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## SALT School Guides

### Using the School Visit Report

Once the SALT visiting team has completed its stay in your school, the team writes a report. The report is the only product of the SALT school visit.

The report tells the school improvement team what the school looks like from an outside perspective. It is intended to provoke the school improvement team to look at the school with new eyes.

The report has no authority beyond its own persuasiveness. It prescribes no action plan. It does not tell the school improvement team what to do with the conclusions it has reached, beyond offering some broadly worded recommendations.

### **Neither the district nor the state takes action based on the report.**

Its value rests in how the school improvement team uses it. The district or state will take action based on how the school uses the report.

The report is an excellent tool for the team to use in its planning process. The report will verify some of the observations made by the school improvement team while also alerting the team to issues it may have overlooked.

While the report is designed to promote productive action, it is the school improvement team, not the visiting team, that decides what that action should be. Thus, it is important that the school improvement team consider the report carefully and decides deliberately how to modify the school improvement plan based on the insights the report generates.

The purpose of this guide is to help the school improvement team understand why and how the report was written and to provide a series of steps to help the school improvement team use the report well.

### **STARTING OUT**

Understanding the purpose of the report

Before reading the full visit report, each team member should read the section of the report entitled, "The Nature of This Report."

The visiting team's charge is to write a report for the school that clearly states the team's conclusions about how well the school is doing in each of the three SALT focus areas at the time of the visit. The team seeks to make the conclusions accurate, fair and useful to the school. Since the school improvement team decides what, if anything, will change because of the report, the visiting team knows that it must persuade, rather than prescribe, what should be done.

[SALT WORKS School by School](#)

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The visiting team builds information in a way that is similar to the way the school improvement team builds information from self-study activities. It seeks information that can be acted upon. Both groups address the same three focus areas. They both use a similar process for building conclusions from evidence.

An important difference is that the visiting team is comprised of practicing professionals who work outside of the school and the school's district. They bring a fresh perspective that often provokes the school improvement team to fresh insights about what the school is doing and what action steps should be taken.

Since the visiting team lacks the detailed historical and political knowledge of the school, they do not know what they need to know to say what action the school should take. The school improvement team has that knowledge and the responsibility for planning effective action.

### How the report is written

The visiting team report is different from many reports schools have received in the past. The report is deliberately short because it seeks to focus on the most important issues the team sees facing the school. It features conclusions because that is the way it portrays what it sees as the actual state of the school. The conclusions in each of the three focus areas are the most important information the report contains.

To build these conclusions team members observe what is going on in the school, discuss what they see and what they think about what they see. They must make professional judgments about the effectiveness and quality of what they see, not just describe it in neutral language. A conclusion, even when it is first formed, contains language that makes it clear what the team **thinks** about the issue it is writing about.

Example of a neutral description:

*The students in this school write every day.*

Example of a conclusion that includes professional judgment:

*The daily writing exercises carried out in this school give students practice in using some of the basic skills of writing. But, the school-wide practice of simply grading student papers based on the number of obvious mistakes, and the lack of instruction about what makes a piece of writing good, goes a long way to explain the poor quality in what students write as well as the poor performance of students on state writing assessments.*

The discussion about the issues a visiting team chooses to write about and how to word a conclusion often raises questions for the team that it then checks out with further observation. This back and forth process between conclusions and evidence, between observing the school and team discussion builds the team's "final conclusions" that appear in the report from early "working conclusions."

A conclusion is continuously tested by the team to assure that it is a good conclusion. The team must agree that the conclusion is based on evidence, is accurate, fair, important and useful. To help ensure this, no conclusion is made final until every member of the visiting team agrees that all these tests are met.

The team's work in building conclusions provides the foundation for its recommendations

and commendations. Recommendations express the team's best judgment about how the school should improve. Commendations single out specific practices or programs that stand out to the team as exemplary. Teams find making commendations and recommendations quite easy once the hard work of building conclusions is done.

