where ERT members may be reached in case of emergency; and
- parental notification of the visit and the likelihood that students may be observed in classes and their work reviewed.

In sites where overnight stay of reviewers is required, responsibility for covering those costs varies. In some cases it is the school and in others it is the agency that coordinates the school inquiry process.

Schedule of Activities

Specific scheduling needs of the school and the ERT should be discussed within the context of the structure of the visit. It is uniformly the expectation that schools be responsible for scheduling data-gathering activities in coordination with the ERT. Potential activities and tasks include, but are not limited to:

- selection of student “guides” for student shadowing by ERT members;

- scheduling of meetings between ERT and community partners, district administrators, parents, school board members, and other non-school personnel stakeholders;
- school presentations to and meetings with the ERT; and
- tours of the school building.

Necessary Documents

Documentation from the completed self-study and/or its conclusions should contain many of the documents required for a school visit. During the meeting, verify the documents needed by the ERT to broaden its knowledge of the school and the community in which it resides. Informative documents that might be added are:

- school and neighborhood maps (neighborhood map optional);
- student demographic data,
- school structure,
- personnel listing and demographic information,
- district or state curriculum frameworks,
- school handbooks,
- school weekly class schedule; and
- attendance, suspension, and promotion rates disaggregated by race, gender, and grade level.

Staff Orientation

A pivotal task in the preparation of a school visit is the orientation of the school staff. School staff should be made aware of:

- the goals of the visit;
- what the visit entails (e.g., shadowing, listening, observation, etc.);
- what will be expected of them as part of the visit (e.g., classroom observations, interviews, guides for lost reviewers, etc.);
- the potential implications of the visit;
- in general, who the visitors are and how they were selected;

- why the school is receiving a visit at this time;
- who the visit is “sponsored” by (i.e., district, state, regional collaborative);

The awareness of and the attitude of the staff during the visit may influence how the school is perceived. The reviewers are “guests” in the school and in some sites are advised to act as such during their training and orientation prior to school visits. Similarly, the school personnel are hosts, and their response to and treatment of the reviewers can affect the quality and outcome of the school visit.

Student Orientation

The orientation of the students is also important. In most schools, students are unaccustomed to being observed in classes or asked about their educational experiences. They, too, will need time to ask questions and prepare for the visit. The things students should know about the visit are the same minimal list of items that should be communicated to staff. This is true of students of all ages and levels of development.