

Charter School Site Visit Protocol

2005 – 2006 School Year

Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Department of Education
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Introduction

Charter schools are the most accountable public schools in the Commonwealth. In return for the increased freedom and autonomy granted to them under the law, they are held to a higher level of accountability – both to parents, families, and communities and to the Massachusetts Board of Education. A charter is granted for five years, during which the school must demonstrate progress toward its stated goals and provide affirmative evidence in the three key areas of charter school accountability: **academic success, organizational viability, and faithfulness to the terms of the charter.**

Site visits are one of the means the Department of Education uses to document each charter school's performance and progress. These visits usually take place during the second and third years of the charter. The Charter School Office, however, reserves the right to conduct visits at other times when deemed necessary.

The primary purposes of a site visit are to verify and augment the information contained in a school's annual report (especially regarding stated progress relative to school performance objectives) and to allow a site visit team to learn as much as it can about the general operation and performance of the school in the three key areas. Site visit reports also help educate the general public about each school and provide the school with critical feedback from an outside team.

In advance of their visit, the team members will receive the school's most recent annual report, the school's accountability plan (which should be reported on in the annual report), the most recent site visit report, and other supporting documents provided by the Charter School Office and the school. The site visit consists of group and individual interviews, classroom visits, and document review.

After the visit is over, a report is generated which documents evidence found during the day in the three key areas. This report becomes a part of the evidence base used by the Board of Education in deciding whether to renew the school's charter.

Essential Questions

The following questions guide the team's inquiry during the day and provide structure to the site visit report. Team members may or may not ask these questions directly during the visit, but all of their evidence collection is meant to inform the answers to these questions.

Academic Program Success

- Is the school's curriculum based on high academic standards, both in terms of content and implementation?
- Has student performance improved or been persistently strong on internal and external assessments?

Organizational Viability

- Are the school's purposes and objectives clear and thoroughly understood by those connected with the school—governing body, professional staff, students, and families?
- Is the school safe and are the physical facilities adequate for the program of the school?
- Are professional staff members qualified by training and/or experience in the areas to which they are assigned?
- Does the school have an effective governance structure and management system for carrying out the purposes and objectives of the school?
- Are families satisfied with the performance of the school?
- Is enrollment stable?

Faithfulness to the Terms of the Charter

- Do the school's curriculum, program, and activities seem consistent with essential legal and regulatory requirements?
- Has the school made efforts to disseminate models of replication and best practices to the public?
- Is the school reaching or making progress toward accountability plan goals?
- Is the school becoming the school it promised to be in its charter?

Sample Schedule

The site visit team will base its findings on evidence gathered from documents, interviews, and observations. The information gathered during the day is limited by the time constraints of a one-day visit. To make the best use of the time available at the school, the Charter School Office puts together a full schedule which allows team members to collect as much information as possible. Prior to the visit, the Charter School Office will work with the school leader to set a schedule that is appropriate for the individual circumstances of the school.

Sample Site Visit Schedule

Team Member/ Time	A	B	C	D	E
7:30 – 8:00	Team Meeting: Orientation to the process (The school should provide a light breakfast)				
8:00 – 9:00	Meet with Board of Trustees				
9:00 – 10:00	Meet with Administration				
10:00 – 11:15	Class Visits	Class Visits	Class Visits	Class Visits	Class Visits
11:15 – 12:00	Student Focus Group		Class Visits	Parent/Family Focus Group	
12:00 – 1:00	Lunch with Teachers (The school should provide lunch)				
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 – 3:30	Team Work Time				
3:30 – 4:00	Presentation of general observations and preliminary findings to school leaders				

Scheduling considerations

- The size of the team will vary according to the size of the school.
- This basic schedule may be modified by the Charter School Office prior to the visit in order to address specific areas where more information is needed.
- Since each charter school is unique in its mission and program, the Charter School Office can adjust the schedule to the extent possible to accommodate the schedule, programmatic elements, and other circumstances of the school. Any accommodations that might be necessary should be brought to the attention of the Charter School Office before the visit.
- Time will be allotted during the day for classroom visits, and it is up to the discretion of the team which classrooms are visited. All faculty should be made aware that any class might be visited at any time over the course of the day.

