



## Ensuring A Positive School Culture and Climate Conducive to Learning

### *School Visit Protocol Supporting Standard II*

School visits are to principal evaluation what classroom visits are to teacher evaluation: the foundation for fair and comprehensive supervision and evaluation. They are also a critical way for superintendents to see firsthand how district and school improvement efforts are playing out in schools and classrooms.

This is a school visit protocol that a superintendent can use to:

- ✓ **Gather evidence of the principal's work** ensuring a positive school culture and climate conducive to learning;
- ✓ **Guide and support the principal's development** as they explore a range of issues related to school culture, safety and operations; and
- ✓ **Monitor implementation of district and school priorities** for school culture and climate.

During this visit, the superintendent and principal conduct observations in primarily non-classroom settings, review artifacts, collect feedback from staff and students, and discuss implementation of systems supporting a positive and safe school culture.

As with principals and classroom visits, what superintendents do before, during and after a school visit needs to be deliberate and intentional. This protocol describes the preparation, visit activities, and follow-up that promote a meaningful and effective school visit focused on school culture and climate.

The focus of this school visit is on the following elements from Indicator II-A: Environment the [Model Principal Rubric](#):

- **II-A-1: Operational Systems and Routines**
- **II-A-2: Social Emotional Well-Being**
- **II-A-3: Student Health and Safety**

### Ten Steps for an Effective School Visit

#### Before the Visit

1. Establish expectations.
2. Review artifacts and develop visit focus.
3. Establish time, agenda, and preparation required.

#### During the Visit

4. Observe with a specific focus.
5. Debrief what you observed and read
6. Share feedback.
7. Agree on next steps and plan for accountability.

#### After the Visit

8. Hold each other accountable for next steps.
9. Review artifacts.
10. Reflect, prepare feedback, and address implications.



## Before the Visit

### 1. Establish Expectations

- Make sure the principal:
  - Understands that the focus of this visit is on the progress they are making in establishing a positive school culture and climate for students, and that you will be spending a substantial part of your time together observing students in a range of settings outside the classroom.
  - Has communicated to staff that the superintendent and principal will be observing students and staff-student interactions in a variety of settings around the building and will likely be interacting with students, and that the superintendent is not evaluating any individual teacher's practice, but rather the principal's leadership in fostering a positive school culture and climate.
  - Knows that you are interested in observing both those aspects of the school's culture and climate that the principal is especially proud of, as well as those for which they would appreciate additional focus and constructive feedback.

### 2. Review Artifacts and Develop the Focus for this Visit

- Review notes and next steps agreed upon at the last one-to-one conference with the principal, leadership team meeting, and/or school visit related to school culture and climate. What questions do they raise that could inform the focus of this visit, for example:
  - *Is there a school-wide commitment to developing students' social-emotional competencies in support of their academic growth, and how is the principal sustaining this commitment?*
  - *What systems or practices are in place to ensure that all students feel safe and supported? Are there clear and appropriate mechanisms to address bullying and other unsafe behaviors?*
- Review the principal's goals. Does one of them focus on school culture and climate? If so, include time in the visit to assess progress, identify obstacles, and discuss ways to overcome them.

### 3. Establish Time, Preparation Required, and Agenda

- Schedule the visit in advance so that the principal can know what transitions and common spaces can be observed and what students can be available for a student focus group, if that is to be a part of this visit.
- Make an agenda for the visit, allowing a balance of time spent analyzing artifacts, observing and interacting with students, debriefing and planning next steps. Consider using a [School Visit Template](#) to capture plans and keep you both focused.
- Be clear about what artifacts you want to review in advance and what you want the principal to have examined and/or have accessible.

## Deep Dive: Planning a School Visit on Climate and Culture

Intentionally planning a school visit around a focus area related to a principal's goals or priorities for the school will help ensure that time allocated for the visit is used to effectively gather evidence and provide meaningful feedback.

- **Identify artifacts.** Reviewing artifacts on your own or with the principal in advance can make for rich conversation during the visit. Artifacts related to school culture and climate include:
  - Analysis of disaggregated student climate survey data from sources such as VOCAL, DESE's statewide survey of 5th, 8th and 10th grade students, and/or school-specific student feedback surveys on perceptions of school climate and culture.
  - A representative set of student schedules– to identify any patterns that might be contributing to opportunity, access or outcome gaps.
  - Data disaggregated by subgroup and grade related to attendance, tardiness, office discipline referrals, detention, in-school and out-of-school suspensions – to identify any patterns that may reveal access, opportunity or outcome gaps or disproportionality.
  - An analysis of partnerships with outside agencies and organizations – to identify those partnerships which merit sustained or increased support because of their positive impact and those that may merit discontinuation because they don't have strong positive impact but require a great deal of time, effort and/or money to maintain.

