



Ensuring A Healthy Professional Culture

School Visit Protocol Supporting Standard IV

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** in nurturing and sustaining a professional culture of reflective practice, high expectations, and continuous learning for staff;
- ✓ **Guide and support the principal's development;** and
- ✓ **Monitor implementation of district and school priorities.**

During the visit, the superintendent observes the principal "in action" leading a staff or leadership team meeting or observes a grade level or department meeting with the principal, and then debriefs.

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 professional culture.

The focus of this school visit is on the following elements from Standard IV of the [Model Principal Rubric](#):

- **IV-A-2: Mission and Core Values**
- **IV-A-3: Meetings**
- **IV-C-1: Communication Skills**
- **IV-D-1: Continuous Learning of Staff**
- **IV-F-1: Response to Disagreement and Conflict Resolution**

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 that the principal has communicated to staff that the superintendent will be observing one or more meetings - and that the superintendent is not evaluating their practice, but rather the principal's leadership and its impacts on the school's professional culture.

2. Review Artifacts and Develop the Focus for this Visit

- Develop a plan for reviewing the principal's analysis of feedback received from staff, a required part of principal evaluation. Administering DESE's [Model Staff Survey](#) in all the district's schools is a good starting point.
- If the principal has a goal related to professional culture or one that depends on a healthy professional culture for its achievement, this school visit is a good time to examine together progress being made, obstacles suspected of hindering progress, and steps taken or to be taken to overcome the obstacles.
- Review notes and next steps agreed upon at the last one-to-one conference, leadership team meeting, and/or school visit dealing with professional culture. What questions do they raise for you that you will want to raise with the principal?
- To help ensure that the school visit is relevant in the principal's eyes, invite the principal to identify what they would like the focus of your observation of the meeting to be.

3. Establish Time, Preparation Required, and Agenda

- Schedule the visit in advance with the principal to be sure to have opportunity to observe the most relevant meeting(s).
- Make an agenda for the visit, allowing for a balance of time spent analyzing artifacts, observing the principal "in action", debriefing, troubleshooting challenges, and planning next steps.
- Be clear about what artifacts you want to review in advance and what you want the principal to have accessible.
- Consider using a [School Visit template](#) to capture plans and keep you both focused.



Deep Dive: Planning a School Visit on Professional 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 some or all of these artifacts can make for rich conversation and learning about the principal's proficiency in nurturing shared vision and values, planning and leading meetings, communicating effectively, managing conflict, and establishing and sustaining high expectations for continuous learning for staff and teams:
 - Agendas for recent and upcoming faculty, leadership team, and/or department head meetings
 - Analysis of feedback sought more informally at the conclusion of recent meetings through "exit slips" or similar feedback devices
 - Agendas and/or notes from recent and upcoming grade level, common planning time and/or department
 - Sampling of recent communications with staff and administrators
 - Analysis of the results of staff survey questions related to professional culture from DESE's [Model Staff Feedback Survey](#).
 - A review of recent grievances filed by teachers' or administrators' unions
- **Develop an agenda.** Sample agenda for a two-hour visit focused on professional culture:

Review pressing concerns, review and adjust agenda.	10 min
Observations of the principal "in action."	45-75 min
Debrief together.	20-30 min
Debrief related topics and issues, time permitting	10 min
Share feedback and next steps	5 min

The agenda should reflect the objective for this visit with the core activity being observation of the principal "in action" establishing a professional culture.



During the Visit

4. Observe and Review Artifacts with a Specific Focus

In this protocol, there are two kinds of meetings to observe: meetings the principal is leading or meetings other school staff are leading.

1. Observe the principal leading a faculty meeting or meeting of their leadership team or department heads. Here, you would observe and offer feedback about the strengths and areas of growth for the principal related to leading meetings and communicating. You are also likely to see evidence related to mission and core values, supporting continuous learning and managing conflict; OR
2. Observe the principal's work indirectly by observing with the principal a department, grade level or common planning time meeting led by other school staff. Here, you would observe with the principal, debrief and discern together possible next steps for the principal related to building the capacity of staff to collaborate and reflect effectively.