Teams deliberately avoid prescribing what the school should do in the recommendations. They do not prescribe action steps.

**The visiting team is only at the school for four days and can not know the intricacies of the school or its history as well as the school improvement team.**

For this reason, the team writes broadly stated recommendations. The school improvement team decides what changes it should make in the school improvement plan.

In order to do this, the school improvement team should decide whether it understands the visiting team's conclusions and recommendations. Then, it should consider what specific action plans would best achieve what it has decided to accomplish.

The information in a school visit report is intended to provoke the school improvement team to see the school in a new light. A successful report will help the school improvement team both by giving the team confidence about congruous insights and at the same time by provoking new insights. These insights should persuade the school to take action that is more effective in improving learning and teaching in the school.

## **MAKING IT WORK**

Steps for using the report

The following steps are intended to the school improvement team process its visit report.

1. Discuss as a team the section, "Portrait of the Condition of the School at the Time of the Visit." The team wrote this "portrait" last, after completing all of its conclusions, commendations and recommendations. This short section presents what the visiting team decided was the best overview of the school, based on all of its conclusions. Think of this section as a portrait of your school during the time the visiting team was there. The portrait was carefully created by a group of your peers from outside your school to tell you what they thought about what they saw. Unlike the earlier section, "Profile of the School," it is not a neutral description. It expresses the team's best insight into what the school is and how well it works to support learning and teaching. This insight shapes and introduces the conclusions that follow in the report.
2. When you discuss the team's portrait, briefly consider: What points and perspectives in the portrait seem right? What points and perspectives puzzle you? Keep these points in mind as you read the visiting team's conclusions and return to the portrait again later.
3. Review the conclusions, commendations and recommendations for each focus areas. Read and discuss the description of the focus area. The team worked from this same description. Remember that there are many things that a team can choose to include. Since teams are limited in the number of conclusions they can write, most teams cannot include everything they thought about and discussed. The conclusions in the report then show what the team decided was **most** important to include.
4. Consider each conclusion. If the members of the school improvement team generally agree that the conclusion makes sense and is sound, continue to the next one. If the team is upset, puzzled or strongly disagrees with a conclusion,

- go to the next section, [Making Sense of Puzzling Conclusions](#).
5. Review the commendations and recommendations. The commendations tell you what the team saw as exemplary practices and programs in your school. They may or may not lead to action. Recommendations are intended to provoke action.
  6. Discuss additions or changes the school improvement team might make to your school improvement plan based on this review.
  7. Draft **initial** proposals for revisions to action plans of the school improvement plan.
  8. The school improvement team should allocate about an hour of discussion for each focus area.
  9. Review the report's *Summary of Findings* section. In order to make even more clear what the visiting team thought was most important for the school to pay attention to, it chose the 5 conclusions it considered most important. The "Final Advice" section of the report gives the team a way to say more about what it thinks the school should do. It usually sums up what the team thinks are its most important recommendations.
  10. Return to the "Portrait" and review your original questions and puzzles to see if they have changed based on your detailed consideration of the rest of the report.
  11. Review, refine, make decisions and place into final form your proposals for changes in your school improvement plan.

#### Making sense of puzzling conclusions

Visiting team conclusions usually puzzle school improvement teams for one of these reasons:

- The school improvement team is confused about what a conclusion is or about the purpose for the visiting team's report.
- The school improvement team believes that it must defend the school against what it sees as a negative conclusion;
- The visiting team's judgment about the school is very different from the school's own view; or
- The visiting team has not done a good job in building a conclusion. Most likely it fails one or more of the tests for a good conclusion. A conclusion must be accurate, useful, important, fair and supported by evidence.

Since the purpose of the report is to persuade and provoke the school to positive action and since the school improvement team is responsible for planning that action, schools have a lot to gain from a thoughtful response to the report that is looking ahead to action and not backward to defending itself.

