# LEAGUE OF INNOVATIVE SCHOOLS

## RESOURCE

# LEARNING IN ACTION

## A Guide to Conducting High-Impact School Visits

# Learning in Action

A Guide to Conducting High-Impact School Visits

Prepared by the Great Schools Partnership for the New England Secondary School Consortium

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## Why We Created this Guide

As a member of the New England Secondary School Consortium's League of Innovative Schools, site visits to other member schools are a critical part of the regional learning and networking experience the Consortium is working to facilitate. For this reason, the Consortium is providing League members with this step-by-step guide, which will help visiting school teams to select appropriate schools, explore the right programs, investigate the evidence of success, and follow up with a practical strategy for sharing and implementing what they have learned with colleagues at their own school. When well planned and thoughtfully coordinated, site visits are powerful professional learning experiences that can make a significant contribution to advancing effective school improvement. Designed to offer practical guidance in an accessible, straightforward, user-friendly format, this guide will help teams maximize their time when visiting another school. This guide contains checklists to help both the visiting and host schools plan and conduct high-impact site visits, in addition to a recommended three-day site-visit schedule that can be modified as needed.

Since site visits allow for only a partial glimpse of strategies that, in many cases, have been developed and refined over years, the recommended three-day site visit builds in time for educators—who may have varying levels of understanding and commitment to school redesign—to absorb, understand, and embrace new ideas. For these and other reasons, the guide urges schools to allocate sufficient time for both the planning process and the site visit itself. When a site visit that is conducted in a spirit of thoughtful reflection and sharing, it creates a mutually beneficial learning experience for both the visiting and host schools.

## Guiding Principles for Site Visits

The following guiding principles will help keep a site visit focused, efficient, and productive.

Learning from colleagues requires:

- A willingness to remain open and receptive to new ideas, and to challenge personal beliefs, assumptions, perceptions, and practices.

- A professional and respectful attitude, and a collaborative environment in which it is safe to question and discover.

- An openness to forging new relationships and a belief that every individual and school has valuable lessons to impart.

- Strong preparation and background research so that visiting teams arrive informed about both research-based best practices and the specific school-improvement strategies they will be observing.

- An understanding of the vision, mission, goals, and expected student outcomes driving the school-improvement work of both the host and visiting schools.

## Building a Knowledge Base

Many questions are generated when schools make the commitment to improve, and site visits are a way for educators to seek answers to those questions and find out what works in other schools. Approaching site visits with a strong understanding of effective, research-based strategies and organizational structures will help teams select schools with aligned programs and priorities. And during the site visit itself, this knowledge will also help team members take full advantage of the time they have on site by encouraging more thoughtful dialogue—to know what questions to ask, educators need to understand the programs and practices they will be observing. In others words, schools should *not* begin their research with a school visit—the visit should be a culmination, not a commencement.

## Configuration of the Visiting Team

The ideal site-visit team reflects the varied roles within a school community, including voices from outside the building. But the most important characteristics of a site-visit team are its leadership and influence in the school community. Teams should include individuals who are empowered to implement changes at the home school, as well as those who are essential to supporting the process—both from within the school system and without. A site visit will only be effective if the lessons it imparts are heard, understood, and acted upon by leaders who are in a position to effect change.

In addition to school leaders, however, the ideal site-visit team should include the following:

✓ Both "trailblazers" and "naysayers"—i.e., individuals who are already "on board" with the school-improvement work and motivated to get things done, as well as those who are "on the fence" and may need to be convinced that school-improvement strategies can help reenergize their school culture and improve student aspirations, achievement, and outcomes.

✓ Respected veteran teachers and other opinion leaders within the school community. School improvement is, in many ways, a political enterprise, and cultivating buy-in within the school building is essential to its success.

✓ School board members. While board members have a great deal of authority over school operations, they are not always deeply knowledgeable about the nuances of school improvement. Seeing strategies first hand can increase board understanding and support.