5. Debrief What you Observed and Read

Find a private place for the debrief where you will neither be interrupted or overheard. Ask a sequence of clarifying and probing questions about what you observed that are designed to support the principal to be reflective and analytical, offering specific examples and evidence as needed to prompt and deepen reflection, e.g.,

- *How typical was the meeting you observed?*
- *How did the meeting reflect and reinforce core values?*
- *How did it contribute to building a culture of high trust?*
- *What could you have done differently to support a better outcome?*
- *What are the implications, if any, for your leadership beyond this specific context?*

6. Share Feedback

Share and discuss your respective assessments of the progress being made to build and sustain a positive professional culture, offering evidence and/or examples.

- Offer specific and actionable feedback that identifies for the principal both strengths to build on and ways to shore up performance related to leading meetings, communicating, managing conflict and/or staff commitment to collaboration and reflection focused on teaching practice and student learning.
- If warranted, offer precise praise for something you saw the principal say or do and share any concerns raised by what you saw and heard.
- Be explicit about whether the progress being made to date is sufficient in your judgment.

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.

- Decide how and when the principal will communicate evidence of their progress in strengthening the school's professional culture.
- Decide how and when you will provide promised support, if any is to be provided.

Deep Dive: Collecting Evidence about Professional 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.

➤ Questions to consider exploring on this visit:

Meetings led by the principal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In what ways were core values referenced and reinforced? • What did the principal say or do that might have contributed to or detracted from a culture of high trust? • In what ways was staff engagement both thoughtful and productive? • How clear was the purpose of each segment of the meeting? • Was the time spent focused on matters of consequence? • Were written materials and verbal directions and explanations sufficient and effective? • Was potential conflict surfaced, named and effectively managed?
Meetings led by another staff member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there evidence that reflection and collaboration are both expected and supported by both the structures and processes used and the behavior of participants? • Is everyone engaged? Is airtime shared? Is there evidence of respectful and active listening? • Do participants focus on learning and instruction, e.g., unit and lessons, student work, student performance and behavior? • How do participants make effective use of data, research and best practice in their planning of interventions and teaching adaptations?

Additional questions to explore can be found [here](#).

➤ Pay attention to the broader implications of what is seen and heard. For example,

- For the principal:
 - What does what we saw tell us about the impact of past professional development? The need for more or different professional development?
 - If so, how might mentoring, coaching, PLCs, department meetings and/or faculty meetings be used to provide it?
- For the superintendent:
 - What might this mean about the effectiveness of past professional development for administrators and/or district professional development for coaches and others?
 - Can future administrator meeting agendas help address this?



Deep Dive: Staff Feedback on Professional Culture

Student and staff feedback is an important source of evidence. Seeking out feedback from both students (optional) and staff (required) gives principals valuable information to improve their practice, and helps superintendents construct the most comprehensive, clear, and descriptive picture of a principal's effectiveness.

13 Questions to Ask: These questions from DESE's [Model Staff Survey](#) can form the basis for a staff survey or focus group discussion:

Response Options: *Strongly Agree, Moderately Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Moderately Disagree, Strongly Disagree, Not Applicable*

Mission and Core Values

1. Teachers, students, families, and the principal work together to promote a shared educational vision in which every student is prepared to succeed.
2. In this school, there is a shared sense of responsibility for improvement.

Meetings

3. The principal fosters an environment where all staff have high standards for student achievement irrespective of starting points or circumstances.
4. The principal encourages teachers to question existing practice and propose alternative instructional approaches to improve student learning.
5. Staff meetings engage educators in productive conversations around important school matters.

Communications

6. The principal models confidentiality in communications with staff and parents to ensure collaboration and respect.

Continuous Learning

7. The principal supports staff to provide feedback on one another's practice.
8. The principal encourages me to reflect on the effectiveness of my teaching practice.
9. The principal seeks staff feedback to inform his or her own leadership practice.
10. Our school is a learning community in which ideas and suggestions for improvement are encouraged.

Response to Disagreement and Conflict Resolution

11. The principal consistently uses a variety of strategies to resolve conflicts in a constructive and respectful manner.
12. The principal is skilled in clarifying teacher concerns and offering solutions.
13. The principal builds trusting relationships with staff.



After the Visit

8. Hold Each Other Accountable for Next Steps

- Make sure that you follow through on any support you committed to provide. 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 indicators of professional culture. Make time to review these before finalizing plans for your next one-to-one conference or visit.