Events to be Scheduled

The following meetings should be scheduled for the day of the site visit. It is the school's responsibility to gather a representative group from each category (the Charter School Office can answer any questions about the make-up of each focus group prior to the visit) and to inform each participant of the time and place of the meeting. The Charter School Office expects that each participant is given complete freedom to speak regarding their knowledge of and experience at the school, with no limits or repercussions imposed.

Workspace Needs:

The team will require a secure workspace that is large enough for the entire team and is accessible to the team for the full day. In addition, each focus group will need space to meet.

Board of Trustees Meeting: This meeting is typically scheduled in the morning in order to work around the schedules of the school trustees. **It is extremely important that as many Board members as possible attend this meeting.** The school leader, even if s/he serves on the Board, should not attend this meeting.

Administrative Meeting: In order to make the best use of the time available for this meeting, only those administrators who are directly and primarily responsible for the academic program and the operation of the school should attend this meeting. The determination of who exactly should attend this meeting, however, is left up to the school. The time reserved for “additional fact finding” in the afternoon may be used to meet with additional administrators who do not participate in this focus group.

Student Focus Group(s): Student focus groups should include only students in Grade 3 and above. Depending on the ages of the students and the size of the school, one or two focus groups will be scheduled. Each focus group should include 5–8 students, representing a variety of ages, grade levels, and time spent at the school. The school should choose students from varying academic performance categories. **Each student should bring a piece of recent work to share with the site visit members;** however, they should *not* plan to make a formal presentation of the work.

Parent/Family Focus Group(s): Depending on the size of the school, one or two focus groups should be scheduled. Each group should include 6–10 parents or family members, whose children represent a variety of grades as well as years spent at the school. The school should prepare a short explanation of how parents and families were recruited for the visit—e.g. where and when it was publicized, how many volunteered, and how the final participants were chosen—to be included with the documents provided to the site visit team on the day of the visit. The time of this focus group may be changed depending on the work schedules of parents.

Teacher Focus Group(s): Depending on the size of the school, the visit will include one or more teacher focus groups. Each focus group should contain a representative sample of teachers in terms of their experience, years at the school, subject, and/or grade level. Teacher focus groups should not have more than 12 participants. Those in the faculty who are lead teachers or otherwise have significant input in the school's educational program (such as curriculum development) should be a priority in scheduling. Administrators and Trustees should not be present at this meeting. The Charter School Office reserves the right to request individual teachers based on the faculty roster provided before the visit, and will work with the school to make sure that the timing of these focus groups does not interfere with classroom coverage.

Required Documents

A variety of documents are required from the school prior to and during the visit as background and reference for the site visit team. The Charter School Office provides the team with the school’s annual report, accountability plan, most recent site visit report, and other relevant documents prior to the visit. The documents listed below will be provided to the team, and should be sent to the Charter School Office in advance of the visit. Even if you believe that the following information is already in your school’s file in the Charter School Office, it is still important that you send it again.

List A – Documents to be provided one month prior to visit:

Please send a copy of these documents to:

Charter School Office
 Massachusetts Department of Education
 350 Main Street
 Malden, MA 02148
 Attention: Mitch Bogen

1. Directions to the school, including telephone number.
2. Standardized test data. Please provide a copy of grade level summaries of student results on any standardized test from the previous three school years. If your annual report has this *specific* information, you may just provide the most recent school year’s data—especially any data that was not available at the time of the annual report. Please provide school MCAS reports generated by the DOE for all relevant grades. In addition, if the school has done further data analysis on scores from any of these tests, such as longitudinal tracking of a certain cohort, this should be provided as well.
3. Data from internal assessments. Please provide any additional information the school has aggregated which gives a picture of student achievement.
4. Current school year student demographics.
5. The number of students in each grade level, and your average attendance rate for this school year to date.
6. A list of trustees specifying board officers, committee membership, terms, and each member’s tenure on the board.
7. A staff roster that includes the information shown in the chart below. *Notes: 1. Please present this information in whatever format is easiest for you. 2. If a teacher is not certified, please specify the date the applicable Massachusetts Test for Educator Licensure, MTEL, was passed or will be taken.*