## Selecting the Right Host School

To help select the right host school, look for the following characteristics:

✓ A culture, philosophy, and academic program that is unequivocally focused on educational equity and preparing every student to succeed in college and careers—the foundation of all successful school improvement.

✓ Strong student outcomes that indicate the school-improvement design, programs, and implementation strategies are effective—particularly, improvements in test scores, graduation rates, college-going data, attendance patterns, disciplinary referrals, and other critical success factors.

✓ Experience documenting and sharing their work in ways that will create a beneficial learning experience for the visiting team.

Questions to consider:

▪ How is the school similar to ours? Does its size or student demographics mirror ours? While the host school does not have to be similar to the visiting school in all ways, the visiting team should be confident that the site visit will provide valuable, relevant, and applicable lessons.

▪ Has the school hosted site visits in the past? Is there a host facilitator—or principal, teacher leader, or project director—who has experience planning a site-visit schedule, including organizing groups to present their work and engage in discussions with visitors?

▪ Are the hosts prepared to make specific site-visit recommendations—for example, what types of sessions should be included, how the schedule should be organized, or which student, faculty, or parent groups should talk with the visiting team?

▪ Is the host school able to provide release time for teachers and others to deliver presentations and participate in other site-visit activities?

▪ Will classrooms be open for observation during the site visit? Are the teachers accustomed to welcoming observers in their classrooms and discussing their work?

## The Psychology of the Site Visit

Before undertaking the logistical preparations for a visit, it is useful to consider how people relate to change. Some people embrace change enthusiastically, while others tend to respond with skepticism or resistance for a variety of complex reasons. Some team members may fundamentally disagree with a proposed improvement strategy or classroom practice, for example, while others may have seen unsuccessful school reform efforts come and go over the years. Some may be fearful of losing their influence or position in the school, or they might be worried that the teaching practices they have used for years will be criticized or looked down upon. Some may even feel they are in competition with

faculty in a host school that is perceived to be more successful than their own. In most cases, resistance to school reforms stems from good intentions. Educators and parents tend to care deeply about their students and children, and consequently many don't want their school to undertake reforms they may perceive to be risky, experimental, or unconsidered, or that they believe could inadvertently have a negative impact on the faculty or students. It is therefore essential that site-visit team leaders encourage open-mindedness, enthusiasm, and respect before embarking on a site visit, while also discussing and addressing any issues that specific team members may have.

For this reason, we recommend that the principal, leadership team, or site-visit team leader engage the visiting team—and even better, the entire faculty or school community—in an open, honest discussion about the rationale for and intentions of the school's improvement work. In addition to reminding staff of the specific educational needs motivating this work—whether it be changing community demographics, perennially low student performance, declining graduation or college-going rates, or a school's institutional and ethical obligation to continually improve educational outcomes for all students—this conversation should underscore that site visits are not only a way for the school to acquire new knowledge and understanding, but they are also opportunities for personal and professional growth. Educators, like all professionals, want to feel valued for their expertise, insights, and contributions, and in many cases school reforms challenge traditional ideas, existing hierarchies, and long-held belief systems. Veteran teachers who feel they are at the top of their game pedagogically might suddenly find themselves struggling to use a new learning technology that younger teachers and students seem to navigate effortlessly. Understanding the emotional, social, and psychological dimensions of a site visit—and making efforts to honor and value the unique contributions, experience, and skillsets of all participants—will help site-visit leaders design a goal-driven program that will keep everyone focused on what really matters: creating better learning experiences for students and preparing them for success in life.

