



Charter Schools Institute
The State University of **New York**

Charter School Evaluation Visit Guide for School Leaders

*A Resource for Leaders of SUNY Authorized Charter Schools
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I: INTRODUCTION

Routine school evaluation visits are central to the accountability for autonomy bargain that serves as the foundation for the New York Charter Schools Act and the high standards and expectations of Board of Trustees of the State University of New York (“SUNY Trustees”). Consistent with *The Practices, Policies and Procedures for the Renewal of Charter Schools Authorized by the State University of New York Board of Trustees* (the “SUNY Renewal Policies”)¹, the SUNY Charter Schools Institute (the “Institute”) conducts formal evaluation visits multiple times during each school’s initial charter term and at least once during subsequent charter terms. The cumulative evidence collected during these site visits, renewal evaluation visits and the school’s record of success at meeting its Accountability Plan goals becomes part of the record that informs the Institute’s renewal recommendation to the SUNY Trustees. The SUNY Trustees’ Charter School Committee makes all final charter renewal decisions.

Given the close ties between school evaluation and the renewal process, the Institute examines SUNY authorized charter schools through the lens of the *SUNY Charter School Renewal Benchmarks*² during all site visits. These visits provide evidence to the Institute and feedback to the schools regarding the extent to which schools are meeting *SUNY’s Qualitative Evaluation Benchmarks* relating to the school’s academic program (benchmarks 1B -1F) and organizational capacity (benchmarks 2C – 2D) at the time of the visit.

As a product of school evaluation visits, the Institute generates letters and reports that summarize each visit team’s conclusions regarding the school’s performance with regard to the *Qualitative Evaluation Benchmarks*. Reports will focus on certain benchmarks in more detail depending on the strengths and weaknesses of the school. These reports represent an important mechanism for keeping school boards, staff, parents and community members informed about school performance. In keeping with the philosophy of autonomy in exchange for accountability, the Institute does not make direct recommendations or prescribe which, if any, changes a school should make in response to evaluation results. In addition, the body of evidence documented in these visit letters and reports, including actions a school has taken in response to Institute feedback, is used along with other data to inform the Institute’s Renewal Recommendation Reports for the SUNY Trustees.

The Institute understands the many burdens on a school’s schedule and appreciates the cooperation of school leaders and staff throughout the evaluation process. The Institute has designed this guidance document to provide practical information about school evaluation visits so stakeholders know what to expect and how to prepare. Familiarity with the following procedures and protocols will help to ensure that each visit runs smoothly. At the end of this document, is a checklist (Attachment A) to assist schools in preparing for and participating in the school evaluation visit.

¹ The *SUNY Renewal Policies* are available on the Institute’s website at: <http://newyorkcharters.org/documents/SUNYRenewalPolicies.pdf>. The policies were last updated on June 25, 2012 to reflect the reconstitution of the SUNY Trustees’ Charter Schools Committee and its authority with respect to renewal.

² The SUNY Charter Renewal Benchmarks are available on the Institute’s website at: <http://www.newyorkcharters.org/documents/SUNYRenewalBenchmarks5FINAL5-8-12.pdf>

II: TYPES OF VISITS

Depending on where the school is in the life of its charter, the Institute uses different protocols in order to conduct the school evaluation visit.

First Year Visits

The Institute visits all SUNY authorized charter schools in their first year of operation. The visit team generally spends one full day at the school. Understanding the challenges of a first year school, the Institute looks for developing systems and processes that will likely lead to student achievement. Using a streamlined and modified version of the *Qualitative Evaluation Benchmarks*, Institute team members observe classrooms, review documents and interview school leaders, the school board and a *limited* number of teachers and other personnel to gather evidence on the strengths and areas for growth at the school. Upon completion of the visit, the team drafts a public letter to the school's board chair outlining the Institute's assessment of the school's progress toward fully implementing a program that will likely lead to student achievement.