Name	Teaching Assignments	Years Teaching (including current)	Years in School (including current)	MTEL tests passed	Degree(s) (including subject area)	Is this teacher “Highly Qualified” according to NCLB?
Ms. Chavez	7 th -9 th grade English, lead teacher	3	2 mos.	Com/Lit; English 7/03	BA, English	Y
Mr. Green	Business Manager	4	2	N/A	BA, Accounting	N/A

List B – Documents to be available during the site visit:

These documents should be available in the site visit team’s meeting space, or readily accessible if needed. Please provide multiple copies, if possible.

1. Map of the school with room numbers and/or teaching assignments
2. Copies of the school schedule for the day of the visit, identifying room numbers for each subject and/or grade level (in order to plan classroom visits)
3. School By-laws
4. Board minutes for at least the previous year
5. Audited financial statements from previous years
6. Personnel policies/Faculty Handbook
7. Student Handbook
8. Family and/or student survey information
9. Parent/Family focus group recruitment procedure (see p. 6)
10. Curricular documents and/or explanation of academic program
11. Explanation of internal assessment program and any relevant samples
12. Past Annual Reports
13. Board of Trustees member resumes
14. Additional information regarding student turnover/enrollment since annual report
15. Description/evidence of dissemination activities/plans
16. Current building safety documents: Occupancy Permit, Fire Inspection, Safety Inspection.

Code of Conduct for Site Visitors

1. Carry out work with integrity.

- a. School personnel are naturally apprehensive, so treat all those you meet with courtesy and sensitivity, and try to minimize stress.
- b. Try to allay anxiety by displaying respect, valuing opinions, and showing an interest in what every individual says.
- c. Focus your attention and questions on topics that will reveal how well students are learning.
- d. Assure confidentiality.

2. Act with the best interests of students and staff in mind.

- a. Do not put students or staff in a position where they may have conflicting loyalties.
- b. Emphasize that students come first and are at the center of the review.
- c. Wherever possible, work to others' convenience.
- d. Be supportive and enabling. Evidence given under undue stress is unreliable.
- e. Under no circumstances criticize the work of a teacher, or anyone else involved with the school, within earshot of others.
- f. Observations are confidential to the teacher and team.
- g. Try to understand what teachers are doing and why. Be supportive.

3. Be objective, base judgments on evidence not opinion.

- a. Judgments must be robust, fully supported by evidence, and defensible, and must inform the essential questions.
- b. Judgments must be reliable in that others would make the same judgment from the same evidence.
- c. An individual's perception can be evidence, especially if supported by others' observations.
- d. Be prepared to ask questions to establish whether a view is based on opinion or evidence. This applies to team members' judgments as well.
- e. 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.
- f. 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.

Source: These guidelines for conduct are based in part on the British Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) code of conduct.

Examples of Possible Interview Questions

The following are examples of the type of questions the site visit team will ask during the visit. While the team's questions will address similar topics, specific questions will be based upon the team's review of documents before the visit and on conversations during the course of the day.

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

- Describe the school's mission and purposes.
- 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 the school employing to meet these challenges?
- Describe a recent policy decision made by the board—from initial proposal to enactment.
- For which students is this school most effective? Why?

ADMINISTRATION

- Describe the school's mission and purposes.
- Describe the school's academic program in terms of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
- What are the specific areas of student performance that are priorities for improvement?
- What is the school's strategy for improvement in these areas, and how does the school support teachers in their implementation of these strategies?
- What are your expectations for what constitutes excellent instruction? How are teachers evaluated?
- What are the school's greatest strengths?
- Describe your relationship with the Board.
- Describe the roles of each member of the administrative team.

TEACHERS

- Describe the school's mission and purposes.
- Describe the school's curriculum. How was it developed? How do you know that you are covering school and/or state standards?
- How do you assess student performance/progress relative to those standards?
- Are there specific areas of student performance that are priorities for improvement?
- If so, what are the school's strategies for improvement in these areas, and what support do you receive in implementing these strategies?
- How does the school review your performance? What are the expectations for what constitutes excellent instruction at this school?
- Who is (are) the instructional leader(s) at this school?
- What kind of teacher is best suited to teach at this school?
- For which students is this school most effective? Why?

