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AN OUTLINE OF THE VISITING COMMITTEE'S ROLE

1. What is the purpose of and charge to the visiting committee?
 - Understand the school on its terms
 - Validate the self-study – Part I (The Standards), Part II (Reflections)
 - Assess and rate the school's compliance with the standards and make commendations and recommendations
 - Review Part II and its relation to the self-study
 - Assess the priorities identified in Part II and the adequacy of resources to accomplish them
 - Propose major recommendations to amend or be added to Part II
 - Propose major commendations
2. How should the visiting committee spend its time at the school?
 - Immerse itself in the life of the school with individual and group interviews, observation, and visits to classes and activities
 - Gauge the degree to which the mission guides decisions and defines school life
 - Interview everyone involved in drafting the responses to the standards
 - Review the Supplementary Materials Inventory
 - Reflect on the quality of the school's self-study
3. How might the visiting committee be organized?
 - Two or more people should be assigned to each standard, with one having primary responsibility for writing
 - Each visiting committee member should be assigned to at least one of the three program standards (4, 5, 6)
 - The chair or assistant chair (or another person assigned by the chair) should have responsibility for coordinating the preparation and writing of the report on the three program standards to assure that all faculty are interviewed and to avoid excessive duplication in the overall report
 - The full committee should meet, with all members contributing their observations, to reflect on the total program of the school
 - The committee should meet as a whole to review Part II and draft major commendations and recommendations
 - Members might be given assignments in advance so that they can pre-write descriptive sections of their report based on (and borrowing from) the self-study
4. What should the visiting committee report look like?
 - The report should be organized with a response to each standard and to Part II
 - The visiting committee should rate the school on each of the standards and discuss (justify) any discrepancy from the school's own rating of itself
 - The narrative overview of the school's position with relation to the standard may be taken directly from the self-study, if it is accurate
 - The report should comment on notable strengths and aspects warranting attention and make commendations and recommendations
 - At the end of the visiting committee report, Part II should be summarized along with a list of major recommendations and commendations from the visiting committee
5. What types of recommendations are appropriate?
 - Major recommendations should be formulated to relate to Part II and should be included as the final page of the visiting committee report
 - Major recommendations should serve to (1) strengthen the school with regard to a standard, (2) address a discrepancy between the school's mission or policy and practice, or (3) endorse a recommendation made by the school for itself
 - Major recommendations should reflect the judgment of the entire visiting committee
 - After each major recommendation there should be a page reference indicating where the issue is addressed in the body of the report

Introduction

The New England Association of Schools and Colleges is a voluntary peer accreditation association. It is one of five regional accrediting associations in the country and accredits institutions through six commissions representing various segments of the educational community. As a peer association, the accreditation process is only as strong as the peer participation. The work of a visiting committee is one part of the peer process; decision-making by the Commission on Independent Schools is another. The Commission on Independent Schools is appreciative of the voluntary participation of visiting committee members.

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

The Self-Study. Every ten years a school undertakes a comprehensive self-evaluation, following defined procedures, which is the foundation of the accreditation process and provides the focus for the subsequent visit. Part One of the self-study is designed to confirm that the Standards for Accreditation are met, and Part Two to reflect on what the school has found in its self-study and to generate steps leading to school improvement.

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. In a collegial rather than adversarial manner, a visiting committee is able to comment on a school's self-assessment, highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the school, and assist it in planning for improvement. The committee is also expected to make judgments about the school's compliance with the standards.

Follow-up. The school's process of follow-up, with the Commission's oversight (including two- and five-year interim reports), assures effective implementation of Part II, incorporating recommendations from the visiting committee and the Commission. While adherence to standards provides some measure of quality, the best long-term assurance of quality is the commitment to ongoing school improvement to which accreditation attests.

This Handbook has been prepared for use by members of visiting committees. It is hoped that this Handbook will assist in the work of the visiting committee and that it will lead to better coordination of the evaluation process and to greater consistency of performance from one visiting committee to another.

Staffing the Committee

Members of visiting committees are selected by the staff of the Commission on Independent Schools from a database of nominees submitted annually by heads of member schools. Typically, committees range in size from five to ten members depending on the size and complexity of the school to be visited. The committee is composed of faculty and administrators representing various academic areas and professional positions, with the majority of members from institutions which are similar to the school being visited. Ideally, committee members have attended a workshop for visiting committee members or have previously served on a committee. When this is not the case, it is the responsibility of the committee chair to provide orientation and guidance.

