



Guidelines for Members of NYS AIS Visiting Committees

Before the Visit

The school will send you a digital and if requested a printed copy of its self-study report approximately 6 weeks before the visit. *It is important to have read the entire self-study report prior to arriving at the school and to have studied more closely your assigned areas.*

The following NYS AIS materials found in this packet have been designed to support your work as a focused and objective committee member.

- Reading a Self-Study Report (2)
- Interviewing and Observing (3)
- Asking the Right Questions (4)
- Writing Recommendations (5)
- Sample Pieces of a Committee Report (6)

Additionally, you will be given a link to a Google site created for the school visit with documents that will support your work. The Google site functions like a file cabinet and will house such documents as this packet, the committee roster, supplementary materials, and the report template. Under one of the tabs you will find the NYS AIS Conflict of Interest form. Please complete the form well in advance of the visit. The form not only acknowledges that there is no Conflict of Interest, but also verifies that you have access to the site.

The NYS AIS Manual for Evaluation and Accreditation (4.0), is available in the Google site and will be useful as a reference should you need clarification on the expectations for a particular section or sub-section of the school's report. The Chair of the committee will be contacting you by email four to six weeks before the visit, and should be sending your specific assignments two to three weeks before the visit.

It is important to have read the entire self-study report prior to arriving at the school and to have studied more closely your assigned areas. In preparation for the visit create an outline in your assigned areas that includes the overarching concept(s) and the evidence the writers of your assigned subsection have provided that supports these concepts. This exercise should prepare you to develop questions that you will ask the writers when you meet them on campus, and/or point you to the supplementary materials that are relevant for review.

During the Visit

NYS AIS and the Chair ask that you give this assignment your full attention and that you be present for the entire visit.

The functions of the Visiting Committee are to:

- at all times evaluate the school in light of congruency with its own mission
- assess the school's self-study report for accuracy and thoroughness
- evaluate strengths and challenges
- offer observations on the school
- suggest ways the school may better achieve its purposes in the interest of school improvement.
- rate the school on its adherence to the CRITERIA FOR ACCREDITATION. (The school will include a listing of its self-ratings with its self-study report.)

For the process to be valid, it must be as objective as possible, and for it to be helpful it must be constructive. Commend the school for areas of achievement and excellence. Ask how this school, given its objectives and resources, might better achieve its purpose. The answers will inform the Committee's recommendations.

You are at all times an observer and a guest, not a supervisor or a consultant. During the school day, focus primarily on those members of the school community who have prepared the particular subsections of the report to which you have been assigned. Your time will be principally spent in talking to those people and thus verifying, assessing and adding to the information the school has provided in its report and in the corresponding supplementary materials (outlined at the end of each section of the NYS AIS MANUAL).

Your role is that of elicitor and unbiased listener, not lecturer or advisor. Ask open-ended questions (refer to the document *Interviewing and Observing and Asking the Right Questions*) that will encourage respondents to speak freely and fully about their work, their objectives, and the means they favor.

Listen, but do not allow yourself to be drawn into judgments about intra-school controversies or rivalries. Do not suggest that someone might want to speak off the record.

Some of your observations will be made during class visits. Keep in mind that you are to be a silent observer; refrain from taking written notes. (Suggestion: once you leave the classroom jot down your notes before you go on to the next task). The Committee does not evaluate individual teachers but rather the work of the faculty as a whole.

Class visits, while useful to a degree, do not provide the broad view of a school's program that the Committee needs to make its judgments. *More important are the conversations you will have with the members of the school community.* During interviews and meetings taking written notes is acceptable, and probably expected by those with whom you are speaking.

As a member of various subcommittees you will be called on to make oral reports to

the full Committee and to write the subcommittee reports that will become part of the final report (which will be a Google doc). Simple language is preferred. Restrict your comments to matters of substance. Make sure that recommendations (refer to *Writing Recommendations*) are constructive and reasonably within the school's capacity and intent. *Avoid any reference to individuals, either by name or title.*

Your conduct must at all times be professional. Keep in mind that all deliberations of the Committee, much of the material provided by the school, and your official conversations during the visit are *confidential*. Do not discuss with members of the school community any of the recommendations the Committee may make, and do not venture any predictions on accreditation.