## Preparing for a Successful Site Visit

To help facilitate the visiting school's preparation process, this section includes a checklist that covers the most important elements of a high-impact site visit, including:

1. Selecting site-visit team leader
2. Researching potential host schools
3. Creating a site-visit team and scheduling planning meetings
4. Preparing a statement of purpose and expected outcomes for the visit
5. Selecting the host school and scheduling the visit
6. Requesting important information from the host school
7. Generating critical questions for the visit
8. Creating a portfolio of essential site-visit materials for team members
9. Preparing a follow-up plan for turning learning into action

## Checklist for the Visiting Team

**Select a site-visit team leader** who will be responsible for coordinating all aspects of the site visit, including planning meetings.

✓ Identify one person (not a committee) to be the primary contact, coordinator, and go-to person for all matters related to the site visit. Give this person authority to make important decisions related to the site visit.

✓ Specify the team leader's specific duties—e.g., developing agendas for planning meetings, contacting the host school, coordinating logistics, confirming details, collecting and distributing essential materials, maintaining communications with the host school, etc.

✓ Make sure the site-visit coordinator keeps school leaders and the visiting team informed and updated throughout the process. While the coordinator should be given authority to make critical decisions, those decisions should not be unilateral—they should result from collaboration and discussion.

**Select a visiting team** that represents a variety of stakeholders from the school community, including district and school administrators, school board members, teaching faculty, students, parents, and community leaders.

✓ Consider including vocal "skeptics" on the team, such as staff members, parents, and others who may have raised significant questions or concerns about the school's improvement work.

✓ Develop a meeting schedule for the site-visit team, assign any necessary responsibilities, and discuss time commitments that will be required.

✓ Clarify all roles and site-visit expectations—make sure everyone knows in advance what they can expect and what will be expected of them.

✓ To help facilitate the planning and preparation process, we recommend that schools use a professional learning group format, including agendas and protocols, that will help to keep planning meetings focused, productive, and goal-oriented. Professional learning groups also provide a supportive structure for the kinds of critical inquiry and self-reflection need to bring about institutional change.

✓ Use a common language to describe the strategies the visiting team will be learning about and make sure that everyone understands specialized education terms and concepts. By reading short articles or book chapters as a team, you can develop a common language based on the common readings. Such experiences create bridges between different stakeholders on your team, ensuring that students, parents, or community members do not simply defer to the expertise of the participating educators.

**Research appropriate host schools,** looking for alignment of vision, mission, strategies, programs, and postsecondary-success goals.

✓ Contact League member schools that may have ongoing school-improvement programs aligned with your action plan—use the League website (lis.newenglandssc.org) as a starting point.

✓ Consider other schools as well: contact appropriate local, regional, or national organizations to get recommendations for potential host schools.

✓ Ask a lot of questions: make sure the school you are planning to visit is getting results and has a lot to offer.

✓ If you still have questions about a potential host school, consider sending a representative to conduct a brief preliminary visit. If a school doesn't look like it's going to be a good fit, it may best to continue looking.

✓ Also consider a brief, targeted visit. If a school has one interesting program that appears to be getting results, it might be more effective to put together a smaller team and conduct a brief half-day or daylong visit.

**Prepare a written statement of purpose** that outlines the specific objectives for the visit and the follow-up plan that will turn professional learning into practical, goal-oriented action.

✓ Review the guiding principles above and add any additional statements to address your school's specific needs. Like norms in professional learning communities, guiding principals help set the tone, establish clear expectations, and keep team planning and preparation activities focused and productive.

✓ Collectively prepare a statement of purpose that reflects the diverse viewpoints of team members and the school community they represent.

✓ Ensure that the statement of purpose reflects the needs of the student body and the specific challenges the school is striving to overcome—see sample statement below.

"Our school is struggling to increase college-going rates in a community that has traditionally been supported by manufacturing jobs. The purpose of our site visit will be to uncover strategies used to increase college preparation and access; raise academic expectations for both students and faculty; ensure the success of all students in a rigorous academic program; and provide every student with equitable access to programs that truly prepare them for college and work. In an era of increasing fiscal challenges, we also need to understand what programs have been changed or eliminated (and how those decisions were made), what new programs

have been implemented, and how resources have been reallocated to increase efficiency and effectiveness. We also want to understand the role of parents and the community in the school-improvement process. Finally, we will prepare written report on what we learned from the site visit, including a brief executive summary of the most important findings, and will deliver presentations on the report to the faculty, staff, and school board within two months of the site visit."