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 safe is your school?
- Describe your teachers.
- Do you feel challenged at this school?
- What was the assignment for the piece of school work that you brought?
- What did you learn by doing this project/assignment? Explain.
- Did a teacher assess or grade this piece of work? How?

PARENTS and FAMILIES

- 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?
- Is the school a safe place?

Questions and Answers

Q. What is a charter school?

A. A charter school is a public school that operates independent of any school committee under a five-year charter granted by the Board of Education. It is often started by parents, teachers, non-profit organizations, or community leaders. It has the freedom to organize around a core mission, curriculum, theme, or teaching method, and is allowed to control its own budgets and hire (and fire) teachers and staff. In return for this freedom, a charter school must attract students and demonstrate success over five years in order to earn renewal of its charter.

Q. How are charter schools held accountable for results?

A. Charter schools are considered the most accountable public schools in the Commonwealth because they must demonstrate performance against high standards over five years or risk non-renewal of their charter. Each school, through annual reports and an application for renewal in its fourth year, must present clear, credible evidence to the Board of Education that it has made significant progress toward meeting the goals of its charter, especially regarding the academic performance of its students. In response to this evidence, the Board of Education will decide whether or not to renew the school's charter for another five years.

Q. What is a site visit?

A. Each charter school in Massachusetts receives a one-day site visit by a team of approximately five experienced educators. The purpose of the visit is to corroborate the school's most recent annual report and to learn firsthand as much as possible about the school's performance. The site visit focuses on three essential areas:

- Academic program success
- Organizational viability
- Faithfulness to charter

The school's annual report should provide evidence of performance and progress in these three areas. The purpose of the site visit is to corroborate the evidence presented in the annual report and to provide the school an opportunity to clarify and elaborate on its performance.

Q. Is a purpose of the site visit to evaluate charter schools in general?

A. No. The purpose of the site visit is to observe and judge the performance of an individual charter school, not the overall charter school initiative.

Q. When do site visits happen?

A. In general, site visits happen in the second and third year of a school's five-year charter. (Therefore, it may happen in years two and three of the school's existence, as well as years seven and eight, and so forth.) This schedule may be amended by the Department of Education if needed. The school will be made well aware if that will be the case.

Q. What is the format of the site visit?

A. The site visit consists of a series of interviews between the site visit team and each of the major constituencies of the school—its board of trustees, director, teachers, students, and families—as well as document review and class visits. The sample site visit schedule included in the protocol is

flexible, and the actual day will vary depending on the particular program of the school and the team's findings during the day.

The format of the visit may change from what is included in this protocol depending on the needs of the Department of Education. Findings from a previous visit or additional information needed by the Charter School Office and Board of Education may require that the times spent with certain constituencies are changed, as well as the focus of the interviews, always in order to obtain information regarding the three questions. Again, the school will be aware if any particular format changes are to be made.

Q. What is the purpose of classroom visits?

A. The purposes of visiting classes during the site visit is to get a sense of the educational program (curriculum, methodology, and assessment) in action and to observe the methods of teaching and classroom management employed by the teachers. The classroom visits are *not* intended to produce conclusive judgments about the quality of teaching or learning at the school, as the time spent in classrooms is too brief for such conclusions.

Classroom teachers should be aware that visitors may (or may not) be in their classroom throughout the day. Special activities for the visit should not be planned; the day should be as normal as possible. Unless deemed necessary by the teacher, visitors should not be introduced and the lesson should not be interrupted upon their entrance. Visitors should feel welcome, if the lessons and activities permit, to ask individual students or the teacher questions during their time in the class, as long as it causes little to no disruption. Schools should make students and teachers aware of the presence of visitors before the day of the visit.

Q. Who will be on the visit?

A. A representative of the DOE's Charter School Office will gather a team of individuals with educational and/or management expertise, preferably including members with knowledge that is helpful in understanding the specific school being visited. These team members serve in an advisory capacity to the DOE staff on the visit team, helping to ensure that the team's findings are as full and fair as possible. The roster of the team members and their affiliations is included in the final site visit report. The team leader (an employee or contractor with the Department) will work with the school to set up the schedule for the day and will facilitate meetings throughout the visit.