The **Model Principal Rubric** defines proficient practice in this focus element as follows:

- **IV-A-2: Mission and Core Values:** *Develops, promotes, and secures staff commitment to core values that guide the development of a succinct, results-oriented mission statement and ongoing decision-making.*
- **IV-A-3: Meetings:** *Regularly plans and leads well-run and engaging meetings that have clear purpose, focus on matters of consequence, and engage participants in a thoughtful and productive series of conversations and deliberations about important school matters.*
- **IV-C-1: Communication Skills:** *Utilizes strong interpersonal, written, and verbal skills to consistently and effectively communicate with stakeholders.*
- **IV-D-1: Continuous Learning of Staff:** *Sets expectations for educators and teams to reflect on and collaborate around the effectiveness of a wide range of tasks related to instructional practice and student learning, including but not limited to implementing standards-based units and well-structured lessons, examining student work, and analyzing student performance and behavior. Supports educators to use data, research, and best practices to adapt instruction and plan appropriate interventions to achieve improved results.*
- **IV-F-1: Response to Disagreement and Conflict Resolution:** *Regularly employs a respectful, non-confrontational approach when responding to disagreement and dissent, and utilizes a variety of strategies to resolve conflicts in a constructive manner*

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 professional culture?
 - What is an emerging C-E-I-J statement that captures an essential aspect of their performance? See [here](#) for samples.
 - What supports might help them strengthen their work or focus their professional development plans with regards to IV-A-2: Mission and Core Values, IV-A-3: Meetings, IV-C-1: Communication Skills, IV-D-1: Continuous Learning of Staff, and/or IV-F-1: Managing Conflict?
 - Are there other principals who could benefit from those same supports? How might Leadership Team time be used to provide them?



Introduction

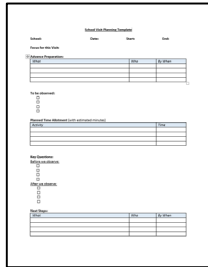
Before the Visit

During the Visit

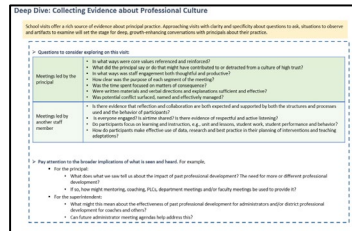
After the Visit

Resources

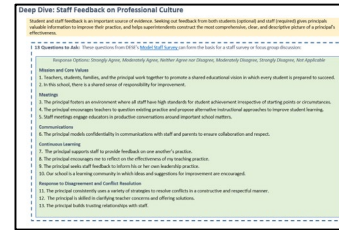
Resources



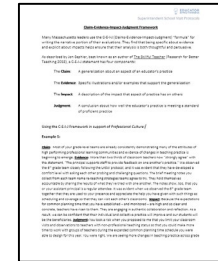
School Visit Template



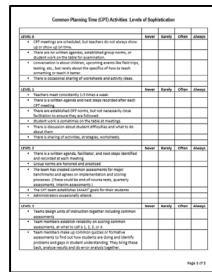
Deep Dive: Planning a School Visit on Professional Culture



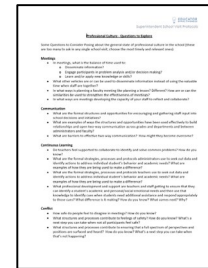
Deep Dive: Staff Feedback about Professional Culture



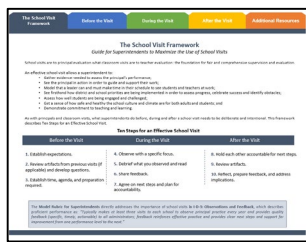
Sample C-E-I-J Statements for Professional Culture



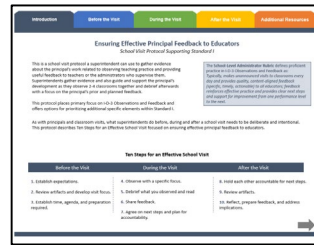
Common Planning Time Self-Assessment (from Research for Better Teaching- Saphier)



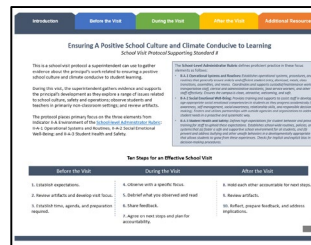
Questions to Explore on a Professional Culture School Visit



School Visit Framework



School Visit Protocol #1: Observations and Feedback



School Visit Protocol #2: School Culture



School Visit Protocol #3: Family Engagement



School Visit Protocol #4B: Cultural Responsiveness