

BRIEFING PAPER
on
SCHOOL VISITS -- A TOOL FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Summary: This Alliance briefing paper is for educators and schools considering using school visitation strategies as a tool for school improvement. First, it provides a brief history and context both nationally and here in Chicago. Second, the paper concentrates on one example of an in-depth school visit that utilizes practice-based inquiry® - the intense SALT visits (School Accountability for Learning and Teaching) used by the Rhode Island State Department of Education.

Note: Last year the Alliance piloted practice-based inquiry® school visits at two member schools, Al Raby High School and Perspectives Charter School. Based on the positive feedback from the two schools; the members of the two teams conducting the visit, who were Alliance teachers and administrators; and on a thorough discussion at the July 2005 retreat, the Alliance is committed to making these school visits an on-going activity.

I. Introduction

“Critical friends,” “walk-throughs,” “Learning Walks™,” “teacher talk,” “grand rounds,” “quality reviews,” “school visits,” and “school inspections” – each of these are strategies used by educators to observe at each other’s practice. Sometimes the educators are peers all from the same school. More frequently, educators from outside the school come as a team to look at the teaching and learning that is taking place in the classroom/school and then make a report about what they observed to the school.

Below are some diverse examples:

- A school institutes regular walk-throughs for teachers so that they can see each other’s work and build a stronger professional collaboration and community among themselves.
- A group of teachers form a “critical friends” group, which meets monthly to look closely at each other’s practice and at student work as a peer professional development tool.
- A principal takes daily walks through his/her school – providing encouragement and suggestions for exploring new classroom strategies to the teachers – as a hands-on management tool. These visits are informal and different from formal teacher evaluations.
- A CPS Area Instructional Officer and his/her staff periodically visit a school for a few hours to do a walk-through centered on a focus question. The question – which is prepared by the school – is related to teaching and learning, and it invites feedback and comments based upon evidence gathered during the walkthrough. Rubrics are used to guide the visit.

- A team of educators visits a school for an entire week, following a rigorous protocol. They follow students, watch teachers and interview all stakeholders in order to develop accurate conclusions about teaching and learning at the school. The team is specially selected for the purpose of this visit and will disband once the report is complete.

II. History

Different schools of thought and practice exist regarding school visitation, and it is valuable to understand the history.

A. “School Visits”

Americans are surprised to learn that the tradition of school visitation first started 160 years ago in the United Kingdom and evolved into a national, well-established tradition of school inspection by Her Majesties Inspectors (HMI).

An exchange visit in 1988 between New York and British educators (including HMIs) introduced the British school inspections idea to the United States. David Green, one of the visitors and an HMI, was asked by the NY State Board of Regents to develop the idea of “school quality reviews” as a new accountability tool. Later, in the late 1990’s, Green worked with the Illinois State Board of Education and school quality reviews were created as a state accountability mechanism. Later they floundered due to complex political reasons.

James Learmonth (also an HMI) worked with school quality reviews in Illinois. He was later invited by Tony Bryk with the Center for Urban School Improvement at the University of Chicago to do a formal school visit/study of the North Kenwood Oakland Charter School in 2000. James Learmonth also led visits at Perspectives and ACT Charter Schools in 2001; the visits were timed so that the schools would have a year to implement the recommendations before the charter renewal applications were due. In retrospect, more time to implement recommendations before the renewal applications would have been preferred. Also, as an affiliate of KIPP, Noble Street Charter School had a school visit; all KIPP schools and affiliates are required to have such a school review/visit by their second year of operation.

All the visited schools found the visits to be an extremely valuable process because of the tight focus on student learning and teaching. For instance, Perspectives implemented the recommendations about instructional leadership, curriculum alignment and the establishment of academic standards regarding students so that there would be consistency across the grades. Similarly, ACT implemented several recommendations regarding strengthening their curricular focus, reducing the overload on the directors and establishing clear and common standards for their portfolio process. The BPI /LQE School Policy Luncheons introduced a broader Chicago audience to these new ideas in

2000 at a lunch entitled “Beyond Tests: What Can We Learn From the British Independent Inspection System?”

