

**New England Association of Schools and Colleges  
Commission on Independent Schools**

**The Handbook for Visiting Committee Chairs**

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## **The Purpose of Accreditation**

Accreditation has two interrelated purposes, school improvement and quality assurance, that are addressed in a three-phase process.

1. The Self-Study. Every ten years a school undertakes a comprehensive self-evaluation, following defined procedures, that is the foundation of the accreditation process and provides the focus for the subsequent visit. The *Manual for School Evaluation* integrates mandated Standards into a self-study protocol that is designed to demonstrate that the Standards for Accreditation are met and to generate plans for school improvement.
2. The Visiting Committee. The visiting committee, comprised of peers from other member schools, validates the self-study and provides the school and the Commission with the observations and recommendations of experienced outside educators. It determines the school's compliance with the Standards for Accreditation, and assists the school in setting direction for future improvement. The visiting committee follows a methodology in its work, the objective of which is reliability in the results.
3. Follow-up. The school's process of follow-up, with the Commission's oversight, assures effective action on recommendations and plans formulated during the self-study and visiting committee phases. While adherence to Standards provides a significant measure of quality, the best long-term assurance of quality is the commitment to ongoing school improvement to which accreditation attests.

## **The Visiting Committee**

The visiting committee undertakes a four-day visit after receiving the school's self-study. The committee's immediate task is to understand the school on its own terms and to validate the self-study. It must then, working within the context of the school and the framework of NEASC policy, write a report which will comment on the self-study and include recommendations designed to further school improvement.

The visiting committee report, described more fully below, must first establish the credibility of the visiting team as knowledgeable observers and careful listeners. It will make recommendations drawn from three sources: Standards which are not met or which could be improved upon, discrepancies between mission, policies, and practices, and endorsement of recommendations the school has made for itself. The report is addressed to the Commission as well as the school and should assist the Commission in setting requirements for follow-up and the school in establishing a clear plan of action.

## The Role of the Chair of the Visiting Committee

The chair of the visiting committee plays a pivotal role in the accreditation process with responsibilities to the school, the committee and the Commission at each stage. For the sake of clarity, each will be examined separately.

Responsibility to the School. The chair is the chief liaison, representing the Commission to the school in the accreditation process. By seeking accreditation, the school commits itself to voluntary adherence to Standards for Accreditation and willing participation by the school in improvement initiatives. The chair can do much to establish a positive and receptive attitude at the school.

**A. Before the Visit.** The chair should arrange to visit the school soon after agreeing to serve. The pre-visit is an occasion to get information and make plans for the visit and is an opportunity to reassure the school community concerning the professionalism of the accreditation process. The chair should confirm the readiness of the school for the visit by inquiring into the status of the self-study and confirm that the school has secured documentation for all regulatory requirements, as listed in Appendix N. The chair should invite the head of school to share any concerns and/or to identify areas for committee focus. It is helpful to tour the school and meet with key people to answer any questions they may have. This is the time to set the tentative schedule for the visit and to make sure that arrangements for housing accommodations, meeting rooms, and computers for use by the committee are satisfactory. Expectations concerning class visits should be clarified. Arrangements should be made for visitors to come and go from classrooms with as little interruption of class activities as possible. The head should be asked to inform faculty that these class visits are not to evaluate teachers. In setting the schedule, the chair should protect the committee's working time and keep social events to a minimum, usually confined to a reception or dinner on Sunday evening. A suggested schedule is included in the Appendix H.

**B. During the Visit.** The chair should be prepared to make introductions and say a few words to set the tone for the visit at the opening reception and at any school assembly. During the visit the chair should monitor reactions to the committee, being alert to misunderstandings and asking for feedback as to whether people in the school feel listened to by the committee. A list of school personnel should be posted in the committee's work room and checked frequently to be sure that everyone is contacted personally before the committee departs. Similarly, the chair should be sure that enough classes are visited to be representative and that all constituencies have been interviewed.