Departing

Before you leave, give the Chair your completed form for reimbursement along with appropriate documentation. If for some reason you cannot complete the form at this time, do so as soon as possible and send it to the Chair or someone who has been designated by the school. The school will reimburse you directly by check.

Please do not leave until the Chair has dismissed you. The Visiting Committee's services are needed until the very end of the visit. Thus, it is not advisable to plan to return to your school on Wednesday.

Do not take away any of the material provided by the school with you. Notes, papers, and digital files relating to the visit should be destroyed before your departure.

After the Visit

The Chair will edit the Committee's report and then ask you do a final review (unless that happened before departing the school).

Protect the integrity of the process by continuing to preserve *confidentiality* and avoiding discussion of the school's affairs with persons other than the NYSAIS staff or members of the Visiting Committee.

Thank you for your tremendous service!

Judith Sheridan and George Swain, Associate Directors for Evaluation and Accreditation, are interested in hearing about your experience and welcome your feedback.

~ judith@nysais.org and george@nysais.org ~

Reading the Self-study Report (2)

Read Section One – Mission and Culture

- Read the Mission statement carefully
- What language stands out as distinctive
- Use the Mission as a lens for all that you read and observe
- Question how the school realizes its Mission in all phases
- Note the questions you have about the Mission and its relevance

Now read the Conclusion because it should contain two parts: an *overview* of how the school undertook the process and a *summary* of what challenges the school synthesized as a result of the undertaking.

Once you have a sense of the school, read the remainder of the self-study report. Develop a system for notes.

As you make your way through, look for:

- clarity
- content
- thoroughness: analytical versus descriptive
- whether the mission comes alive
- evidence
- school-wide involvement in writing the report

For the subsections to which you have been assigned, note in your outline:

- what impresses you
- what evidence supporting assumptions have been provided
- what seems like areas of strength
- what seems like areas of challenge

Bring any questions, comments, or observations on any subsection to the committee discussion.

Interviewing and Observing (3)

The goal is for each staff member to be interviewed before the close of school on Tuesday, ideally by each of two Committee members. While some class visiting should be undertaken, class visits alone provide an inadequate and sometimes inaccurate view of the academic program.

Points to consider when talking with faculty or visiting classrooms:

- interdepartmental cooperation
- intentional articulation of curricular choices – both vertical and horizontal
- classroom climate for teaching and learning.
- time available for department and division heads to provide supervision
- use of library and other resource materials
- the process by which curriculum development and revision take place
- how well the teachers evaluate the outcomes as they relate to the school's statement of purposes
- professional learning and collaboration
- process & effectiveness of orientation of new staff/faculty.

When observing classes, the visit need only be for 10 minutes, but refrain from taking notes because it makes teachers nervous. If possible, find a quiet corner after the observation, and jot down notes. Keep in mind how the school has described the pedagogical approach that shapes teaching and learning.

Before setting up interviews, plan:

- who to interview
- what open-ended questions to ask
- what supplementary materials need to be previewed.

When interviewing, refer to the NYS AIS guide to "Asking the Right Questions." Try to put people at ease, and be a good listener. Give teachers and staff members an opportunity to discuss their objectives and methods. Taking notes is appropriate. *Refrain from giving advice and sharing how things are done at your own school. You are not a consultant.*

To facilitate writing a subsection of the Visiting Committee report, after each interview consider:

- What strengths do you perceive from the self-study report, and then after interviewing and observing?
- What significant achievements emerge?
- Are there follow up questions to explore?
- What is to be commended?
- What might worthy of a recommendation?

Asking the Right Questions (4)

- Ask questions that offer open-ended opportunities to talk honestly about the school's strengths and weaknesses.
- Avoid questions that presume a negative response or imply criticism.
- Listen carefully and refrain from offering advice or your own point of view.
- Relax and enjoy the conversation. Tone is more important than content – convey interest in the person as a professional with valuable thoughts, feelings, and opinions..

If you just follow these few principles, the picture you have of the school through interviewing people within it will be candid, for better and/or worse, and amazingly complete in a remarkably short time.

Not such good questions:

How would you respond to the comment that the commitment to diversity in your mission statement is not reflected in the daily life of the school?