Dr. Thomas A. Wilson, author of Reaching for a Better Standard – English School Inspection and the Dilemma of Accountability for American Public Schools (1996), is another central figure (or “wise elder of tribe” as one book reviewer put it) in developing an American approach to school visits. Based on extensive field study of how visits can work as a rigorous school inquiry tool, he developed Practice-based Inquiry® (PBI). PBI is a set of design principles and related protocols for school visits. These principles have been used for visit protocols by individual schools commissioning a school visit, regional accrediting agencies, charter authorizing agencies, and city and state school systems such as the Rhode Island Department of Education. Wilson was a co-founder of one of Chicago’s first small, alternative schools, Metro High School. After 15 years of working in Chicago on school reform issues, he worked for the Coalition of Essential Schools and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. He is now the principal partner of Catalpa, Inc., “the professional visit organization.” (www.catalpa.org)

B. “Walk-throughs”

“Walk-throughs” or Learning Walks™ were first developed by Lauren Resnick at the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburg (www.instituteforlearning.org) and then instituted in a variety of districts, most notably in the former Community District Two in Manhattan. There, Anthony Alvarado, the District Superintendent, used them as a key tool to focus schools on teaching and learning.

In Chicago, the Center for Urban School Improvement (“CUSI”) (<http://usi.uchicago.edu/aboutnew.html>), as part of training the then-new Area Instructional Officers (AIOs), brought the District Two trainers and experience to Chicago in 2002. CUSI trains teachers and principals to use the walk-through as an in-depth means to gather evidence of student learning in their school and create professional development plans based on that evidence. These “walkthroughs” are now an important practice of the AIOs.

C. “Critical Friends”

The Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) introduced the “critical friends” phraseology and methodology in the 1980s when it developed the CES “Trek” visitation as a school change experience, a professional development strategy, and a way to promote strong professional communities in schools. CES and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform then collaborated together to develop “Critical Friends Groups” and a training program. Now CES affiliates and the National School Reform Faculty at the Harmony Education Center (Bloomington, Indiana) provide training for “critical friends.” Prospective CES-member schools are often visited as a precondition before becoming a CES affiliate.

Please see:

- “How Friends Can Be Critical as Schools Make Essential Changes” by Kathleen Cushman. http://www.essentialschools.org/cs/cespr/view/ces_res/43
- Also, visit the National School Reform Faculty/Harmony Education Center website at <http://www.nsrharmony.org>.

A recent example of “critical friends” work in Chicago (although not utilizing the school visitation format) is the all-day “critical friends” presentations/conference sponsored by the Chicago High School Redesign Initiative to look at the research/action projects of its small high schools.

III. Similarities and Differences

While these different school visitation strategies seem similar on the surface, there are important underlying differences due to their different purposes and histories. School leaders seeking the best strategy should not assume that these school visitation strategies are interchangeable, nor that they mix well.

Important differences in the approaches include:

- The theory of action about how schools work and change that underlies the assumptions of the visit design
- The purpose for the visit (e.g., professional development, school improvement, administrative management, accountability)
- The sponsor for the visit (e.g., the school itself, district, state, accreditation association)
- The nature of the visiting team (e.g., colleagues, peers, experts or citizens)
- The frequency, intensity and length of the visits (e.g., some are designed to occur frequently, even daily, while others occur every four or even 10 years)
- The importance the approach places on the visit as a rigorous inquiry

IV. SALT Visits: An Example of Rigorous School Visits

This briefing now examines one concrete example of how these design issues (e.g., purpose, sponsorship) play out in practice. We chose to focus on this approach because of Alliance members’ experiences with school visits and their strong interest in them as an improvement strategy.

We chose the School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT), the school visitation process established in Rhode Island, because of its long, public track-record. More than 260 SALT visits were conducted in the past eight years, each with a public report. This appears to be the best tested and longest-running institutionalization of the school visitation process since traditional school accreditation visits.

The SALT school visit utilizes Practice-based Inquiry[®] (see Tom Wilson, above), which in turn is built upon the lessons learned from the British inspection school visits and the accreditation process of the Commission on Secondary School of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges.