The school is hosting the team at the end of an arduous process of self-study. The chair must be sensitive to the school and project a high degree of professionalism during the visit. The school is hosting evaluators – almost always a cause for some anxiety and possible defensiveness. The school has invested great effort in the self-study. It has tried to communicate about itself and wants to be heard.

Keep reminding the team to be sensitive to the feelings of the school. Invite them to try to imagine themselves in the others' shoes. Stress to the team how important it is at the end of the visit for the school to feel that the team has listened and has understood. Also, be sure in so far as possible that everyone at the school has at least had an opportunity to talk with a member of the team. The way the team comports itself will determine much of the eventual response of the school to the team's recommendations. Be alert to any discomfort team members may be generating at the school and intervene if necessary. The sections of the draft report should be reviewed and edited with an ear to how they might sound to the school.

- C. Exit Interview.** No matter how prepared the school is, the visit causes a level of tension and resultant defensiveness. Wednesday afternoon is not the best time to communicate conclusions. The chair should ask the assistant chair or a member of the committee to join in an exit interview with the head of school and key people chosen by the head, not the entire faculty. This is a time for the chair to thank the school, to outline general areas of focus for the committee's report, and to bring closure. Chairs should not discuss specific recommendations, votes on Standards for Accreditation, or the recommendation to the Commission concerning accreditation status. This would be inappropriate since the report has not been finalized and the decision on accreditation status and the final major recommendations will be made by the Commission. Do stress that a draft report will be sent to the school quickly.
- D. After the Visit.** The chair should block out a day in his/her schedule immediately after the visit to compile and edit the report. All committee members must submit their sections of the report before leaving on Wednesday. The chair needs to complete the visiting committee report, mail it to the head of school for a check on factual accuracy and to the visiting committee members for comment within one week, edit the final report, and send it to the Commission. The Commission will send the final report and the vote on Standards to the school and invite comment prior to Commission action. The preferred timetable is to complete all of this within a month so that the school is in a position to begin its follow-up while the process is still fresh in everyone's mind. The mailing of the final report and accompanying documents to the Commission concludes the chair's responsibility to the school. (Appendices L, M, N, O, Q)

Responsibility to the Visiting Committee. The visiting committee is comprised of strangers who gather for four days of intensive work and then disperse. It is the chair's job to provide strong leadership to allow this group to work productively together and to learn from the experience. Throughout the visit, the chair should be vigilant in balancing intense work with time to relax (don't meet late into the night).

- A. Before the Visit.** The members of the committee are volunteers with varying amounts of experience with the accreditation process. The visit will proceed much more smoothly if the chair takes steps early to make committee members feel comfortable. A letter of introduction and welcome should be sent (by mail or email) once the membership of the committee is confirmed. This letter should outline the schedule for

the visit and solicit information to help the chair make assignments. It should stress that all members of the committee are generalists, although each will have specific responsibility for drafting one or more sections of the report. Committee members should read the entire self-study and make notes prior to the visit, as there will not be time once the committee arrives at the school. A sample letter is included (Appendix F). The chair may want to assign responsibility for writing about specific standards to all committee members to prepare preliminary drafts of parts of the report subject, of course, to revision based on observations during the visit.

**B. During the Visit.** The chair should arrive at the hotel early in order to be present to welcome committee members and make sure they find their accommodations in order. It is important at the initial meeting on Sunday afternoon to take time for introductions. The chair needs to orient the committee to the purpose of the visit, confirm assignments for writing sections of the report, and review the schedule.

Be directive in providing clear organization for the committee. The chair can do much to reassure team members that they are fitting into a well thought out plan and help them to focus their energies on observing and interacting with the school.

Orient the team to the task of accreditation. Even though most will have some background, it is wise to come to a common understanding. Stress:

- Everyone is first a generalist even though each has assignments to draft sections of the report.
- All members of the committee are responsible for the entire report and all commendations and recommendations.
- The focus of accreditation is on encouraging school improvement.
- The text for the visit is the school's self-study and it is important to understand the school on its own terms.
- Narrative sections of the self-study may be copied into the visiting committee report.
- The team should listen actively. Hear what the school says, don't try to advise/consult.
- Take time to gain an understanding of how the school functions before narrowing the focus to specific sections of the report.
- Talk to faculty, staff, students, parents, administrators, trustees, and other members of the school community as available.
- Talk to those who prepared sections of the self-study which you are reviewing.
- Class visits are important to give a flavor of the program, but avoid investing too much time in this activity.