Before the Evaluation Visit

To assist in preparation for the visit, each member will receive a mailing from the office of the Commission, a mailing from the school to be visited, and another communication from the chair of the committee. The visiting committee report template is located on our website at http://cis.neasc.org/resources_for_evaluators/for_team_members/.

Commission Mailing. Several weeks before the visit, the office of the Commission on Independent Schools will mail a copy of the Handbook for Visiting Committee Members, a Self-Study Guide, an expense voucher, a list of the visiting committee members, and other miscellaneous information.

School Mailing. At least one month before the visit, the school will send the following: the self-study report (both in print and an electronic form); a copy of the school catalog or descriptive brochure of the school; a list of staff; a complete daily program schedule, including teacher assignments to facilitate classroom visits and interviews; a map of the campus and floor plans of the classroom, office, and residential buildings to facilitate visiting committee movement around the school; and directions to the school and hotel.

Communication from the Chair. The chair of the committee will correspond with each member of the committee to gain information that will help make the best use of the talents and experience of each member. Members should be prompt in responding to any requests.

Preparing for the Visit. There is not sufficient time to read the required materials during the actual visit to the school. Each committee member should be familiar with the Handbook for Visiting Committee Members and the Standards for Accreditation. When the self-study and other material arrives from the school, members should read it carefully, identify descriptive information that might be included in the visiting committee report, make notes about themes, potential commendations and recommendations, and compile an initial list of questions (including who might be asked). If the chair has assigned responsibility for writing about specific standards, committee members may wish to prepare preliminary drafts of parts of the report, drawing on the statements in the self-study (see template download information above). Such drafts would, of course, be subject to revision based on observations during the visit. It is important to keep an open mind before the visit, and it is equally important to be very familiar with the entire report written by the school. This self-study need not be returned to the school, so underlining or highlighting is encouraged.

Personal Planning. All visits begin on Sunday afternoon and end on Wednesday afternoon. It is essential that each committee member be present for the entire visit. The Commission requires that each committee member be provided with a private room and bath. All committee members are expected to stay at the designated hotel. The school is responsible for expenses for travel, lodging, and meals. Expense vouchers which are provided by the Commission must be approved by the Director of the Commission and then submitted to the school for payment. Expenses such as personal phone calls and entertainment should not be billed for reimbursement. Travel other than by personal car must be approved by the Director of the Commission in advance.

Although this is a wonderful professional experience for committee members, it does involve hard work and long hours. Committee members should be prepared to devote the entire stay to the work at hand. This is not a time to catch up with office work, test correction, or lesson planning.

The following page shows an example of the schedule for a typical visiting committee. The chair of the committee will set the schedule to best handle the work at the school, so this is only an example.

Tentative Schedule for Visiting Committee

Sunday		
3:00 -	4:00 p.m.	Committee members arrive at the hotel
	4:00 p.m.	Organizational meeting at the hotel. Please be prompt!
	5:00 p.m.	Campus Tour
	6:00 p.m.	Reception hosted by the school for the full committee and members of faculty, administrative team, trustees, and some parents followed by dinner for the full committee, members of the administration team, and trustees
	8:30 p.m.	Visiting Committee reconvenes at the hotel
Monday		
	7:00 a.m.	Breakfast
8:00 -	11:30 a.m.	Interviews with faculty, students, and service personnel. Details will be worked out at the organizational meeting. Classroom visits
11:30 -	12:15 p.m.	Luncheon in the school dining hall
1:00 -	5:00 p.m.	Continued interviews/meetings/classroom visits
	6:00 p.m.	Dinner
	7:30 p.m.	Visiting Committee reconvenes at the hotel. Brief reports on all standards and suggested ratings. Extended discussion of program standards (4-6).
Tuesday		
	7:00 a.m.	Breakfast
8:00 -	11:30 a.m.	Continued interviews/meetings/classroom visits
11:30 -	12:15 p.m.	Luncheon with representatives of parents and alumni/ae
1:00 -	4:00 p.m.	Continued interviews/meetings/classroom visits
4:00 -	5:30 p.m.	Visiting Committee reconvenes
5:30 -	6:30 p.m.	Dinner at the hotel
7:00 -		Visiting Committee reconvenes. Extended discussion of Part II and any recommendations for additions/revisions to it.
Wednesday		
	7:30 a.m.	Breakfast
	8:15 a.m.	Visiting Committee completes drafts of all sections of the report, identifies major commendations and recommendations, conducts final vote on standards, and discusses summary statement. Draft report is approved by the committee and submitted to the chair for final editing
	NOON	Committee departs
	1:00 p.m.	Exit interview by chair and assistant chair with head of school