Further, the SALT design has been readily adaptable to schools wishing to commission their own SALT-like visit.

We advise reading a sample (real) SALT teams school visit report along side of this briefing. We recommend that you read both the findings and the recommendations; reading one without the other is not sufficient. The detailed *Handbook for Chairs of the SALT School Visit, 2nd edition* is another good resource. It describes the theoretical constructs behind the SALT visit and stipulates many details of the visit procedures.

SALT Reports are public and are posted on-line. Two reports you might want to read are: Central Falls School District: Margaret Robinson Elementary School and Providence School District: Times 2 Academy Charter School (Grades 6-12) <http://www.ridoe.net/schoolimprove/salt/visit/vismenu.htm>

Other illustrative reports, including other elementary and high school SALT visits, are not yet posted to the website. If you are interested, we can email you them. Contact: Kzalent@bpichicago.org.

1. PURPOSE OF THE VISIT

The purpose of the SALT visit is to capture as accurately as possible what makes the school in question work, or not work, as a public institution of learning. The visit is a rigorous inquiry about how well the school is performing, not a routine process. The team seeks to know and understand the school on its own terms and to write a public report that helps a school improve its teaching and learning. The team is required to write a report that it judges to be fair, useful and persuasive – especially to the school.

On a SALT visit there is:

- Explicit use of professional judgment as a tool of the methodology
- No comparison made between schools (see below)
- No promotion of personal agendas (e.g., teaching styles, pedagogy, particular curriculum)

- Team members have to sign a conflict of interest form and agree to the protocols.
- No evaluation of individual teachers

The central questions are:

- How well do students learn at [name of school]?
- How well does the teaching at [name of school] affect learning?
- How well does [name of school] support learning and teaching?

2. SALT TEAMS ARE ALWAYS DIFFERENT

The purpose of the visit is to capture the uniqueness of the school – not to compare it to other schools. If you have the same teams visiting schools, they would inevitably start to compare the schools. Also, team members are not allowed to compare or talk about what happens in their “home” school while on a SALT visit. The number on the team varies from 5 to 21. Teachers are 50-60% of the team. Parents, community members, and school administrators have also served on teams. No one can be from the school district of the school being visited. Team members are asked to sign a conflict of interest/code of conduct statement, which includes a pledge that all deliberations of the team are confidential.

3. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

All findings and recommendations are about what the team judges to be the most important issues facing the school; they must be supported by certain evidence and must be agreed to by consensus of all team members.

There are at least two reasons why these explicit tests for what the team writes are important. First, they strengthen the validity and persuasiveness of the report. Second, they require the team to use the variety of perspectives among its members as tools that will help the whole team decide what is accurate. The team’s awareness of the limited amount of time reduces unfocused debates about minor points.

4. The SALT VISIT SCHEDULE

The following key points about the schedule outline the structure and design of the SALT visits.

- SALT visits are done in a five day period. (However, it is possible to do a credible school visit in three or four days).
- The focus for the first day is how well students are learning. This includes the students’ perspective about how they think about their learning. Each team member follows a student for the entire day.

- On Tuesday, the team starts observing teachers with a focus on teaching for learning. The set of questions for the team is: What do you see? What do the teachers (the actors) think about what you are seeing? What do you think about it? At the end of the day, the team begins to work on its written conclusions by drafting tentative, working conclusions about what it has seen and what it thinks about what it has seen.
- On Wednesday, the overall question is, “How well does this school’s organization and community structure support good learning and teaching?”
- Thursday is the last chance to gather evidence that confirms or challenges the team’s working conclusions. Team members might talk to teachers, administrators, students, staff, or a school leadership team. On Thursday afternoon, the team moves to its room and begins to finish its report.
- On Friday, the team writes the report. All drafts are destroyed to preserve confidentiality.

NOTE:

- Test scores are reviewed, discussed, and are considered as one source of evidence for conclusions. The scores are appended to the report.
- During the course of the visit, the team meets with the principal, parents, district administrators, and the school improvement team.
- Because the purpose is to see the school as it is and to have the team use its professional judgment, teams are not given checklists or specific questions that are expected to be covered.