- Students, especially in elementary schools, expect to see visitors in their classrooms and would be disappointed if this did not happen.
- Take notes, compile notes, begin writing early.
- Each section will be shared in draft form. Be prepared to offer observations on sections other than your own.
- The school has spent over a year preparing for the visit; be sensitive to their expectations.
- The committee needs to gain the school's confidence if it wants them to listen to its recommendations.
- Remind the committee that they are not there to suggest solutions to problems based on their own personal beliefs or experience.
- Remind the committee that recommendations come from three sources: Standards which are not met or which could be improved upon, inconsistencies between mission and practice, and endorsing recommendations the school has made for itself.
- Recommendations should define issues and may suggest directions in which the school may proceed, but they should not be prescriptive.
- Findings (observations) resulting in recommendations should be confirmed with evidence from more than one source.

It is important to take time at the first meeting to allow members to discuss impressions from the self-study and questions it has raised for them. Help the committee members plan what they will do first on Monday morning.

When making writing assignments everyone will usually be responsible for at least two standards, one of which may be a program standard. Everyone will be expected to contribute to the discussion of all sections, especially the three program standards (4-6) and Part II: Reflection, Recommendations, and Issues for Further Discussion, when drafts are presented to the committee. It is often helpful to pair members to draft two or more sections, perhaps putting together experienced and inexperienced evaluators. Usually the chair will write the introduction and mission sections of the visiting committee report, often preparing a draft for the Monday evening committee meeting to give an example to the members. The chair is also the only one to receive confidential financial information. The chair should delegate most other work in order to remain free to monitor the visit and pick up on issues which emerge unexpectedly.

The committee will feel most comfortable if the chair sets and keeps a clear schedule to accomplish all the work with time for the entire committee to hear all sections of the report and approve all recommendations. During the visit, let the committee explore, but keep everyone to the schedule, arrange for sharing of observations and be sure that the job is completed thoroughly. The chair must also be vigilant in maintaining the

appropriate tone. Keep the big picture in the foreground in committee discussions. Watch for swings to narrow or judgmental perspectives and refocus the team back to its larger purpose.

Check frequently on who remains to be visited; post a list of all school personnel and ask members to initial the list when they interview someone. Remind the committee that the final report is the work of the entire committee and that everyone should be comfortable with all the recommendations.

The visit might proceed as follows:

**Monday.** The committee should be encouraged to devote Monday morning to listening and observing in an open-ended fashion, seeking to gain an understanding of how the school operates and an appreciation of its distinctive culture. The committee should be pulled together at noon or in the early afternoon to share perceptions, identify issues, and test preliminary conclusions. The chair should encourage full participation in the discussion, stressing that the entire report must convey the conclusions of the entire committee. The committee should have free time between the close of school and dinner to organize their notes, make any edits to descriptive sections of the self-study they had copied into their reports, and begin drafting the rest of their report including commendations and recommendations. Keep the Standards in sight – conduct a straw vote Monday evening to identify where attention is needed; assign members to research Standards in question and to bring back proposed language for recommendations. It is not too early to begin hearing draft reports on each standard. The chair should reserve time for the committee as a whole to hear and discuss the draft reports on the program standards. See Appendix H.

**Tuesday.** The committee should begin Tuesday with a clear agenda of people to see and issues to research. The chair should check to make sure that a representative number of classes are visited. The committee should be pulled together at noon or early afternoon to share observations and have a preliminary discussion of the school's Part II: Reflection, Recommendations, and Issues for Further Discussion. The committee should have free time between the close of school and dinner to organize their notes and begin drafting their sections of the report. Members should be aware that the committee will share first drafts of all sections of the report no later than Tuesday evening, leaving time for final revisions overnight. The chair should reserve time for the committee as a whole to hear and discuss the draft report on Part II, to reflect on the most salient issues that have been identified, and to identify possible major commendations and recommendations.