The Role of the Visiting Committee

The visiting committee has six major responsibilities during the school visit. These are as follows:

1. To review and validate the self-study done by the school to determine that it is an accurate description of the school and its programs.
2. To measure the school against each of the published Standards for Accreditation, rate the school's compliance with each, and explain any differences from the school's rating of itself.
3. To assess the school's Part II (Reflection). Is it comprehensive? Does it match the priorities of the school? Does it promise school improvement? Does it respond to the ratings on the standards? Are the planned steps realistic? Are resources available or within reach? Are there other items the committee wishes to recommend for inclusion in Part II?
4. To write a report following the same sequence as the self-study in which the school is described and commendations and recommendations are made. Major recommendations, for adding items to Part II, are listed at the end of the report.
5. To draft a summary statement, including the major commendations and recommendations. The chair of the visiting committee will write this statement with suggestions from the visiting committee.
6. To make a recommendation to the Commission on Independent Schools regarding the accreditation status of the school.

The visiting committee is not a group of consultants sent to show a school how to do things. Regardless of the expertise of the group, this is not the purpose of the accreditation process. The committee measures the school against its mission statement and the Standards for Accreditation. It does not compare it to other schools or one's thoughts of the "ideal school". Members should avoid introducing their own biases or prejudices about how they feel schools should operate. Recommendations of the committee should not be prescriptive and, where appropriate, should endorse the school's recommendations for itself. Independent schools should be able to maintain their independence as long as they are institutions of quality and integrity and meet the Standards for Accreditation.

Committee members visit the school as peers and colleagues. Members are there to help the school improve for the benefit of the students. If the school has done its self-evaluation well, the committee will probably not provide it with much new information. The committee can, however, reinforce the critical analysis carried out by the school and encourage change and improvement. It is important to remember the two purposes of accreditation — school improvement and quality assurance.

Beginning the Visit. The first task of the visiting committee in validating the school's self-study report is to gather data, always with an eye to writing the visiting committee report. Data is gathered from reading the self-study report, from conversations and discussions with members of the school community, from observing the school in operation, and from reviewing the supplementary material inventory and other records at the school. Meetings will be with individuals and also with groups. The committee should visit a sample of classes in all areas, since this is an excellent way to see how teachers and students interact and carry out the mission of the school; however, caution should be taken that class visitations do not

consume too much time. It is probably least disruptive to arrive at the beginning of class and remain at least 15 minutes. It is important that all faculty members have an opportunity to communicate with the visiting committee in some way. Many committee chairs post a checklist of faculty members to assure that this happens and schedule open meeting times for staff who have not been interviewed individually.

Although each committee member has primary responsibility for drafting specific sections, it is expected that the drafts of the various sections will be shared and discussed with the entire committee before they are finalized. All commendations and recommendations should be approved by the entire committee.

The committee is there to gather information that will be incorporated into a report. Conversations should be designed to reach that goal, which means that questions should be open and enabling. Committee members should avoid being drawn into giving advice to the school. Although members will have specific assignments for writing, notes should be made concerning other issues as well to pass along to other members of the committee.

Gathering Data for the Sections of the Evaluation. In its self-study, the school has prepared a report that documents how it meets each standard and what recommendations for improvement it makes for itself. The school also rates itself on a six point scale as to the degree of compliance with each standard. The visiting committee member responsible for drafting the report on a specific standard should plan to interview members of that self-study committee, as well as others who might offer insight into the area. The school's discussion of the indicators may help suggest directions for inquiry. There may be documents in the Supplementary Materials Inventory that will add perspective.

When drafting the report, the visiting committee member may take the school's summary statement as an introduction and then add comments based on observations at the school. Are there qualifications or additions to make to their statement? Are there comments on the thoroughness of the self-study process. What is the school's rating of itself on the standard? Does it differ from the visiting committee's rating and, if so, why?