Routine School Evaluation Visits

The Institute does not visit all schools on an annual basis. The Institute conducts site visits as frequently as it deems necessary to monitor schools' progress toward meeting the Renewal Benchmarks. Routine school evaluation visits generally last between one to two and a half days, depending on the unique circumstances of the school and/or concerns of the Institute. Visit teams observe classrooms, review documents and interview school leaders, the school board, teachers and other personnel relying on the Renewal Benchmarks as a guide for gathering evidence. In contrast to first year visits, regular school evaluation visits focus on the depth, quality and efficiency of systems in order to evaluate whether or not the academic program is likely to result, or has resulted in, student success. The reports issued following school evaluation visits highlight some program strengths, but tend to focus more on the areas in which the school will need to improve in order to become a likely candidate for charter renewal. Past reports are available on our website.

III: PREPARING FOR THE VISIT

Scheduling Visit Dates

The Institute typically conducts visits between October and May. Prior to a visit, the Institute contacts schools with planned visit dates. Factors considered in selecting these dates include holidays, testing and professional development schedules of the schools, districts and state as well as the availability of evaluators. While the Institute attempts to accommodate schools' schedules, planned visit days are generally not changed unless a serious conflict exists, namely if a large number of students will not be in attendance or participating in typical instruction. Once a school leader knows the day(s) of the Institute's site visit, he/she should share that information with staff and board members and begin preparations for the visit.

Recognizing that the time of year may have an impact on the quality of instruction and efficiency of operations, the Institute takes timing into consideration when drawing conclusions from evidence

collected during a visit. The Institute asks that schools refrain from varying the school's regular daily routine in anticipation of the visit.

Point of Contact

The Institute's Senior Analyst, is the initial point of contact for issues related to school evaluation visits. As the visit date approaches, a visit team leader will be assigned to your school and will work with you to develop a schedule for the day(s) of the visit. The schedule will include classroom observations, interviews and time for document review. The team leader will be a member of the Institute's staff. In the weeks leading up to the visit, the school's primary contact will be the team leader, though schools should always feel free to contact the Senior Analyst with questions or concerns that the team leader is unable to address.

Team Composition

The Institute's Director of School Evaluation is responsible for creating visit teams. Visit teams often include external consultants as well as Institute staff members. The Director of School Evaluation carefully considers multiple factors such as school performance, past visit reports, school size and location in order to build visit teams with expertise that corresponds to the unique profile of each school.

The Visit Schedule

Institute teams generally conduct evaluation visits over the course of one to two and a half days, depending on the size and structure of the school. Using the teacher schedules and the school's organization chart provided by the school leader, the visit team leader drafts a broad visit schedule shortly before the visit. This schedule identifies the times when team members will conduct classroom observations and interview teachers (usually during their preparation periods) but in some instances may not specify particular classes and teachers. The schedule also includes interviews of school leadership, specialists, staff developers, coordinators, operations personnel and other out-of-classroom staff.

The schedule may include meeting times for evaluation team members to share notes, discuss patterns or trends, identify areas for further inquiry and develop conclusions. The schedule also includes time for visit team members to meet with school leadership at the end of the visit to share *preliminary* conclusions.

Most days typically run from approximately 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. If this falls outside of the school's normal operating hours, please inform the custodial and security staff of the visit team's expected presence and inform the visit team of special procedures for entering or exiting the building before or after regular school hours.

Sample 1.5 Day Visit Schedule

Team Member	Team Leader	Team Member 2	External Consultant
Day One (Half Day)			
12:30- 1:00	Team Arrives		
1:00-2:00	Interview Principal		
2:00-3:00	Interview Special Education Coordinator	Interview Academic Intervention Teacher	Document Review
3:00- 4:00	Document Review	Document Review	Interview Director of Operations
4:00-5:00	Interview Director of Staff Development	Interview Learning Support Coordinator	Interview Dean of Students
5:30-6:00	Team Meeting		

Team Member	Team Leader	Team Member 2	External Consultant
Day Two (Full Day)			
8:15-8:30	Team Arrival		
8:30-9:20	Interview ESL Coordinator	Teacher Interview	Classroom Observations
9:20-10:10	Classroom Observations	Interview Data Coordinator	Teacher Interview
10:10-10:50	Classroom Observations	Classroom Observations	Interview ELA and Math Coaches
10:50 to 11:30	Sit-in on 5 th Grade Team Meeting	Classroom Observations	Teacher Interview
11:30-1:00	Working Lunch and Team Meeting		
1:00-2:00	Follow-up with Principal	Teacher Interview	Classroom Observations
2:00-4:00	Team Discussion and Drafting		
4:00-5:00	Debrief with School Leadership Team		
5:00-6:00	Board Meeting		

Submission of Pre-Visit Documents

The Institute uses pre-visit documents in order to gain familiarity with the organizational structure and programs of each school prior to on-site review. This practice allows the visit team to maximize time spent in classrooms and speaking with school staff during the visit.