Q. What are the duties of a site visitor?

A. As a site visitor, you are expected to:

- Review the materials that the charter school office sends prior to the visit, including this protocol as well as the school's most recent annual report.
- Participate on the site visit (usually running from 7:30 – 4:00). This will include classroom observations, interviews, and discussion.
- Review a draft of the site visit report and, if needed, suggest changes to it.

Notebooks will be sent to the site visitors a week or two before the visit. Site visitors should pay particular attention to the school's accountability plan and annual report, as well as the most recent report written about the school by the CSO (schools in their second year will not yet have an official report from the CSO).

The most productive site visits are those where a site visit team asks good question, listens well, observes closely, and makes clear, well supported observations about what it has learned. While the team leader will facilitate the interviews, team members should consider themselves as co-interviewers. A site visitor should be willing to ask fair, often tough questions of a school about its performance and to ask for clarity when aspects of the schools performance are vague or confusing. A site visitor should feel free to pursue a line of questioning or, when appropriate, introduce a new topic so long as it is consistent with the guiding questions of a charter school site visit. Queries that do not further understanding of how the school is performing in relation to the three key areas of charter school accountability should be avoided. Additionally, a site visitor should avoid allowing their own bias or educational philosophy affect their line of questions or findings on the visit.

Q. Are site visits intended to provide advice or technical assistance to the charter school?

A. No. Site visits are intended to document as much evidence about a school’s performance as possible, and are evaluative in nature. As part of the CSO’s efforts to allow charter schools as much flexibility as possible in the implementation of their academic program, the CSO does not provide advice or technical assistance during site visits. Site visitors should not offer the school any advice or recommendations regarding its program throughout the day. While you may see several opportunities to offer advice to a staff member at the school, please refrain from doing so. Please refer to the Code of Conduct (p. 9) for additional guidance on visitor demeanor.

Q. What are the duties of the charter school?

A. At least a month prior to the visit, each charter school must send the requested documents to the Charter School Office (see page 7). The CSO will then work with the school to set up a schedule appropriate for the school and the team, allowing for the maximum amount of information gathering. School officials should identify and gather the individuals needed for focus groups, as well as make sure they are in the proper place at the scheduled time. On the day of the visit, the school should have the appropriate documents (page 8) available in a room that is suitable for the team to occupy for the day. A building map should be provided with room numbers and grades/subjects/teachers to facilitate visits during the day.

It is the responsibility of the school to prepare the whole school community for the visit. This includes explaining to all constituencies what the purpose of the visit is, what questions will be guiding the day, what the outcome/product of the visit is, and where the visit fits into the accountability cycle. Faculty and students should be made aware of the visit and that they may be asked questions throughout the day. While this visit is, by nature, intrusive, the team and school should work together to mitigate the disturbance caused to the students and the school community.

Q. What is the final outcome or product of a site visit?

A. A written site visit report. The report represents the conclusions of the site visit team regarding the school’s academic and organizational performance. Based on the notes and summary discussion of the site visit team on the day of the site visit, the team leader will prepare a draft report. Each member of the site visit team will receive a copy of this draft, and will be invited to suggest changes to it. The charter school office will make revisions and produce a final draft. This draft will be sent to the school for *factual* corrections and then a final report is produced. For issues or disagreement over findings, the school may submit a formal response which will be included in the DOE/CSO school file.

Q. Of what consequence is the site visit report?

A. The final site visit report will be sent to the school and will be made available to the public. The site visit report, along with reports from prior and subsequent site visits and annual reports, and an application for renewal, will be used by the Board of Education to decide whether the school's charter should be renewed after five years. In the charter renewal process, each site visit report will be a critical piece of evidence in the Board's review. The site visit report should also provide the charter school with a valuable external review of its performance.

If you have any additional question or need for clarification, please contact Mitch Bogen at (781) 338 3218 or mbogen@doe.mass.edu.