The visiting committee report should include commendations of the school for exemplary practices or achievements. Finally, list the recommendations the school has made for itself and comment on them. Do they address any deficiency in the standard (a rating of less than "2")? Do they address overall priorities of the school? Will they further school improvement? Endorse the school's recommendations, if appropriate. Make additional recommendations only if needed.

Members should aim at completing initial research on the standards on Monday. Monday evening the committee should hear brief reports on each standard. Those initial reports should suggest a rating; explain any difference from the school's self-rating; note if the self-study summary can be carried over into the report and what points, if any, need to be added; list the school's recommendations for itself and comment on their adequacy; suggest any additional recommendations that are indicated; and identify any further inquiry that is necessary for Tuesday. Extended time on Monday evening should be reserved to discuss and reflect upon program (standards 4-6) and any other standard(s) identified by the chair. All members of the committee should be prepared to contribute to this discussion.

Tuesday morning is to be devoted to talking with any faculty or staff who were missed on Monday, investigating any issues identified Monday evening, and exploring the recommendations offered by the school for inclusion in Part II. Tuesday evening should be devoted to discussion by the entire committee on Part II. Is it comprehensive? Does it match the priorities of the school? Does it promise school improvement? Are the planned steps realistic? Are resources available or within reach? Are there other items the committee wishes to recommend for inclusion in Part II?

Wednesday morning the full committee should finalize its report. The chair should set aside time for the committee to discuss possible major commendations and recommendations and what to include in a summary statement.

Self-Study Part I: Reviewing the Standards

Standard 1 (Mission): There is congruence between the school's stated mission and core values and its actual program, policies, planning, and decision-making at both the operational and governance levels.

The school is asked to provide a brief history of the school and its statement of mission. The committee should inquire into the procedure by which the statement of mission was developed, the procedures for systematic review, and the understanding of and agreement with the statement among the various constituencies of the school.

It is not unusual for this section to be discussed by the committee on Sunday evening, prior to actually seeing the school in operation. This is possible if the committee has met with faculty and other members of the school community at a reception and there has been an opportunity to ask questions about the section. Questions such as the following might be appropriate:

- Does the statement accurately describe the unique mission of the school?
- How well do parents and students understand the statement?
- Does the statement serve as the basis for the school's programs?
- Does the statement guide the school in decision-making in all areas of the school?

Remember that a school is measured against its statement of mission during the accreditation process. It is not compared with other institutions. The statement, therefore, is a very important part of the self-evaluation document and should be clear to all constituencies and unique to the school.

This section also provides the visiting committee an opportunity to sum up its observations of the school in operation and of its distinctive character. The entire visiting committee might wish to discuss this section and contribute perspectives before the report is drafted.

Standard 2 (Governance): The school has an appropriate system of governance that assures that the school remains true to its mission and that it has the necessary resources to support its present and prospective operations.

The health of a school depends upon having a responsible and effective system of governance that assures that the school remains true to its mission and that it has the necessary resources to support its operations. There is no one governance structure common to all independent schools; therefore, this section of the self-study asks the school to describe how the functions of governance are accomplished and to assess the effectiveness of the system for the school.

The visiting committee should plan to meet with a representative group of those responsible for governance. Topics of discussion at that meeting might follow closely the indicators for the governance standard, being sure that all functions of governance receive adequate attention. A written long-range planning document should be available in the Supplementary Material Inventory.

Standard 3 (Enrollment): The admissions process assures that those students who enroll are appropriate, given the school's mission, and are likely to benefit from their experience at the school.

The school will provide information about the composition of the student body, admissions, graduates, and student families. The visiting committee should explore the material provided to determine the degree to which there is congruence between the mission and the composition and aspirations of the school community. There is the expectation that the programs of the school fit the needs and abilities of the students.

Committee members assigned to this section will spend time reviewing procedures, files, and policies. Admissions officers, deans, the registrar, and alumni/ae officials should be interviewed, as well as faculty, students, and parents. This is primarily a data gathering section and so it will be well to review with the responsible persons the information provided in the self-study.

Standard 4 (Program): The school provides a comprehensive program of intellectual, aesthetic, and physical activities that stems from the school's beliefs about teaching and learning, is appropriate to support its mission and core values, and is consistent with the needs of the range of students admitted.