**Schedule a site visit with the selected host school.**

✓ Try to provide at least eight to ten weeks of advanced notice when making the visit request—the more advanced the notice the better.

✓ Submit the request during the summer, if possible, or at the beginning of the school year. Plan ahead and give the host school time to plan ahead as well.

✓ Make sure to maintain regular contact with the host school and confirm all dates, scheduling details, and arrangements multiple times.

✓ Remember: clear, consistent, considerate communication is a gesture of professionalism and respect. Calling to arrange a site visit two weeks in advance of the desired date or burdening a host school with unclear or inconsistent communications are not the best ways to kick off a productive site visit.

✓ Once a host site has been selected, the two schools should collaboratively develop a site-visit schedule. The visiting team should express its learning needs and desires, while also being mindful that the host school is making sacrifices and rearranging schedules and workloads to accommodate the visiting team.

✓ Flexibility, openness, and consistent expressions of appreciation build the kind of relationships and trust that will ultimately make the site visit a success.

**Request critical background and programmatic documents** from the host school that the site-visit team can review and discuss before the visit.

✓ Evidence that it has a well-organized plan, detailed agenda, and thoughtful process for sharing its work with visitors.

✓ Documents that describe how the school uses student data to inform its goals and shape school-improvement strategies, including action plans, model curricula, and descriptions of its professional-development programs, student-support strategies, and data systems.

✓ Available evidence of improved student outcomes, including critical measures of success and academic growth across all student subgroups—e.g., lower numbers of course failures and behavioral incidences, steady increases in test scores and graduation rates, and increased college enrollment, persistence, and degree-attainment rates.

✓ Messaging materials are also important. How has the school communicated to its improvement work to the community?

✓ Important district and school policies, particularly those that address assessment practices, graduation and course requirements, grading and reporting systems, or professional development programs.

✓ Pedagogical practices in critical areas, such as the ninth-grade transition, teaching and supporting English language learners, implementing standards-based grading and reporting, etc.

✓ Documents that describe how teachers plan together and work collaboratively to improve practice and student success, such as through professional learning groups, interdisciplinary teaching, teaming, or other collaboration-driven strategies.

✓ Any research or readings that heavily influenced or informed the host site's school-improvement work—understanding these ideas will provide a broader context for the practices you observe at the school.

**Formulate essential questions and goals for the visit:** What do we want to observe? Who do we want to interview and speak with? What do we need to learn and understand so that we can move our work forward?

✓ Collectively develop and write down the essential questions and goals for the visit. Make sure to provide these to the host school in advance to guide the development of the site-visit schedule and program.

✓ Remind the visiting team of the larger purpose of the site visit—turning learning from the host school into concrete actions at your home school—and clearly connect the site visit to your school's action plan, improvement strategies, progress, and needs.

✓ Remember that the purpose of the visit is to learn from—not evaluate, judge, or criticize—the host school and its practices.

✓ Devote some planning time to discussing site-visit expectations, including appropriate and inappropriate behaviors and questions.

**Create a portfolio for the site-visit team** that includes relevant materials about the host school and the site visit. The portfolio will serve as a manual for the visit.

✓ Include your guiding principles, essential questions, and goals for the visit.

✓ Logistical information such as the visit schedule (when its developed and finalized), a map of the host school, the bell schedule and classroom course assignments for the visits days, etc.

✓ All the essential background information and documents related to organizational structures, improvement work, and student outcomes that were supplied by the host school.

✓ Essential research and professional literature that the visiting team should read in advance of the visit.