Schools scheduled for an evaluation visit are required to submit all of the following documents three weeks prior to the start of the visit. The Institute understands that program schedules and staffing assignments may be fluid very early in a semester and works with schools to get accurate and timely information.

Please be sure that pre-visit documents provide consistent, up-to-date information such as teacher room numbers and class names, so the Institute can develop an accurate visit schedule. Again, we recognize that this process takes valuable time, but complete and timely receipt of these documents helps to ensure that the visit runs efficiently. To the extent possible, please feel free to submit *existing documents*. Please note that while the Institute team reviews all submitted information, team members might not decide to ask questions about specific documents during the visit.

Required Pre-Visit Documents

- **Staff Directory:** Provide a complete staff directory that includes each person's room/office number; for teachers, grades and subjects taught should be included as well. The directory should also list non-instructional staff, including persons in the school who may not be employees, such as special education contractors or cafeteria and security personnel utilized by the school.
- **Teacher Roster and Certification:** Fill out the Institute required Teacher Roster & Certification template, detailing each current teacher's certification, teaching area and experience. The Institute recognizes that teacher rosters are subject to change at the beginning of the school year and asks that school leaders highlight these changes during pre-visit discussions with the visit team leader. Note too that additional information/guidance on certification is requested below. The template is available online at <http://newyorkcharters.org/schoolsPubsReports.htm>, though please feel free to submit *existing documents*.
- **Organizational Chart:** Provide a chart that includes *all* types of staff members and illustrates the school's reporting structure. It need not include individual staff members by name, but should reflect all positions in the school and relationships with any management company or charter management organization.
- **Teacher Schedules:** Provide schedules that clearly indicate where each teacher will be and what subject and grade he or she will teach throughout the day(s) of the visit. Please also indicate non-instructional time, e.g., prep or planning periods, team meetings, lunch, etc. Again, in order to facilitate scheduling, please be sure to clarify class names and locations. If a teacher's schedule contains class names for internal purposes such as "Harvard" or "801B," please provide an explanatory key. The Institute uses this information to schedule

teacher interviews with every effort to avoid conflicts with classroom instruction, though situations may arise when the visit team may ask that coverage be provided for a teacher in order to accommodate an interview. The Institute recognizes that teacher schedules are subject to change at the beginning of the school year and asks that school leaders highlight these changes during pre-visit discussions with the visit team leader.

- **Assessment List and Calendar:** Provide a list of all diagnostic, formative and summative assessments by grade level administered during the year; also provide the current annual calendar of when they are administered.
- **Professional Development Calendar and Rationale:** Provide a calendar of all professional development opportunities provided to staff.
- **Visit Data Collection Form.** Complete and submit the Institute’s Visit Data Collection Form requesting student enrollment and teacher faculty retention data. The template for this document is also available on the Institute’s website at: <http://newyorkcharters.org/schoolsPubsReports.htm>

Logistics

The visit team seeks the following accommodations:

- ***Coordination:*** The school should designate someone, typically a school leader, to serve as a liaison for the visit team. That person should be available throughout the visit to troubleshoot issues with the schedule, help team members locate documents or other evidence and ensure that the evaluation team has the chance to gather as much information as possible about the school’s program and accomplishments.
- ***Meeting Space:*** The evaluation team will require a private meeting space (e.g., a small conference room, vacant classroom or lounge) for the duration of the evaluation visit. **Please also provide in the room an LCD projector in the room with a clear space to project.**
 - The Institute understands that space is often limited in charter schools and recognizes that taking over a space for an entire day may cause disruption to some staff. That said, a private meeting space is essential to the successful conduct of the evaluation visit. This space will be used for team discussions, document review and interviews with members of the school community if necessary. Place and clearly label requested documents for review in this room.
 - Note, too, that many of the evaluation team members utilize laptop computers during the visit. Please ensure that adequate power outlets are available in the team’s meeting room, which may require providing a power strip and/or extension cords.
- ***Meals:*** The Institute asks schools to provide the team with the names of, or preferably lunch menus from, nearby restaurants that deliver. The team, which may ask school staff to accept delivery of meals, will cover all costs. Please note that team members are required

to pay for their own lunch and that the school should not provide food or beverages for the team members during the school evaluation visit.