Standard 5 (Experience of the Students): The school actively considers individual students and has developed plans, policies, programs, and pedagogy to nurture, support, and encourage all students to reach their potential and to participate in the life of the school.

Standard 6 (Resources to Support the Program): Given the school’s mission, there are adequate resources (space, equipment, technology, materials, and community) to support the school’s program.

There are three program standards. The program section is usually the longest and most significant part of the self-study report prepared by the school. Program, after all, is the heart of the school and faculties are encouraged to spend the greatest amount of time on this section. As a result, most committee chairs assign all members of the committee to contribute to discussion of these standards.

The school is asked to scrutinize its program and assure that it reflects the school’s pedagogical beliefs and that these beliefs are subject to continuing faculty discussion and review. The self-study and visiting committee report focus on the overall program of the school, not on individual departments or programs. The school has examined the component pieces of the program in its preliminary study and this information should be available in the Supplementary Materials Inventory.

Questions to be asked on this section will vary depending on the type of school and level of education. They might include, but should not be limited to, such questions as:

- To what extent does the curriculum meet the full range of student needs and abilities?
- To what extent are instructional techniques varied and appropriate?
- How effectively is assessment data gathered and used to improve the curriculum in a particular area?
- Is the level of financial support adequate to provide sufficient textbooks and other instructional materials?
- What impact has technology had in classroom instruction?
- What is a faculty member’s input into curriculum revision?
- Do teachers talk about assumptions and beliefs regarding teaching and learning which are consistent with the mission of the school?

It would be well to frame additional questions that relate to each of the three standards. The school’s response to the indicators may suggest areas for inquiry. The members of the visiting committee should have the opportunity to review the student activities program including organizations, clubs, and sports activities. Counseling is a part of the program section. Library and Technology are areas of rapid change in many schools.

The persons who prepared the sections of the self-study should be interviewed. In addition, both students and faculty should be interviewed about their experience with and perception of all aspects of the program.

Standard 7 (Early Childhood Programs): The early childhood program meets the social, intellectual, and developmental needs of its students by providing appropriate programs, adequate staffing, and sufficient resources and facilities.

The early childhood program, a program for children younger than kindergarten (3 and 4 year olds), is often underrepresented in the self-study process. Its location may be separate from the rest of the school, its hours may be longer, and its faculty may be less accessible. This standard is intended to assure that full attention is given to examining the early childhood program.

Standard 8 (Residential Program): The residential program provides for an intentional curriculum, appropriate facilities, engaging activities, and adequate supervision to meet the needs of each student.

Schools that have residential students are expected to provide safe and positive experiences for these students. The residential curriculum should be intentional and should serve the mission of the school.

The visiting committee should take time to visit dormitories when students are present and they should have an opportunity to see the residential program in operation. They should also interview the residential staff and residential students to determine if the program functions well, meets the needs of students, and is appropriate for the mission of the school.

Standard 9 (Faculty): There is a sufficient number of appropriately qualified faculty to carry out the mission of the school.

A school worthy of accreditation is concerned about the quality of teaching and assures that the number of qualified faculty is sufficient to carry out the mission of the school. It is also important that the school treat faculty members with respect and actively promote their professional growth.

It is typical for visiting committee members to visit classes and meet with teachers. This is not to assess individual professional performance, but rather to evaluate the policies followed and the procedures used to assure quality teaching. The committee will observe the professional staff as a total entity and will evaluate its suitability to carry out the school's program. The committee will seek to determine if the professional staff is appropriate for the mission of the school.

Committee members assigned to this section should meet with those persons at the school who were responsible for preparing this section of the self-study, as well as other staff. Sample questions might include, but should not be limited to, some of the following:

- Are the professional and support staffs adequate in number to support the programs of the school?
- How effective is the program for orienting new teachers and staff?
- Are in-service programs appropriate and helpful?
- Is the professional development budget adequate?

During the visit it is certainly appropriate for all committee members to ask similar questions of individual teachers during interviews and conversations.

Standard 10 (Administration): The administration provides leadership and maintains a structure to facilitate the effective functioning of the school, including the participation of faculty in decision-making.