Why are you teaching (aspect of curriculum) or running your department in such and such a way?

What aspects of the division/department/office/school should absolutely be changed?

What are the weak spots within the staff?

Do you get much support from the administration in dealing with classroom management problems?

If you could send an anonymous message to the Head or Board what would it be?

How's staff morale?

If you could magically change anything in the school what would it be?

Examples of good questions:

What are the principles or processes that inform how departmental decisions are made?

How would you characterize the strengths and challenges of the educational program or division or department?

Tell me about professional learning (professional development) you participated in this year.

How is the school's commitment to diversity realized in daily life?

Describe ways in which faculty/staff participate in decision-making or making suggestions for change.

What are ways in which staff/faculty engage in the life of the school outside their own classrooms/offices?

What would be your great hopes for the future of the school?

Writing Recommendations (5)

- Generally fewer recommendations have greater impact.
- Base recommendations on factually accurate observations in light of the school's stated mission, not the priorities of the Visiting Committee members.
- Recommendations need to deal with matters of importance.
- Recommendations must be supported with detailed evidence in the visiting committee's narrative report. Do not make a recommendations without explanation or support.
- Avoid recommendations that will have major budget implications, such as adding program, adding space or equipment etc. unless confirmed by the head of school. Additional staff should be recommended only in the most serious of circumstances and always in line with the school's fiscal ability.
- Opening verbs might include:

Address	Find
Articulate	Formalize
Assess	Identify
Broaden	Implement
Clarify	Institute
Define	Increase
Determine	Pursue,
Develop	Vigorously pursue
Enhance	Review...with an eye to
Ensure	Strive for
Establish	Undertake

Avoid the use of “should/must” and “consider”

“should/must” is prescriptive and “consider” is passive.

- If the recommendation is one that the school has identified and included in the self study, acknowledge that by in the Committee's recommendation by including “...as indicated in the self-study...” or “...follow its own recommendation...”
- Avoid advocating positions that the school has not taken, remembering that the Committee's role is to determine if the school's stated mission,

and pedagogical approach is actually occurring.

- NYS AIS does not generally recommend (or commend) student teacher ratio or class size.
- Do not recommend hiring of employees
- Use caution when stating the same recommendation in more than one subsection. A repeated recommendation indicates a significant recommendation. Is that the Committee's intent?
- Fire proof cabinets for records are strongly recommended, but not required by law or by NYS AIS. Encourage schools to convert to digital storage, with on- and off-site backup.

Sample Recommendations

Not so good...

Hire a full time assistant to work in the admission office

Use a newsletter to keep regular contact with alumni

Appoint a science coordinator for the lower school

Research and identify maps and globes that should be used by every social studies teacher first through fifth grade in order to have contemporary and consistent materials in every classroom

Consider increasing the number of computers in the computer lab so that each student in the lab has a computer

Explore the concern expressed by the upper school teachers that there is a need for a full time learning consultant

Evaluate the policies and procedures for the use of technology

Assess the environmental impact of current cleaning products

Examine the quality of the meals and snacks being served.

Better...

Review staffing of the admissions office in light of the increased number of applicants

Establish regular, effective contact with alumni

Ensure that maps and globes for first through fifth grades are contemporary and consistent in every classroom

Support the lower school classroom teachers in their efforts to use the inquiry method, which requires students to engage in experiments and use an array of scientific tools and procedure

With an eye to the school's mission and the department's goals, determine the optimal number of computers needed to support the academic program

Address the concern expressed by the upper school teachers that there is a need for a full-time learning consultant and distinguish between the needs for a learning specialist for students and the need for further pedagogical training for faculty who deal with a wide-range of abilities

In alignment with the school's mission, create clear policies and procedures for the use of technology by both students and staff

Sample: Visiting Committee Reports for Program Subsections (6)

Essential Knowledge and Skills

Grade teams meet regularly with each other to set academic standards, ensure continuity and avoid redundancy. In addition, these teams serve to make sure there is alignment within the same grade level. Teachers remain current with the most recent ideas and latest research as a way to refine their practice. Some examples are research on play-based learning and social and emotional learning. While not followed closely, the New York State Common Code also factors into the decisions about curriculum to prepare students who may choose public schools at a future point in their education. The Lower School Division Director ensures that essential skills are included in the curriculum, and at the same time allows a great deal of autonomy and flexibility to teachers on meeting those goals.