III: DURING THE VISIT

Evaluation team members will observe classrooms, interview teachers, administrative staff and school board members and review documents during the visit. Team members then analyze the evidence collected from these to generate conclusions about the links between student achievement data, the educational program and organizational capacity. The team typically shares preliminary conclusions with school leaders at the end of the visit, but these conclusions are subject to change following additional analysis.

Document Review

Visit team members also examine a broad range of documents during the visit (the full list is below.) The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) permits the Institute and its staff, as the school's authorizer, to inspect student records including student performance data, Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and discipline records during an evaluation visit. All external members of the visit team have signed, and are bound by, confidentiality agreements.

Please make all requested documents available for review in the team's private meeting space upon its arrival. Please also provide these materials in an organized and clearly identified manner, e.g., in labeled binders or folders. The school should also arrange electronic access to documents too large or unwieldy to print (e.g., curriculum documents or school policies). In addition, throughout the visit, the evaluation team may request additional documents to pursue a particular line of inquiry. In order to minimize the work in preparing these documents for the visit, and to enable the Institute to understand the school's actual operation, please provide whenever possible existing documents. If school leaders have any questions about the requested documents, they should contact the Senior Analyst well before the visit date.

- **Map of School:** Provide a basic floor plan that evaluators can use to locate classrooms and offices. This does not need to be a formal blueprint.
- **Core Curriculum Documents:** Present documents that demonstrate a comprehensive curriculum aligned to state standards, such as curriculum frameworks or maps, scope and sequences, pacing guides, unit plans and lesson plans. These documents should include the documents that teachers use in their planning. If the school uses commercial curriculum materials (e.g., textbooks or prepared labs) provide examples showing their alignment to the school's curriculum and to state standards.
- **Lesson Plans:** Provide copies of English language arts and mathematics lesson plans from all teachers who will be teaching these subjects during the school evaluation visit.
- **Assessment Documents:** Provide examples of the school's key assessments, such as interim assessments or unit tests. In addition, documents, tools and results should be provided that demonstrate the school's systems for collecting and analyzing data and indicate how the school leader and staff use assessment results. These documents might include **sample** data binders, rubrics, item analysis, action plans or report cards.

- **Student Writing Samples.** Provide student writing products from each student from one representative class in each grade.
- **Evaluations:** Provide all protocols for evaluations of teachers, administrators, school leaders, the board and management company or partner organization, if applicable. Since leaders will not have completed summative evaluations for the current year by the time of the visit, provide instead evaluations from the previous year. The Institute understands the confidential nature of these documents and will review them in confidence in its meeting room, assuming that it offers adequate privacy. Please make teachers aware that team members may discuss their evaluations with them and/or with school leaders who completed the evaluation.

Please make documents available from each of the following groups of staff and school community members:

- **Teachers:** This can include formal evaluation documents, such as observation checklists/narratives, teacher self-assessments, or summative evaluation documents.
- **Administrators:** Provide all evaluations of instructional leaders and other senior staff and the criteria used, e.g., annual goals, job descriptions, bonus requirements.
- **School Leaders:** Provide the board's evaluation of school leaders who report directly to it and the criteria used to assess leadership performance.
- **Management Company/Organization:** If a school has a management company/organization, provide the board's evaluation of the company.

Classroom Observations

In order to maximize information gathering and ensure an in-depth understanding of the school's program, members of the visit team often begin visiting classrooms at the start of the visit. While they are unlikely to visit all classes, evaluation team members do attempt to observe a representative sample of classrooms, particularly those in the core areas of instruction. Note that while evaluation team members observe classrooms as indicated on the visit schedule, they may also observe additional classrooms, especially in the same grade or subject as time allows or to pursue a particular line of inquiry.