**Wednesday.** Wednesday the committee will visit the school only to check on specific items which were missed. Otherwise, the morning is spent finalizing the sections of the report, including recommendations; voting on Standards; agreeing on major commendations and recommendations and determining the overall recommendation on accreditation status to be made to the Commission. Again, the committee must be reminded that:

- the report represents all of them.
- the committee should vote on the “spirit” of the standards and not fail a school on a narrow, technical interpretation.
- the test for passing a standard is: “The experience of the students is supported”; the test for failing a standard is: “The experience of the student is compromised”.
- a school cannot receive initial accreditation until it passes all standards with at least a “3”.
- no recommendation should be included that is not clearly documented in the narrative and without the concurrence of the full committee.
- the language and findings of the report should reflect the judgment of the full committee.

Once the chair has received drafts of all sections of the report, the committee may be excused with appreciation for their efforts and with a final reminder of the confidentiality of the work. The committee should be told that they will receive a draft for comment, but that the chair will exercise final editorial judgment.

- C. After the Visit.** The chair should mail a draft of the final report to the committee members and the head of school within one week, giving committee members one week to respond with proposed corrections or suggestions and the head of school one week to point out factual inaccuracies.

Responsibility to the Commission. The chair is the agent of the Commission, representing the New England Association of Schools and Colleges in the accreditation process.

- A.** The chair is responsible for preparing the visiting committee report and for communicating clearly a recommendation concerning accreditation status. Preparation of the report will be discussed below.
- B.** It is important that the chair complete the report and submit a final copy to the Commission within one month of the conclusion of the visit.
- C.** The chair has a responsibility to evaluate committee members (Appendix Q). The Commission relies upon the chair to assess the suitability of members to serve on future committees. Please complete forms (provided in the visiting committee chair packet) for every member, and send them with your final report.

### **The Visiting Committee Report**

The visiting committee report is written for two audiences: the school and the Commission. The form of the report follows the outline of the *Manual for School Evaluation* with a section of the report devoted to each standard and a final section on Part II: Reflection, Recommendations, and Issues for Further Discussion. Each section of the report should begin with an overview of the school’s assessment of its position with regard

to the standard (this may be copied verbatim, abridged, or adapted from the self-study). This is followed by comments on the accuracy and adequacy of the school's self-description. Any difference between the school's self-rating on the standard and the rating made by the visiting committee must be explained. If warranted, commendations and/or recommendations should follow. Finally, just as the school's Part II draws together the self-study, so does the visiting committee's assessment of Part II which, together with any related major commendations and recommendations, gives focus to the visiting committee report.

Responsibility to the School. It is important that the report be suitable for publication to the entire school community. It should convey understanding and appreciation of the distinctive mission and qualities of the school. It is an occasion to affirm the school for what it does well. It should contain clear and well-supported recommendations clearly explained in the narrative and drawn from one of three sources:

1. a Standard which is not met or which could be improved upon
2. an inconsistency between the school's mission, policies, and practices
3. a recommendation the school has made for itself

Avoid prescriptive recommendations. The committee may include suggestions in the narrative without requiring the school to respond, as they must to recommendations.

Major commendations and recommendations listed at the end of the report should be drawn from within the body of the report. Recommendations should address 4-6 issues of major importance and often may tie together several individual recommendations. If the self-study is done well, these issues will already have been drawn together by the school in its Part II. In this situation, the visiting committee will assess the priorities of Part II and whether they correspond to the issues facing the school. If so, the major recommendations of the visiting committee may well parallel or endorse the school's own recommendations in Part II.

All unmet Standards must be explained in the report and have a related recommendation which identifies the Standard by number.

Commendations should be included only to recognize something which is truly noteworthy. They are often a vehicle to convey an appreciation of the school's distinctive programs and qualities.

Commendations and recommendations should follow from and be supported by observations and perceptions/judgments which are based on evidence from more than one source.