✓ Consider creating an online portfolio and document archive, especially if the portfolio is large. Using tablet computers and smartphones instead of binders will reduce both paper consumption and carrying weight (a good idea when walking around a school all day).

**Develop the site-visit schedule** in collaboration with the host school.

✓ Allocate sufficient time for the site visit. Deeper professional learning necessitates a greater commitment of time. Three days is ideal for observing systemic school-wide or district-wide improvement work, two days may be enough, and one day will likely be insufficient unless the focus of the visit is a specific program.

✓ Make sure to build in time for discussion, processing, and debriefing during the visit. Also include opportunities for informal discussions and socializing with the host school's faculty and staff.

✓ Schedule time for the visiting team to share its own action plan and school-improvement work with the host school at the end of the visit (if possible). Use this session as an opportunity for collaborative problem solving or to get constructive critical feedback from a school community that is engaged in similar improvement work.

✓ Build in time to discuss communication strategies with school leaders from the host site—specifically, what messages and strategies they used to build understanding and support for their school-improvement, and their recommendations for sharing lessons learned with the faculty and staff at the home school. Turning learning into action requires an effective communications strategy.

## The Site Visit

The host school may already have a preferred schedule and agenda that it has refined over the course of previous site visits. Based on the needs of the visiting school, however, the site-visit program and timetable should be customized to address the specific questions of the visiting team.

An ideal site-visit schedule includes the following:

✓ Presentations, panel discussions, and sessions that describe specific strategies and programs implemented to improve instructional practices and student learning, provide necessary interventions to students, and track, analyze, and act upon student-performance data.

✓ A detailed presentation on the specific challenges the host school faced during its school-improvement process, as well as effective strategies for addressing these challenges.

✓ First-hand observations in which the visiting team can see classes, programs, and other learning opportunities in action.

✓ Several opportunities for the visiting team to debrief presentations and process new information with faculty and staff from the host school.

✓ Opportunities for visiting team members to talk with students,

parents, and community members, especially those who have been involved in the school-improvement process.

✓ An opportunity for the visiting team to share its own action plan and improvement strategies with the host school and to receive feedback on the plan.

## A Few Things to Keep in Mind

✓ Arrive on time each day. Remember that the host team has rearranged its own schedules and workloads to accommodate the visit.

✓ Use time efficiently and productively. Review the schedule as a team and determine individual assignments based upon interests and expertise.

✓ Remain open minded. Don't let assumptions or past experiences diminish receptivity to new ideas.

✓ Express appreciation often. Let your hosts know that you value their hard work and willingness to share their expertise.

✓ Focus on the purpose and goals of the visit. Avoid judgmental or evaluative conversations with colleagues, and never speak critically of the host school, especially in hallways, classrooms, and other public areas.

✓ Follow the schedule that has been planned for you. Respect the efforts the host school has made on your behalf and politely request adjustments if necessary.

✓ Adopt a can-do attitude: don't focus on problems; focus on problem solving. Generally speaking, it's unproductive to generate reasons why the strategies being employed by the host school could not be implemented elsewhere. A more helpful approach is to consider and discuss what would have to happen or change back home so that the desired outcomes could be achieved.

## Communicating Lessons Learned

Ideally, a visiting team will observe a school that has improved outcomes for students, ask hard questions, and come away with new information. The team's report-out should focus on the effective strategies observed and, if appropriate, ways to

think about incorporating those strategies into its own school-improvement program. Ultimately, the school's administrators and leadership team will need to decide how to proceed.

A detailed written plan for sharing lessons learned with the school community—particularly the teachers, administrators, and school board members who were unable to participate in the site visit—will help ensure new learning will not be lost. Time is of the essence, and an effective communications strategy is essential. Those who were not on the visit may need time and coaching to understand what was observed—and, understandably, they may not be as enthusiastic about acting on new ideas. The communications strategy should include, at a minimum, the following elements:

✓ A detailed written report on the visit, including a brief executive summary that distills the most important insights and lessons learned. Keep the executive summary to a single page.

