

## TRANSFORMING AMERICAN SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY WITH THE PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL VISIT

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In the discussion that will shape Congress's reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, policy makers are considering a state-based initiative that will send visiting teams to every American school to judge its learning and teaching performance. This significant proposal directly aims at what is missing in the existing accountability system: valid assessment of the actual teaching and learning that takes place in the classrooms of each particular school.

Some worry that a national system of school visits is too pioneering and untested and that it will result in random, biased or uncertain findings about schools. Others worry that it will cost too much.

School visits are neither pioneering nor unique. The visit is a well-developed approach to school assessment that has been used in the United States and for more than 170 years by governments around the world, most notably in Britain. The costs depend on how the visit is structured. If school visits are rigorous, the potential benefits for accountability, improvement in the actual practice in schools, and opportunities for professional development will make the cost an excellent investment.

Through four years of research based on the observation of school visits conducted by British inspection and American accreditation, Tom Wilson identified the elements that determine how a professional peer visiting team comes to know a school so that its report is substantive, accurate and legitimate. He describes this work in *Reaching for a Better Standard: English School Inspection and the Dilemma of American School Accountability* (Teachers College Press, 1996) and *Visiting Accreditation* (Lab at Brown, 1999).

Pam Gray-Bennett directed the Commission on Public Secondary Schools of the New England regional accreditation association from 1991-2009, where she led a comprehensive revision of the Commission's protocol for visits that included most of Wilson's elements. Over the last ten years, this protocol has been used for approximately 700 visits. NEASC, schools and the school visit team chairs agree that the revised protocol produces conclusions that are significantly more substantive and legitimate than before.

Tom Wilson used the same foundation elements in his 15 years of work. For 15 years with Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) staff to build and institutionalize a state-wide visit system, based on a rigorous visit protocol (School Accountability for Learning and Teaching—SALT). Teams have visited 95% of Rhode Island public schools. In addition, he has worked with the Chicago Schools Alliance successfully applying the principals to visits for complex urban schools, including a turn-around school.

The authors' collective experience with the school visit shows that preparing a substantive report requires visit teams to follow a carefully designed and rigorous protocol. Knowledge of the elements of how a visit works as an inquiry methodology is key to protocol design.

These “fundamental elements” are at the heart of the methodology:

**1. *Dynamic Evidence*** is specific information that team members see and hear during the visit that pertains to the school's teaching and learning practice. This evidence is dynamic because it shifts and develops as the team's understanding of the school shifts and develops, and its meaning changes with the team's growing understanding about what makes the school tick.

**2. *Professional Practitioner Judgment*** is the knowledge and values that a practitioner gains from actual practice.

The team forms its conclusions from the evidence it gathers while it is visiting a school. The judgments of individual team members and of the team as a whole are moderated by the evidence and by the team's varying and changing perceptions of what the evidence means. The team's growing corporate judgment guides its decisions about what is most important to say in the report and how to write it well.

Practitioner judgment explains how a school visit can deal with the complexity of actual practice in a particular school. Experienced practitioners rely on the knowledge they have gained from their actual practice of schooling. Their daily use of this knowledge develops the cognitive skills they need to prepare conclusions that succeed in pushing change in the school.

**3. *Deliberated Consensus*** requires all team members to test each conclusion and agree about how it is worded before including it in the report. This consensus agreement assures the accuracy and legitimacy of a visit team's conclusions.

Deliberated consensus requires rigorous, focused and ongoing team discussion. Agreement is not negotiated among team members. Disagreement leads them to gather new evidence that will hone their discussion until they reach agreement that they

have it right. By the end of the visit, team members reach a high level of agreement.

A good visit protocol will maintain these three elements in tension throughout the visit process. The complete methodology of the inquiry includes a set of “necessary constraints” and “procedures for legitimacy” that must be followed to assure a productive tension between the fundamental elements and provide the framework for rigor, e.g., team composition, tests for conclusions, endorsement of reports. (See [Catalpa Ltd.](#) for more detail on elements, constraints and procedures.)

Knowing how the visit works as an inquiry methodology provides the necessary background for thinking through design proposals such as whether to use ‘experts’ or teachers as visit team members.

The designers of school interventions often do not trust the knowledge and judgment of school practitioners about teaching. This is unfounded. American accreditation, British inspection and our experience with current visit systems all depend on the judgment and experience of school practitioners, who have been majority team members. While most American educators ignore professional judgment, other practicing professions recognize it as a critical construct (law, medicine, law enforcement).

Teams dominated by trained practitioners, who work in schools on a daily basis, can and do make unbiased, accurate, reasoned and well-informed judgments. Practitioners can and do make hard decisions about the quality of teaching and learning in visited schools. A rigorous visit inquiry depends on the special knowledge and judgment of practicing educators, because they understand the complex intricacies of what actually goes on in classrooms and they know what practitioners need to do to improve it. This capacity is an untapped resource for improving accountability, as well as the practice of teaching and learning in our nation’s schools.

A rigorous inquiry protocol calls for, and indeed depends on, a well-trained, mentored and experienced chair to lead a team in gathering evidence, using professional judgment fairly, building substantive team agreement, and writing accurate conclusions that represent the team’s thinking. Good chairing, like good teaching, is a practice. A solid visit system requires chair apprenticeship and coaching systems, as well as ongoing professional development.

Because reports from rigorous school visits are written by practitioners for practitioners, they move teaching and learning forward in the visited school. Conclusions written in direct

language have immediate impact on a school because they are written with a practitioner's eye and are centered on action. The school understands that they are the thoughtful result of a careful focus on actual practice of teaching and learning. Frequently, conclusions lead directly to change, cutting short the usual planning for change.

Thousands of practitioners who have served as members of both accreditation and Rhode Island schools visit teams attest to the value of the visit as a professional learning experience that is based in practice. Using practitioners on school visit teams keeps costs reasonable and opens exciting new systemic opportunities for practice-based teacher training and professional development.

If we do this work carefully, we will know with more certainty how our schools are doing. Finally, we will intervene in schools in ways that will actually strengthen their ability to provide better learning and at the same time hold them to more meaningful accountability.

*What do you think? Go to [Tom's Blog](#) to make a comment.*

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