Responsibility to the Commission. The report is the primary source of information the Commission relies upon when taking action. For this reason, the report should be free standing and include all information necessary for the Commission to make an informed decision. It should convey a "picture" of the school in the introduction and include the school data sheet that is attached to the self-study. It is essential that recommendations and

votes on Standards be clear and well supported by observations and perceptions/judgments in the body of the report.

The committee must formally rate the school on the 6-point scale on all Standards for Accreditation. Any unmet Standard (rating of 4, 5, or 6) must be explained in the report and a related recommendation must be included. Any difference between the school's self-rating and the committee's rating should also be explained. The committee should be instructed to vote on the "spirit" of the Standards and not fail a school on a narrow technical interpretation of a Standard if the purpose is being met.

The visiting committee also will vote on the accreditation status to be recommended to the Commission on Independent Schools. The following types of recommendations are possible for a school seeking initial accreditation:

- Accreditation (if all standards are met)
- Accreditation and some specific stipulation (if all standards are met)
- Tabling of action pending completion of a specific response from the school (action will be tabled if a school has a rating of 4, 5, or 6 on any standard)
- Denial of accreditation (This is an adverse recommendation and is subject to the appeal process of the Association.)

For a school seeking continued accreditation, recommend:

- Continued accreditation (if all standards are met)
- Continued accreditation and some specific stipulation (if all standards are met)
- Continued accreditation with failed standard(s) rating of 4, 5, or 6 (the school will have no more than one year to correct)
- Continued accreditation on Warning (This is a non-public action which entails a special report and focused visit.)
- Continued accreditation on Probation (This is a public action which is usually taken only after a period on Warning. This is an adverse recommendation and is subject to the appeal process of the Association.)

Continued accreditation with stipulations suggests to the Commission that some follow-up activity beyond the regular interim reports is warranted. Most frequently a stipulation is the strongest action recommended by a visiting committee. It gives the school an opportunity to address a deficiency. Warning status is used if a school does not respond adequately to requirements set by the Commission. It indicates that there are serious concerns and there is need for close monitoring by the Commission. This is a private matter between the Commission and the school. Probation status is more serious and it means that there will be a public announcement that the accreditation of the school is probationary. Normally, a school is not put on Probation unless it is already on Warning. In the case of Probation the school is also closely monitored. There is an appeals system

available to the school in the case of a recommendation for Probation. Note that the visiting committee recommends, but the Commission will make the final decision on accreditation status and follow-up requirements for the school.

### Writing the Report

The *Manual for School Evaluation* is intended to provide the structure for both the self-study and the visiting committee report. The report should begin with an introduction thanking the school for its hospitality and briefly describing the school as the committee experienced it. The school data sheet from the self-study should be attached at the front of the report. The report should then proceed in the order of the *Manual* with comments for each standard and Part II: Reflection, Recommendations, and Issues for Further Discussion. Each segment should begin by describing the school's position with regard to the standard. This may be taken verbatim from the self-study. Following the observations, there should be perceptions/judgments or conclusions which the committee wishes to convey, being especially careful to explain any standard that is failed and/or any difference in the rating of the standard. Suggestions may be included here. Finally, commendations and/or recommendations should be listed. All recommendations should have been presented to and agreed upon by the full committee. The chair should remind the committee that they will not evaluate individual faculty, staff, or administrators and will not comment on the performance of any individual or identify them by name in the visiting committee report.

- A. Assignments.** At the Sunday orientation meeting, if not before, the chair should assign a committee member to draft the sections for each standard and for Part II.
- B. Format.** Each section of the report should begin with observations and conclusions, followed if appropriate by commendations and/or recommendations. **Observations** describe the school's position with regard to the standard. This may be taken, in whole or in part, verbatim, abridged, or adapted from the school's self-study. **Perceptions/judgments** are the conclusions which the committee makes based upon the observations and provide relevant background for any commendations or recommendations. **Commendations** should refer to truly outstanding practices or aspects of the school. They are an excellent way to affirm the school and to demonstrate the committee's understanding and appreciation. **Recommendations** should come from one of three sources: (1) Standards which have not been met or which could be improved. All Standards which are not met must have a related recommendation (citing the standard by number) suggesting how the school might address the deficiency, (2) discrepancies between the school's mission, policies, and practice may warrant a recommendation, and (3) the committee may choose to endorse recommendations the school has made for itself in the self-study. The visiting committee report should conclude with a description of the school's Part II (which may be taken verbatim from the self-study), an assessment of how the priorities outlined correspond to the issues facing the school, and major commendations and recommendations.