Both administrators and faculty carry out decision-making functions. The committee should meet with those who prepared this section of the self-study report and also speak to other individuals to assure that there are a variety of people appropriately involved in the decision-making process. It is well to remember that there is no correct way to make decisions at a school. Certainly a Quaker school will have a very different decision-making system than a military school. However, it is expected that there are channels for faculty participation in program planning and review.

Standard 11 (Evaluation and Assessment): The school engages in forms of programmatic assessment consistent with fulfilling its mission and core values. This data is used to inform decision-making and planning.

This standard refers to a school-wide culture of evaluation and assessment. The indicators suggest the broad range of areas warranting inquiry, such as:

- Does the Board engage in self-evaluation?
- Does the school gather and use data on the performance of graduates?
- Are procedures used for the evaluation of staff helpful, effective, and ethical?
- Are policies and practices evaluated in terms of their success in meeting goals?

In interviewing members of the school community, the visiting committee should look for a commitment to using evaluation and assessment in guiding school policy and practice.

Standard 12 (Health and Safety): The school is a safe and healthy place for students and faculty.

Assessing the safety of the school requires the committee to make judgments. The indicators will help identify areas for inquiry, such as supervision policies, arrival and dismissal procedures, emergency response plans, etc.. The committee should reach consensus in rating the school on this standard.

Every school has responsibilities to provide health services for its student body. This differs greatly between residential and day schools. Health services appropriate to meet the emotional and physical needs of the students, should be appropriately staffed, and adequately housed.

Standard 13 (Communication): The school maintains effective systems of external and internal communication and record keeping that inform all constituents and facilitate participation where appropriate.

This standard refers to the entire network of communication among members of the school community. The committee should talk with administrators, faculty, parents, support staff, students, board members, and alumni.

- What forms of communication are used?
- How effective is formal communication throughout the school?
- Are written records complete and are they kept secure?

Schools will typically arrange for members of the committee to meet with a group of parents, often those responsible for the parent survey. It might also be wise to speak with other parents and that may be possible with a bit of imagination. This may take place after school in the parking lot, etc. It is important to determine if parents are appropriately engaged in their children's education and that communication with the school is satisfactory.

In some cases the relationship of the school to its geographical community is extremely important and in other cases it is less so. The committee members involved in this section should use their judgment about that importance and make appropriate inquiries both within the school and the local community.

Standard 14 (Infrastructure): There are adequate resources (personnel, finances, facilities, equipment, and materials) to provide for the overall institutional needs of the school.

This section covers a wide range of administrative and service functions. The visiting committee should meet with those responsible for each of these areas. There is the expectation that administrative staff is sufficient in number and have appropriate training and experience to be effective in their roles. It is also expected that administrative activities are appropriate for the mission of the school.

An assessment of the financial management is extremely important in the accreditation process since effective resource management is necessary to sustain the mission of a school. Some visiting committees include business managers or others with financial backgrounds, but often the chair and assistant chair must draw on their own experience to review this section. The committee chair will receive confidential financial information that is not available to the rest of the committee. This includes an audit conducted by an independent certified public accountant (or an approved alternative), budgets, salary and benefit information, and operating statements. Because of the confidentiality of much of this information, it is usually not shared with the entire committee unless there are issues of concern.

It is expected that there is effective financial management, and it is further expected that there is thoughtful financial planning to assure the future of the institution. Those committee members involved in this area should ask to see financial plans, and be assured

that the financial future of the school is secure. The committee might wish to consider financial management, long-range planning, and development together.

The school's facilities must be effective in housing and supporting the school's program. Conversations may be conducted with the committee that prepared the section, administrators, teachers, board members, or students. Questions might include some of the following:

- Are the facilities and equipment adequate for your programs? If not, what is the problem?
- Is there long-range planning to address current and future facility needs?
- Is there adequate staffing to maintain an appropriate level of cleanliness?
- If something is broken, how long does it take to get repaired?
- Is the facilities budget adequate?
- Is there deferred maintenance? Is there a plan to resolve this?
- Are there programs that should be offered but are not because of facility limitations?

Committees should avoid recommending overly prescriptive solutions to facility shortcomings. On the other hand, facility problems should be clearly identified.

A visiting committee may be at a school that provides three meals a day, seven days a week or it may be at a school where all students carry their lunches and the school simply provides space for students to eat. In either case the committee should note the appropriateness of the arrangements. In some situations it will be necessary to check for health inspections and in other cases the committee should just assure itself that there is cleanliness.