It is worth the school improvement team's time to try and figure out why a conclusion puzzles them and what action it provokes for the school. In fact, discussions about puzzling conclusions often prove more beneficial to school improvement team's work than easier discussions where they note they agree with the conclusion.

The report is written to make it hard for the school improvement team to simply dismiss a conclusion. "That was a bad day." "I don't see why they said that." "It isn't clear and I don't see why I should figure it out." The visiting team's decision to include each conclusion was deliberate and discussed. The team's wording of the conclusion was deliberate and it is likely it was revised a number of times. Each person on the team agreed to the conclusion including how it is worded. They are not edited by the chair of the team or anyone else after they are made final by the visiting team as a group.

Remember that in the final analysis, it is the school improvement team's judgment, not the visiting team's judgment that rules. The school improvement team decides what action that school should take and thus what becomes part of the school improvement

plan.

To help the school improvement team in its consideration of a puzzling conclusion, it should review the conclusion using tests the visiting team use.

Ask of the conclusion:

- Is it accurate?
- Is it supported by two sources of evidence?
- Is it important?
- Does it contain the team's judgment?
- Can you tell the basis on which the team's judgment was made? (e.g. how to improve teaching, what matters for students, how to do something better.)

If the conclusion is still puzzling, ask these questions:

- What might have been some of the specific things the team saw or heard the week they were in the school that lead to its deciding it had the evidence to support this conclusion?
- What was its judgment about what is important about the substance of this conclusion?
- Why did the team put the conclusion together the way it did?
- Why would the team think that this conclusion was useful for the school improvement team to consider?

### **WHAT'S NEXT: CONNECTING THIS WORK TO THE SALT PROCESS**

The SALT process is based on the work of the school improvement team. It is the judgment of the school improvement team that determines the plans for action the school will take to improve the teaching of students.

With the authority comes the responsibility to do all you can to make sure your plans are productive and that they result in better teaching. The visiting team report is designed to persuade you to consider the visiting team's conclusions. It is designed to provoke you to new insights about your school that will strengthen your school improvement plan and its implementation.

How you respond to the report is much more important than what the report says about you. Since it is your response that shapes the action you plan and determine how likely you are to reach your objectives, *it is the way you respond to the report that matters.*

### **Feedback on Using the School Visit Report**

We want to know if this guide is helpful to you. Once you have read this guide and tried to use it, please fill out the form below, and either mail or fax it to the department (401-222-2734).

Overall, was the guidance clear?

Very Clear \_\_\_\_\_ Clear \_\_\_\_\_ Difficult to Understand \_\_\_\_\_

Which parts of the guidance need to be clarified?

Did you find the guidance useful?

Very Useful \_\_\_\_\_ Useful \_\_\_\_\_ Difficult to Use \_\_\_\_\_

Which parts of the guidance were not useful?

Was there something you thought you needed to know that was not in the guidance?  
(Please let us know what it is.)

How would you suggest improving this overview?

Would you like to participate in a focus group evaluating this publication? If so, please identify your name, school and district below:

If you want to contact someone directly, call Ken Fish, Director of the Office of School Improvement and Accountability at (401) 222-4600 X 1-2200, or e-mail him at [fish@ride.ri.net](mailto:fish@ride.ri.net).

### **Credits**

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The SALT pilot schools contributed to this guide. They are:

#### **Middle Grades SALT Pilot Network**

- Coventry Middle School
- John F. Deering Middle School
- Joseph H. Gaudet School
- Joseph Jenks Junior High School
- Kickemuit Middle School
- Ponaganset Middle School
- Urban Collaborative Accelerated Program

#### **Urban SALT Network**

- Asa Messer School
- Reservoir Avenue School
- Sackett Street School
- Vartan Gregorian Elementary School at Fox Point
- William D'Abate School
- M.Virginia Cunningham School
- Citizens Memorial School

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- English school inspection
- The accreditation visit, as practiced by the Commission on Public Secondary Schools of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC)
- The SALT School Visit

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