**Major Commendations.** The committee should also identify up to a half-dozen major commendations to list at the end of the report. They should be drawn from the body of the report.

**Major Recommendations.** The committee should identify up to a half-dozen major recommendations for which they feel the school should be held accountable at the time of the Interim Evaluation Report. These major recommendations should be drawn from the body of the visiting committee report, either repeating recommendations already made or combining two or more specific recommendations into a more general one. Major recommendations are listed at the end of the report and should be integrated into comments on Part II.

The school will often highlight the major commendations and recommendations in public announcements concerning accreditation.

- C. Style.** The report should be concise and to the point. The most important stylistic consideration should be attention to the two primary audiences, the school and the Commission. In writing the report, the visiting committee should not hesitate to draw on the words of the self-study, reproducing sections verbatim, as appropriate. The report should be suitable for publication by the school to its constituency. Careful attention to appearance, grammar and spelling is called for in this regard. In the editing process, it is important to read the report from the perspective of the school and to be sensitive to the choice of words and the phrasing of recommendations. The purpose of the report is to encourage and support action by the school and, therefore, should be cast in a fashion which will facilitate acceptance by the school community. The second audience is the Commission. In this regard, clarity of description and full explanation of recommendations is the most important quality.

### **Indemnification and Appeals**

Members of visiting committees, in the performance of their duties with the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Inc., are indemnified to the extent legally permissible in the event of any action resulting from this work.

The New England Association of Schools and Colleges has a carefully designed "due process" procedure. "Adverse recommendations are defined as, and limited to, denial of candidacy for accreditation, termination of candidacy for accreditation, denial of accreditation, placement on probation, and termination of accreditation. The Board of Trustees shall appoint an Appeals Committee for each Commission whose function shall be to review an adverse recommendation which has been appealed, and make recommendations to the Board of Trustees regarding its disposition."

The best safeguards against such complications are reports that are meticulously accurate in all facts, well documented in support of recommendations and avoid all reference to personalities and comments about individuals. As has been stated previously, names of individuals should not appear in the report.

### Prior to the Visit

- Accept invitation to chair committee
- Register for Chairs' Workshop, unless recently attended
- Contact school to arrange for pre-evaluation visit
- Confirm arrangements with head and coordinator following the visit
- Receive final list of committee members
- Survey members regarding backgrounds, interests, and computer use
- Send schedule of visit and other advance information to committee members
- Make final check with school three weeks prior to visit
- Plan Sunday afternoon and evening meetings with visiting committee
- Plan comments for any Sunday reception and/or Monday assembly at the school
- Arrive early at hotel to greet members

### During the Visit

- Hold Sunday afternoon/evening introductory meetings; provide final assignments and schedule to visiting committee
- Orient committee to 2007 edition
- Manage visit, keeping in close touch with each visiting committee member and with the head of school**
- Set aside time for reflection/discussion on program standards and Part II
- Conduct final vote on standards
- Determine major commendations and recommendations
- Collect all final drafts before members leave on Wednesday
- Schedule and plan exit interview with head and one other member of the committee

### After the Visit

- Assemble final report within one week
- Send draft report to school for factual corrections
- Send draft report to committee for comments and corrections
- Final editing of report, based on input from members and school head
- Final mailing to the Commission office, including:
  - Final report (both written and electronic copy)
  - Letter specifying accreditation recommendation
  - Letter attesting to compliance with health and safety regulations
  - Report on the Standards for Accreditation
  - Chair's expense voucher
  - Committee member evaluation forms