The committee should satisfy itself that service and office personnel are sufficient in number and appropriately skilled to assist in carrying out the mission of the school.

Standard 15 (The Accreditation Process): The school is fully committed to institutional improvement and to the process of accreditation. The school completed an inclusive self-study, conducted in a spirit of full disclosure and following Association guidelines; responds to Commission recommendations and the requirement to meet all Standards; and participates fully in the peer review process, hosting a visiting committee and sending personnel to serve on visiting committees to other institutions.

The quality of the self-study, the inclusiveness of its preparation, and the plans in place for follow-up are important factors in assessing compliance with this standard. The committee should also ask which members of the staff have served on visiting committees to other schools and what plans are in place to encourage this activity in the future.

Writing the Report

Introduction. Visiting committee members must remind themselves that data gathering has the single purpose of providing information to write a report. The greatest challenge to the committee is the clock. The draft of the visiting committee report must be written by the end of the visit on Wednesday. Every chair tries to have committee members begin writing on Monday. For many, the hardest part of the visit is the actual writing and the easiest part is meeting with people and gathering data. Visiting Committee Report template located at http://cis.neasc.org/resources_for_evaluators/for_team_members/.

Each committee member is responsible for writing one or more sections of the report. The chair of the committee is responsible for combining the drafts from all the members of the committee into one document that speaks with one voice. The chair will do this after the committee leaves the school.

Remember that there are two primary audiences for the visiting committee report. The most important audience is the school community for whom the report is a validation of months of self-study. Also, the committee represents the Commission on Independent Schools and is writing the report to assist the Commission in making decisions regarding the accreditation of the institution. It is important to be aware of these audiences since it will affect the style of writing. For the Commission, the report must be comprehensive and self-contained since it is almost the only source of information available to the members. For the school, the report provides support and assistance to their efforts at improvement. To be effective in this latter function, the report must communicate clear understanding and appreciation of the school, sensitivity to issues the school is grappling with, and must offer recommendations designed to help guide the school in the years ahead. The report should be written in a fashion which recognizes that it will receive wide distribution within the school community and may even come into the possession of the press.

Visiting Committee Report Format. Every report has the same format. There is a data sheet, a table of contents, an introduction, a chapter for each standard, a section on Part II, and a summary statement that includes the major commendations and recommendations. Each section of the report has observations, perceptions/judgments, commendations, and recommendations. At the end of the report, the visiting committee lists up to six major commendations and recommendations.

Observations. This part of the report introduces each section, provides factual information, and describes what has been seen. The self-study includes a description of the school's position with regard to each standard. The visiting committee should not hesitate to incorporate the text of the self-study in whole or in part.

Perceptions/Judgments. Comments on the school's self-description and/or assessment of particular shortcomings or strengths should follow the observations. The report should be clear in stating these conclusions of the committee as background for commendations and recommendations which follow.

Commendations. This is an opportunity to commend the school for exemplary activities or accomplishments. This is a place for the committee to demonstrate that it has observed and appreciated distinctive strengths. Commendations are typically numbered and listed. There need not be a priority listing, but care should be taken to assure that commendations are significant. Insignificant or frivolous commendations reduce the credibility of the visiting committee report.

Recommendations. The school has included recommendations for itself in each section of the self-study. The visiting committee may endorse the school's recommendations and/or make additional recommendations in areas where the visiting committee feels that change or improvement is needed. All recommendations must flow from the narrative and should refer to carrying out the school's mission or fully meeting the Standards for Accreditation. At times members of a committee might wish to make a recommendation that refers to a commonly accepted educational practice, but care must be taken not impose any specific framework or educational philosophy on the school. Recommendations are listed and numbered and come from three sources:

1. A standard which is not fully met.
2. A discrepancy between the school's mission and/or stated policy and its practice.
3. A recommendations which the school has made for itself in its self-study.

Recommendations should identify issues that warrant attention but should not be prescriptive. The major recommendations will be selected from the recommendations in the body of the report and should support the school's own plans for improvement.

Style of the Report. It is appropriate to organize the visiting committee report in the same fashion as the school's self-study report with sections on each standard and Part II. It is well to keep in mind that the report must be an independent, freestanding document and a reader should not have to refer to other documents to understand it.