- **Develop an agenda.** Sample agenda for a two-hour visit:

Review pressing concerns, review and adjust agenda.	15 min.
Review insights and raise questions based on artifacts.	15 min.
Observe together and interact with staff/students.	40 min.
Debrief together.	30 min.
Debrief related topics and issues	10 min.
Share feedback and next steps	10 min.

**Note:** The primary focus of this visit is on the collection of evidence outside of the classroom – such as observations of students and staff-student interactions during transitions and in non-classrooms settings. However, brief classroom visits may also be incorporated if they are specifically focused on indicators of effective classroom culture and learning environments.

- **Consider including other administrators.**

- You could ask the principal to invite other school administrators with responsibility over student discipline or school culture initiatives to observe the principal “in action” observing, debriefing, and discussing next steps with other members of their leadership team.
- Consider bringing the Student Services administrator to add expertise and insight.

## During the Visit

### 4. Observe and Review Artifacts with a Specific Focus

In collaboration with the principal, decide what transitions and common spaces you will observe and whether and how you will interact with students and/or staff.

### 5. Debrief What you Observed and Read

Generally, the debrief follows this line of inquiry:

- *How typical is what we saw?*
- *Did we both see (and hear) the same things?*
  - *What were teachers and staff doing to build positive relationships with students? Were there missed opportunities?*
  - *In what ways were strong school operational systems and routines evident? Not evident?*
  - *Are there particular places in the building and/or times of day that pose challenges?*
- *What pleased us? Why? What concerned us? Why?*
- *What evidence did we see of progress in the areas you've been working on?*
- *What does what we have learned today about student perceptions, behaviors and interactions, and staff-student interactions tell us about the state of the student culture and climate in this school?*
- *What next steps does the principal want to take? Why? Are there alternatives to consider?*
- *What supports are needed? Why?*
- *What are the implications of what was learned today, if any, beyond this context? This school?*

### 6. Share Feedback

- Share and discuss your respective assessments of the progress being made to build and sustain a strong school climate and culture, offering evidence and/or examples. Be explicit about whether the progress is sufficient in your judgment.
- Develop with the principal the specific action(s) they will take to continue the progress and the timetable for their completion. Troubleshoot strategies and tactics they can consider in order to be successful.

### 7. Agree on Next Steps and Plan for Accountability

Conclude with clarity about the specific next step(s) for both the principal and the superintendent. Be specific about the timeline. For example,

- Decide how and when the principal will communicate evidence of their progress in addressing culture and climate issues.
- Decide how and when the superintendent will provide promised support, if any.

## Deep Dive: Collecting Evidence about Climate and Culture

School visits offer a rich source of evidence about principal practice. Approaching visits with clarity and specificity about questions to ask, situations to observe and artifacts to examine will set the stage for deep, growth-enhancing conversations with principals about their practice.

### ➤ What to look for as you observe together:

During transitions between classes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive and respectful staff-student and student-student interactions and communication.</li> <li>• Routines and procedures that allow for smooth and safe physical movement of students and staff.</li> <li>• Teachers supporting students to enter class on time and ready to get to work, e.g. standing at their door greeting students, alerting students to a “Do Now” or similar start-of-class assignment.</li> <li>• Procedures for “stragglers” or tardy students.</li> </ul>
In hallways while classes are in session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Signs/posters/displays reflecting students’ languages, cultures, identities, and interests.</li> <li>• Few students in the hallways; those that are have a purpose.</li> <li>• Clean and orderly environment.</li> <li>• Presence of gender-neutral bathrooms.</li> </ul>
Beginning and/or end of the school day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welcoming and supportive main office.</li> <li>• Clear and enforced expectations, rules, and routines and evidence that students have internalized them.</li> <li>• Respectful and positive interactions between/among students, staff, and families.</li> </ul>
During lunch and/or recess	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive and respectful staff-student and student-student interactions and communication.</li> <li>• Students demonstrating inclusivity in conversations and activities.</li> <li>• Presence of “loners” and how staff and/or peers respond.</li> <li>• Clean and orderly environment.</li> </ul>
At assemblies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respectful and positive interactions between/among students, staff, and guests.</li> <li>• Preparedness and engagement of presenters.</li> <li>• Culturally responsive and engaging content.</li> </ul>
In classrooms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rigorous, engaging, and culturally responsive instruction.</li> <li>• Explicitly teaching and reinforcing students’ social-emotional competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making).</li> <li>• Physical layout supporting student collaboration.</li> </ul>

## Deep Dive: Staff and Student Feedback

Student and staff feedback is an important source of evidence collected during the 5-Step Evaluation Cycle. While student feedback is optional for principals, by including both student and staff feedback in evaluation, principals gain valuable information to improve their practice, and superintendents gain the ability to construct the most comprehensive, clear, and descriptive picture of a principal's effectiveness.