✓ Distribution of the report and summary to the entire school community (faculty, staff, parents, and other community members).

✓ A formal presentation to the faculty, school board, and any critical internal and external groups.

✓ Informal—but scheduled and well-facilitated—meetings with district leaders or faculty groups as needed.

## Hosting a Site Visit

Site visits require both the visitors and the visited to be well prepared. In some cases, the host school will have experience planning, scheduling, and hosting successful site visits, particularly if it is a widely recognized model school. Still, every site visit is unique, and the needs of both the visiting school and the host school should be considered. For an inexperienced school, it's a good idea to conduct a scaled-down trial site visit to ease into the process, identify issues, and develop a site-visit program that works for the hosting faculty, students, and community with minimal disruption.

## Preparing to Host a Successful Site Visit

To help facilitate the host school's preparation process, this section includes a checklist that covers the most important elements of a high-impact site visit, including:

1. Communicating with site-visit team leader
2. Preparing a detailed schedule
3. Coordinating the logistics of the visit
4. Developing topics for presentations and discussions
5. Informing the school community about the visit
6. Conducting preparation meetings
7. Preparing a short evaluation form
8. Debriefing the visit

## Checklist for the Host Team

**Communicate clearly and consistently with the visiting school.** Identify one person (not a committee) to be the primary contact, coordinator, and go-to person for all matters related to the site visit. Specify the specific duties of the site-visit coordinator, and give this person authority to make important decisions related to the site visit.

✓ Make sure the schedule includes "normal" school days so that the visiting team can observe classes and programs in action.

✓ Ask detailed questions about the visiting school's intentions and plans: What do you want to learn? How many people are you planning to send? Use this information to determine if the inquiring school is both serious in its commitment and a good fit for a site visit.

✓ Be clear and forthcoming about what you can and can't do during the site visit. Make sure the visiting team's expectations are in alignment with the learning experience you are planning for them.

**Prepare a detailed site-visit schedule** that includes the agenda for each day.

✓ Describe all roles and assignments for participating individuals, and list the protocols, materials, and technologies needed for sessions and presentations.

✓ Provide the schedule to the visiting team in advance of the visit. Make sure that the schedule meets the school's needs and make any modifications to address the visiting team's specific questions and school-improvement challenges.

✓ Reach out to other schools that may have experience planning and conducting site visits to learn about their process and identify common obstacles or problems.

**Coordinate the logistics.** Set aside space for meetings and work sessions, make arrangements for meals, find substitutes for teachers, and prepare a packet of materials that includes a floor plan with room numbers, the master schedule, a wireless network password, and other essential site-specific information.

✓ Communicate with the visiting school to determine what preparatory materials are needed, particularly if the visiting team is compiling materials in advance (this will reduce preparation time on both ends and avoid the printing of multiple unnecessary copies of materials).

✓ Set aside parking space and have nametags prepared.

✓ Develop a short welcoming program: the greeting arrangements, a review of logistics, a brief tour of the building, etc.

**Develop the sessions and presentations.** Consult with the visiting school to determine topics for all the presentations, panel discussions, work sessions, and team meetings.

✓ Select representative groups of teachers and students to participate in presentations and panels. For example, don't pick only the highest-achieving students—a common tendency in schools.

✓ Select faculty members who can speak eloquently and engagingly about the school's redesign work and who have a strong understanding of the school's evolution over time. The ideal candidates are often experienced presenters who have been trained in group-facilitation techniques and protocols.

✓ Teachers who were initially skeptical about the school-improvement work are often the best spokespeople, since they can speak with sympathy and authenticity to the hesitations and skepticism that some visitors may be experiencing.

✓ Select and distribute relevant resources and examples of work. If certain resources have been useful to your school, they will likely be useful to the visiting school, as well.