All recommendations must be clearly explained in the narrative since the school will be expected to respond to each of them. It is very frustrating to receive a phone call from the school, after the visit, in which the school does not understand a recommendation or why the recommendation has been made. The Commission on Independent Schools cannot interpret a recommendation made by a visiting committee that has not been explained in the narrative. Remember that judgments/perceptions flow from observations and recommendations flow from the judgments/perceptions.

The school must address each standard rated 3 or failed (4-6). The action necessary to bring the school into full compliance with the standard should be clearly spelled out in a recommendation and the school should have no difficulty understanding the reason for the decision of the committee. The body of the visiting committee report should support the votes on standards, particularly giving the reasons for any difference between the school's and the visiting committee's rating. The Commission has been hard-pressed on occasion to support a visiting committee recommendation or a vote on the standards because documentation was missing in the written report. A school is mystified by a visiting committee report that glosses over or does not explain a negative vote on a standard.

Typically, a visiting committee report becomes a permanent document available to a large number of people. This means that it should be clear, grammatically correct, and accurate.

Completing the Job. The completed draft of all sections of the report must be given to the chair of the visiting committee on Wednesday of the visit. The chair of the committee should not allow committee members to depart with a promise to complete their sections at home. This is an unacceptable practice since members of the committee must have the opportunity to discuss and agree on the report; and also, there is a risk that a committee member may become too busy to complete the work in a timely fashion once he or she has returned home.

After receiving drafts of all the sections of the report from committee members on Wednesday, the chair must then compile and edit them to speak with one voice and to remove overly prescriptive comments and recommendations or inappropriate language. Once the report is in complete draft form, it is sent to each committee member for review. The chair will request that committee members return their corrections or suggestions in a timely fashion. It is suggested that very strict deadlines be set. Note that the finished product should be sent to the Commission on Independent Schools within four weeks after the visit.

Confidentiality. The visiting committee report will become the property of the school. Committee members will not receive a copy of the completed report from the Commission or the chair. If a member wishes to receive a copy of the report, he or she should request it from the school. Remember that accreditation work is confidential. Notes and draft copies of the report should be destroyed and committee members should not discuss the committee findings or information about the school with others.

Voting on Standards & Accreditation Status

One purpose of the visiting committee is to assure that the school meets the Standards for Accreditation. The committee often conducts straw votes on standards as early as Monday evening to identify areas requiring focus; however, the formal vote on standards usually does not take place until after the report is substantially complete and sections have been turned in to the chair. A form for rating the school's compliance with the standards is provided to each member of the committee. The chair will record the committee's decisions on the rating for each standard. Ratings of all standards should be noted and explained on the Report on Standards for Accreditation.

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 with a standard Two-Year Interim Report (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 with a standard Two-Year Interim Report (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.

After the Committee Departs

After the chair has dismissed members of the committee, he or she conducts an exit interview with the head of the school. Often the assistant chair or another member of the committee will accompany the chair to the exit interview. This is usually a courtesy visit to thank the head for the school's hospitality and to review major areas of focus in the visiting committee report. It is not a time for a detailed report of the work of the visiting committee, since the report has not been completed. Also, it is not a time to address the entire faculty since the report has not been completed and misunderstandings might occur.

Each member will have been sent, with the packet of material, an NEASC expense voucher and postage-paid return envelope. These forms, even if no reimbursement is to be requested, should be signed and returned to the NEASC office within 14 days of the completion of the evaluation visit or they may not be honored for payment. If there are questions about these vouchers, please contact the Director of the Commission.

The Commission – Following the Visit

The work of the visiting committee, including the visiting committee report, supporting documents and recommendations, as well as the school's self-study and supporting documents, and the school's response to the visiting committee report are presented to the Commission by a member of the Commission who has become familiar with the school and its evaluation. The presenter makes a recommendation for accreditation status and the Commission votes on that recommendation.

The school, when it is informed of the decision of the Commission, is also informed that it must make an interim report, usually in two years. In some cases, special action such as a special progress report or a focused visit may be specified. Members of the visiting committee will receive a copy of the notification letter. The interim report filed by a school after an evaluation will require the school to report on the status of Part II and respond to the major recommendations of the visiting committee.