During their time in the classroom, evaluation team members observe instruction and inspect curriculum resources and the work of students on display as well as in folders, journals and written assignments. Evaluators do not interrupt instruction, but may briefly talk to students or teachers at opportune moments.

Teachers should have lesson plans, grade books and related documents, as well as artifacts of student work available for inspection. Please inform teachers and students that visitors may be entering and leaving their classes throughout the day, please reassure them that they are not obligated to greet or respond to visitors in any way. Teachers should refrain from deviating from their typical routine or pedagogical style. Changes to routines and teaching methods often have undesirable consequences, as students are neither accustomed to, nor prepared for, the changes. Furthermore, such practice prevents the evaluation team from accurately assessing the

effectiveness of typical and daily instructional activity.

Interviews

The school evaluation team will conduct interviews with a number of school stakeholders. Interviews typically take 45-60 minutes and may not require all of the time set in the visit schedule. In addition, the Institute may choose to cancel an interview noted in the schedule if team members feel they have sufficient evidence to support a given conclusion. In the event that team members would like to add an interview, the team lead will work with the school leader in order to find a mutually suitable time

- **School Leader Interview:** At the beginning of the visit or during a pre-visit teleconference, the school leader(s) provides a general orientation to the school, indicating current priorities, immediate challenges, and program changes since the previous visits, as well as a the reporting structure and the roles of key personnel.
- **Teacher Interviews:** These interviews primarily involve teachers from observed classes, though the team may schedule interviews with other teachers. As noted above, team members make every attempt to schedule interviews with teachers when they are not instructing students; however, the Institute may request coverage for a class so that a particular teacher can participate in an interview.

Please provide accurate teacher schedules for the day(s) of the visit in order to avoid, to the extent possible, any conflicts with classroom instruction. Please let all personnel know about scheduled interview times according to the visit schedule. It is preferable to conduct interviews in the teachers' own classrooms so that they can readily refer to their curriculum and other materials; however, when that is not possible, please identify another private space such as an unused classroom or office. In such cases, teachers may wish to bring documents with them such as curriculum guides, grade books, assessment calendars, etc. The Institute's academic benchmarks (in particular Renewal Benchmarks 1B-F) provide a framework for the types of questions teachers should expect to answer during the interviews. Please ensure that teachers understand that the purpose of the school visit is to evaluate the overall school program, not individual teachers. The Institute does not use staff names and minimizes the identification of titles and positions in its evaluation reports. In addition, team members do not provide feedback to individual teachers regarding their observed performance in the classroom.

- **Administrator Interviews:** The Institute interviews other school leaders, besides the principal or head of school, generally at the beginning of the visit. Evaluators may follow up with school leaders later in the visit as additional questions emerge and clarification of issues is needed. In addition, the Institute may schedule other key staff members such as the school's special education coordinator, academic intervention coordinators or curriculum specialists for interviews.
- **School Board Interview:** The board interview requires approximately one hour and may occur at the school during the visit or at the Institute's Albany or New York City offices on a separate date from the school visit. As oversight is one of the major responsibilities of the board, the Institute anticipates that all board members will attend. The board interview primarily focuses on governance and the board's plans for the future; it also

includes discussion of school performance, legal compliance and fiscal soundness. While school leaders may be ex-officio, non-voting members of their school's board, the Institute may ask them not to participate in part or all of the board interview.

Debrief with School Leaders

At the end of the visit, the evaluation team typically generates preliminary conclusions based on the information collected during the visit and shares them with school leaders. Note that these conclusions are preliminary as the Institute conducts additional analysis of available evidence after the visit. Participation by other school staff at this briefing is left to the discretion of the school leader; typically, senior school leaders attend and sometimes board members as well.

IV: After the Visit

Reports

After the school evaluation visit, the Institute produces a draft School Evaluation Report based on the findings of visit team during the school evaluation visit. Using *SUNY's Qualitative Evaluation Benchmarks* as a guide, the report focuses substantively on the school's progress in providing students with the academic and organizational program promised in its charter and Accountability Plan. The purpose of the visit is to evaluate the overall school program, not individual teachers or other staff members; thus, as noted above, the Institute does not use names in its reports. However, reports may refer to specific positions when warranted, such as discussion of instructional leadership or coordination of the special education program.