**Inform the entire school community** about the visit. Notify the faculty and staff well in advance of the visit, especially the teachers whose classes will be observed.

✓ Notify the school community as early as possible. Make the announcement in writing and electronically, and send out reminders in advance of the visit.

✓ Prepare a list of classes that can be observed by visitors and make sure that the visiting team has all the information it needs to find the appropriate classes and sessions.

✓ Discuss the classroom-observation process with teachers and the visiting team. Make sure that expectations are clear and the teachers are comfortable with the format and will welcome visitors into their classrooms and answer questions.

**Conduct preparatory meetings.** Hold meetings with the faculty, staff, students, parents, and community members who will be directly involved in the visit.

✓ These meetings should address specific roles and responsibilities, presentation objectives and content, and other critical details to ensure the seamless execution of the visit.

✓ The agenda for the site visit will evolve out of these discussions. Make sure that a final copy of the agenda is provided to all staff members and made available online.

✓ As noted above, the host school should have a facilitator's agenda that includes all important logistical details in one document.

**Prepare a one-page evaluation form** to be completed at the end of the visit.

✓ While paper-based surveys are fine, consider an online survey, since it will make the collection, compiling, and distribution of survey information much easier. Just make sure that the visiting has necessary access to computers or mobile devices.

✓ Focus the evaluation on the process and substance of the site visit—it is not an opportunity for the visiting team to comment on the quality, configuration, or progress of the host school's program.

✓ Use the surveys to improve future visits and provide positive feedback to teachers and staff.

**Debrief the visit.** The debriefing process should include a review the visiting team's evaluations, discussing what worked well, and making adjustments to the site-visit process and protocols. In many cases, the host school can learn as much from a site visit as the visiting school.

✓ The debriefing session is an opportunity to look anew at your school's redesign work. Improvement is an iterative process that requires thoughtful, ongoing self-reflection.

✓ In many cases, host schools become "mentors" to visiting schools. Relationships develop over time and provide opportunities for ongoing dialogue, support, and tuning with colleagues from other schools.

✓ Schools that frequently host site visits often become more public and transparent about classroom practice and school-wide policies and practices. Less siloed and isolated schools tend to be the schools that improve the most.

### Something to think about...

One of the many benefits of hosting a site visit is that it allows administrators, teachers, and students to express their vision for the school and how they, in their individual roles, fit into the larger, long-term vision. Sharing professional practices and accomplishments can be very rewarding experiences for educators, since it requires administrators and teachers to be reflective about their professional life and candid with themselves and others about what is, and is not, working. Having students participate in this process empowers them and illustrates their key role in increasing their achievement and educational outcomes, while also reminding everyone else what this school site visit is all about.

## Sample Site Visit Schedule

In general, brief site visits present fewer opportunities for substantive learning, since they typically don't build in time for the kind of in-depth questioning, conversations, and strategizing that are needed to embrace new ideas and translate learning into action at the home school. For these reasons, this guide provides a three-day schedule that includes time to discuss and process new learning, while also considering the host school's practices in relation to the visiting school's learning goals. A longer site visits also gives participating educators a chance to interact, develop relationships, and see one another as partners in the same fundamental mission-driven enterprise: educating students. If a three-day visit is not logistically possible, the components of the schedule below can easily be adapted to fit the specific needs and duration of the visit.

## Day One

The host school should plan the welcoming program, provide a floor plan of the building, and review logistics and expectations.

The host school should plan the welcoming program, provide a floor plan of the building, and review logistics and expectations.

The observations may include a team meeting, student projects or presentations of work, heterogeneous classrooms, dual-enrollment programs, intervention programs, advisories, etc.

Lunch is a good time to meet with parents, school board members, and selected teachers to hear informally about their role in the improvement process.