- **Conducting focus groups.** Incorporating staff and/or student focus groups into the school visit schedule is an effective way to learn more about school culture and climate. Sample questions include:

### For students:

[from DESE's VOCAL survey: access [here](#)]

- How consistent are staff when enforcing rules in school?
- How often do teachers give students a chance to explain their behavior when they do something wrong?
- How often will a student help other students if they are upset, even if they are not close friends?
- How interested are teachers and adults in students' well-being beyond just their classwork?
- Do teachers let students pick on other students in class or in the hallways?

### For staff:

[from DESE's Model Staff Survey: access [here](#)]

*Choices: Strongly Agree, Moderately Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Moderately Disagree, Strongly Disagree, Not Applicable*

- The principal/administrator seeks student and staff input on policy and procedures adopted in this school.
- The principal/administrator implements effective school-based programs that support students' social and emotional competencies.
- The principal/administrator ensures access to community resources (e.g., psychological services, youth organizations, hospitals) to support students' social and emotional well-being.
- The principal uses teacher and student feedback to assess students' social and emotional needs.
- The school has systems (e.g., entry and dismissal routines, meals, class, transitions) in place to ensure that the school runs in an orderly and efficient manner.
- The principal/administrator establishes a culture to prevent bullying and other unsafe behaviors in a developmentally appropriate way.
- When needed, the principal/administrator supports me in managing disruptive behavior in the classroom.

## After the Visit

### 8. Hold Each Other Accountable for Next Steps

- Make sure that you follow through on any support you committed to provide, e.g., examining a district policy related to tardiness at a Leadership Team meeting, arranging for a review of the bus schedule to address a chronically late bus, or asking the Director of Curriculum to poll principals and teacher leaders about pressing needs for follow up on district professional development on student self-regulation.
- Make sure you review the principal's report on progress and provide specific, actionable feedback.

**Tip:** Try using a shared "Google Doc" to keep track of next steps, share drafts of feedback, report on impacts, share relevant documents and reports and prepare for future school visits.

### 9. Review Artifacts

- The visit may prompt the need to review more data about student behavior, attendance and/or perceptions. Make time to review these before finalizing plans for your next one-to-one conference or visit.

### 10. Reflect, Prepare Feedback, and Address Implications

- Take time to reflect on the visit and make notes:
  - Are there patterns emerging about this principal's leadership related to school culture and climate?
  - What is an emerging C-E-I-J statement that captures an essential element of their performance? See [Claims-Evidence-Impact-Judgment Samples for Culture and Climate](#).
  - What supports might help them strengthen their work or focus their professional development plans with regards to II-A-1 **Operational Systems and Routines**, II-A-2 **Social Emotional Well-Being**, or II-A-3 **Student Health and Safety**?
  - Are there other principals who could benefit from those same supports? How might Leadership Team time be used to provide them?
- Draft written feedback for the principal that is specific and actionable, identifying both strengths to build on and ways to shore up less-than-proficient performance.

The **Model Principal Rubric** defines proficient practice in these focus elements as follows:

- **II-A-1: Operational Systems and Routines:** *Establishes operational systems, procedures, and routines that generally ensure orderly and efficient student entry, dismissal, meals, class transitions, assemblies, and recess. Coordinates and supports custodial/maintenance workers, transportation staff, clerical and administrative assistants, food service workers, and other staff effectively. Ensures the campus is clean, attractive, welcoming, and safe.*
- **II-A-2: Social Emotional Well-Being:** *Provides training and supports to assist staff in developing age-appropriate social emotional competencies in students as they progress academically (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making). Fosters and utilizes partnerships with outside agencies and organizations to address student needs in a proactive and systematic way.*
- **II-A-3: Student Health and Safety:** *Defines high expectations for student behavior and provides training for staff to uphold these expectations. Establishes school-wide routines, policies, and systems that (a) foster a safe and supportive school environment for all students, and (b) prevent and address bullying and other unsafe behaviors in a developmentally appropriate way that allows students to grow from these experiences. Checks for implicit and explicit bias in decision-making procedures.*

# Resources

School Visit Template

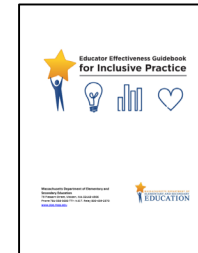
Deep Dive: Planning a School Visit on Culture & Climate

Deep Dive: Collecting Evidence about Culture & Climate

Deep Dive: Student & Staff Feedback

Sample C-E-I-J on Culture & Climate

VOCAL Student Climate Survey



Guidebook for Inclusive Practice

School Visit Framework

School Visit Protocol #1: Observations and Feedback

School Visit Protocol #3: Family Engagement

School Visit Protocol #4A: Professional Culture

School Visit Protocol #4B: Cultural Responsiveness

Coming soon!