The Institute shares School Evaluation Reports with the school's board and asks board chairs to review them for any factual corrections they might contain. At its discretion, the Institute incorporates the factual corrections in the report before issuing it in final copy, which is sent to the school's board and the school leader. The Institute then publishes final reports on its website.



ATTACHMENT A: SCHOOL EVALUATION CHECKLIST FOR LEADERS OF SUNY AUTHORIZED CHARTER SCHOOLS

The Institute designed the following checklist to help school leaders adequately prepare for school evaluation visits.

SIX WEEKS PRIOR TO THE SCHOOL EVALUATION VISIT

- Share information with the school's board, staff, students and parents regarding the school evaluation visit.
- Lead the school in preparing the requested materials for the visit as detailed on pages 6-9 of the Institute's "Charter School Evaluation Guide for School Leaders."
- Gather the following documents (Outlined on pages 6-7 of the Institute's "Charter School Evaluation Guide for School Leaders.")
 - Staff Directory
 - Teacher Roster & Certification
 - Organizational Chart
 - Teacher Schedules (including subjects, times, locations, and explanatory key if unclear)
 - Assessment List and Calendar
 - Professional Development Calendar
 - Annual Visit Data Collection Form

The Institute templates noted above can also be viewed and downloaded from the Institute's website at: <http://newyorkcharters.org/schoolsPubsReports.htm>.

FOUR WEEKS PRIOR TO THE SCHOOL EVALUATION VISIT (INSTITUTE DESIGNATED DATE)

- Send all of the above documents in electronic format to danielle.keen@suny.edu.
- Once documents are submitted work with team leader and Senior Analyst to clarify any uncertainties institute staff have regarding previously submitted Pre-Visit Documents.

TWO WEEKS PRIOR TO THE SCHOOL EVALUATION VISIT

- Work with the team leader to plan for the school evaluation visit, including the development of a schedule for the visit. This may take several iterations to complete.
- Make preparations for all logistical components of the visit outline on page 5 above.

ONE WEEK BEFORE THE SCHOOL EVALUATION VISIT

- Speak with the visit team leader by telephone to review and finalize the visit schedule and discuss school materials and documents.
- Arrange logistical components of the visit, including reserving a private and secure room for the visit team to meet, conduct interviews and review documents.

THE DAY BEFORE THE SCHOOL EVALUATION VISIT

- Ensure that the requested material is available, organized and clearly labeled in the team's private meeting space. As noted above, additional detail on each of the items below is noted above.
 - Map of School
 - Core Curriculum Documents
 - Lesson Plans
 - Assessment Documents
 - Student Writing Samples
 - Evaluations
- Finalize the schedule.
- Review the team's private meeting space, ensure LCD projector set-up.
- Remind teachers to make lesson plans, grade books and related documents as well as artifacts of student work available for inspection during the visit.
- Inform custodians, security and other relevant personnel about the scheduled arrival/departure times of the visit team of materials.

DURING THE SCHOOL EVALUATION VISIT

- Provide names of, or preferably menus from, nearby restaurants that deliver. Please note that members of the inspection team will pay for lunch; the school should not provide food or beverages for team members during the school evaluation visit.
- Provide teachers scheduled for interviews and/or observations with the visit schedule, including the time and location of interviews.
- Ensure that the team's meeting room remains private and all requested documents are available and clearly labeled. As needed, provide a power strip and/or extension cords to power laptop computers.
- Be available to the visit team for an initial interview and any necessary follow-up. Assist the team in securing data, information and documents as needs develop during the visit.
- Bring concerns and questions to the attention of the team leader as they arise.
- Attend the debrief meeting to discuss the visit team's preliminary conclusions. Decide if any other senior staff members should attend this meeting.

AFTER THE VISIT

- Work with the school's board to review and provide factual corrections and comments on the Institute's draft School Evaluation Report.
- Share the final school evaluation letter or report with staff, parents and the school community.