Discussion questions may include: What did you see? What did you learn? What do you need to know? What puzzled or confused you? What can be modified to improve the process on the following day?

| LENGTH | ACTIVITY |
|---|---|
| 30 minutes | Arrival, refreshments, introductions, welcoming program, and review of the site-visit schedule |
| 45 minutes | Tour of the building |
| 90 minutes (including break) | A presentation by principal and teachers on the school's "improvement journey" |
| 60 minutes | Observations of specific programs and strategies |
| 45 minutes | Facilitated discussion with students |
| 45 minutes | Lunch |
| 60 minutes | Classrooms and program observations or structured conversations with teachers |
| 30 minutes | Visiting team meets with the site-visit coordinator or school leadership to debrief the day |
| 30 minutes | Host and visiting teams review and finalize plan for Day Two |

The goal of this presentation is to share how the work was accomplished and how it is being sustained and evaluated—it should not attempt to convince the visiting team to adopt the same strategies. Include the school's vision, goals, and evidence of success, while also making sure that major obstacles encountered and overcome are discussed.

Focus on the classroom-level impact of the school-improvement program: How, specifically, has it improved the learning experience for students?

This time can provide opportunities for the visiting team to revisit programs or follow up with staff members if they have specific questions.

Dinner with selected faculty may be scheduled to socialize and connect.

# Day Two

Answer any questions and address any issues that arose during the previous day's debriefing session.

Keep the questions and discussion focused on the nuts and bolts of the school-improvement work—what's working well and what may still need some refinement.

Essential question: How does your school prepare all students for postsecondary success? Make sure a trained facilitator is on hand to guide the discussion.

This time is for the team to finalize its presentation to the host school.

| LENGTH | ACTIVITY |
|---|---|
| 15 minutes | Arrival, breakfast, quick team huddle to review plans |
| 2 hours | Classroom visits |
| 60-90 minutes | Teacher panel discussion |
| 45 minutes | Lunch |
| 60 minutes | School community "town meeting" with teachers, counselors, students, parents, and community members |
| 30 minutes | Observations of specific classes or programs |
| 60 minutes | Team meeting to debrief the day, review the plan for Day Three |

Try to cover as many classrooms, grade levels, and different curriculum areas as possible during the classroom visits. Use observation protocols when appropriate.

Team time to debrief or engage in informal conversations.

Use this time to cycle back to ask unanswered questions or address burning issues.

## Day Three

Finish any last-minute preparations for team presentation.

The host school's administrators, policymakers, and leadership team share their journey navigating roadblocks and overcoming resistance to reform. The purpose is to discuss in depth the specific leadership, messaging, and communications strategies that were used to secure support and buy-in from all stakeholders.

This is a good time to complete evaluation forms for the host school.

| LENGTH | ACTIVITY |
| --- | --- |
| 15 minutes | Arrival, breakfast, quick team huddle to review plans |
| 90 minutes | Visiting team presentation |
| 60 minutes | Leadership, messaging, and communications discussion |
| 90 minutes | Gap-analysis exercise for the visiting team |
| 45 minutes | Lunch |
| Optional | Team planning time |

Using a tuning or consultancy protocol, the visiting team shares its action plan, discusses the roadblocks they have encountered, and their initial ideas about how they intend to incorporate what they have learned on the site visit. The team receives thoughtful, constructive feedback from host school's leadership team and teachers.

The host school provides a facilitator, and the visiting team discusses how they can get from where their school is to where they want it to be. This is time for the visiting team to begin discussing its site-visit report and communications plan.

Use this time to engage in any final conversations with the host school. Before departure, refine or finalize the plan for how lessons will be shared and incorporated into ongoing improvement work.

## About the League of Innovative Schools

The League of Innovative Schools is a regional professional learning community for schools. Membership is open to any New England secondary school—including charter schools, private schools, and career-and-technical institutions—committed to educational equity, student-centered learning, and ongoing improvement. All participating schools will become part of a growing network of learning institutions working to strengthen their programs, exchange professional expertise, and create better learning opportunities for their students.

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