5. THE TEAM’S JUDGMENT DEVELOPS DURING THE FIVE DAYS

The SALT visit anticipates that a team arrives as separate individuals with immediate, initial perceptions of the school initiated as they walk through the door. Over the five days, the individual members develop a team perspective about the school and a set of explicit judgments and recommendations, which have been honed through the rigorous discussion process, the examination and re-examination of evidence, the testing of working conclusions, the development of new insights, and finally, the requirement that all findings and recommendations in the report are made by consensus.

The team’s chair (a practicing Rhode Island public school teacher who is on temporary leave) is responsible for ensuring that the team works through these different stages and steps and adheres to a methodology of rigorous inquiry and sifting of evidence. *The Handbook for SALT Visit Chairs* reminds members to “know what you see, not see what you know.” This advice is from the British inspection tradition.

Interestingly, Tom Wilson of Catalpa, Inc. reports that teams agree more often than one would suppose they would. Seemingly intractable pedagogical disagreements about, for example, the use of whole language vs. phonics tend to melt away when experienced teachers talk about what they see in an actual school.

6. CONCLUSIONS, COMMENDATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Here are the guidelines for conclusions, commendations, and recommendations:

- The team must agree by consensus on every conclusion in the report.
- Each conclusion must be:
 - Important enough to include in the report
 - Supported by the evidence the team gathered during the visit
 - Set in the present, and
 - Contain the judgment of the team
- The team is only allowed to make five recommendations per area (e.g. student learning, teaching for learning, and school support for learning and teaching) to the school. They cannot make recommendations to the school about issues they judge the school doesn't control.

The team may make recommendations to the district or anyone else (e.g. the teachers union, the State Department of Education, the community-at-large). They must be careful to make recommendations in light of what impinges directly on the school and to not go beyond the evidence, remembering that they don't know much about the inner workings of these other institutions.

7. TEAM PARTICIPATION AS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR THE TEAM MEMBERS

- A scientifically conducted survey of the 1,100 Rhode Island teachers who have served on SALT visit teams, shows that 89% see their participation on a SALT visit team as “the most powerful professional development experience they have ever had.”
- Too often teachers only get the opportunity to see other teachers and schools at work in small slices of time. Rarely is their professional experience so intensely put to use in concert with other educators.

NOTE: The Alliance asked the school visit team members for Perspectives and Al Raby to reflect on what they learned and experienced. C.f. *PBI School Visit Team Member Reflections – 2005*.

8. THE SCHOOL RECEIVES THE REPORT QUICKLY

The team writes the report during the visit, and the report is therefore substantially completed at the end of the five days. By the following week, the faculty has read the *pre-release version* of the report, and shortly thereafter they have a copy of the *final report* which is published on the web about three days after the school receives it. The report is brief and concise. Schools may challenge their report. Only the chair of the team

may alter wording of the report. Each visit and its report is reviewed by Catalpa. A Catalpa endorsement of the report assures that the visit and the report meet the standards of the protocol.

9. USE OF THE FINAL REPORT

The SALT visits are part of the overall school-centered cycle of activities to improve school and student performance. They are designed to promote continuous improvement and are carried out under the auspices of the Rhode Island Department of Education. To see the other SALT activities (e.g. self-study, school report night) done in addition to the SALT visit, see <http://www.ridoe.net/schoolimprove/salt/default.htm>.

When a school sponsors the visit (as has happened in Chicago), the dynamics are different. The Alliance and the schools engage a consultant to design the protocol (which defines the team members' qualifications), train the team, and facilitate the process, including the writing of the final report. The schools then make their own decisions about who sees the report and how it is utilized. Alliance schools report that these visits have helped their school communities reflect together and act to improve student learning and teaching at their school.

Regardless of the report's sponsors, because it is written by practitioners for the school, the report is immediately understandable, usable and actionable — unlike some data reports supplied to schools. Again, the best way to understand how the SALT report could be useful is to read one for yourself.

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