The Middle School, particularly as compared to the Lower School, determines essential knowledge and skills- through preparation for structured testing. Less is done by way of presentation or other non-traditional methods of assessment. The self-study states that the students are being prepared for what will be required in the High School. In incorporating CTP-type testing into the curriculum, there is a tension that develops for teachers between preparing students for the test and using the test as a snapshot of knowledge at a given moment.

In the High School, teachers take seriously their responsibility to prepare students with essential knowledge and skills they will need to succeed as they move up the grade levels and as they transition to college and beyond. The tendency is to rely on standardized tests, SAT and subject tests as well as AP scores and anecdotal information as a means to assess the success of the program.

Each division seeks to provide a strong academic foundation coupled with ample opportunity for students to develop independence and autonomy. In terms of assessing both student learning and the strength of the program as a whole, the committee supports the school's commitment to map and review curriculum school-wide, and specifically recommends keeping an eye to expanding consistent opportunities for students to demonstrate their understanding in more varied and authentic ways.

It is of particular note that many members of the visiting committee complimented the program for providing a developmentally-appropriate level of intellectual analysis and for defining demonstrated skills in the same manner. The faculty as a whole deserve credit and praise for this essential aspect of their collective work.

The Visiting Committee commends the school for:

- the faculty commitment to provide a strong academic foundation for continuous learning
- the degree to which students can participate in deep level discussions in their classes displaying both interest and intelligence.

The Visiting Committee recommends that the school:

- continue communications across divisions regarding desired learning outcomes by capitalizing on such groups as the Curriculum Committee
- review testing in the Middle and High School as a means of assessing student learning with an eye towards employing additional methods.

Student Services

The School's mission proudly states that the School will provide children the "opportunity to grow and develop to their potential." The School supports this mission by ensuring students receive the services they need to maximize learning. The local public school district provides support for students in need of special services such as physical therapy, occupational therapy and speech. A social worker provided by the school district is also available once a week.

If students are identified as needing more academic support services or counseling beyond what they receive in the classroom, they are referred to the Child Study Team. Members of the Child Study Teams (including teachers and administrators), report that this is an effective method for identifying students in need and ensuring that they receive appropriate services. The Associate Head oversees all plans, implementation, and personnel related to students in need of special services.

A clear policy or procedure for identifying students who need accommodations and additional services was not presented in the supplemental material nor shared by any faculty member. The Visiting Committee noted that, beyond the faculty procedures document, there is not much emphasis on supporting students with special needs through modifications or accommodations (i.e., using learning objectives in Individualized Education Programs or 504 plans).

In the Middle School, a Study Skills class is offered to teach students executive functioning skills such as planning, time management, and organizational strategies. While there is ample time for home room, that time is largely used for procedural matters, such as attendance and lunch plans, and announcements, with a general community message that students might discuss. No other time in the schedule is given to advisory programming. As a result, a coherent advisory or homeroom curriculum that addresses the unique developmental needs of boys and girls in this age group is missing. Health and wellness programming exists but lack a clear scope and sequence. The programming that does exist is taught by the physical education teacher and the nurse.

At this time, the School does not systematically keep track of where students attend high school following their final year. The Director of Admission articulated a desire to have an electronic database to keep data on alumni and acknowledged the value of having such data to understand trends and to best support families in high school placement.

The Visiting Committee commends the School for:

- establishing a collaborative approach to address student needs through Child Study Teams.

- for exploiting resources available to the School by the local school district
- for teaching study skills in the middle school that will serve students throughout their education.

The Visiting Committee recommends that the School:

- research and develop a kindergarten through ninth grade health and wellness curriculum that is supported by a coherent social-emotional learning homeroom/advisory program;
- provide professional development training to homeroom teachers or advisors in serving as guides and mentors to students;
- create a clear process for identifying and supporting students who need accommodations or services not provided by the School and include the protocol in Faculty and Parent Handbooks; and
- establish a systematic exmissions process to keep track of where students go after their final year to identify trends that will help the School best support students and families.