



New Jersey Department of Education, Office of Charter Schools

Charter School Renewal Site Visit Protocol

September 2015

Overview

As the State Education Agency and sole charter authorizer in the state of New Jersey, the New Jersey Department of Education (Department) holds all charter schools accountable for providing students with a high-quality public education. In 2012, the Department released the Performance Framework which outlines academic, organizational and fiscal standards by which all New Jersey public charter schools are evaluated. In August 2015, the Department provided an update to the [organizational section of the Performance Framework](#). As part of the renewal process, the Department conducts site visits aligned to the standards set within the Performance Framework. The Renewal Site Visit is designed to objectively evaluate the success of the charter school and whether it is meeting its mission to provide a high-quality public education to its students. The site visits are conducted to ensure a thorough review of each school and to provide an opportunity for reviewers to see the school in action. Site visits may differ in terms of length and breadth based on a school's current standing with the Department.

This Protocol is designed to provide practical information about Renewal Site Visit so that stakeholders know what to expect and how to prepare. Familiarity with the procedures, protocols and responsibilities will help to ensure that each visit runs smoothly and ultimately generates an evaluation that provides schools with useful feedback.

Differentiated Site Visits

Central to the charter school concept is the trade-off between greater autonomy and increased accountability. Charter school leaders understand the greater emphasis placed on results-based accountability and the importance of producing positive outcomes. If a school is not producing marked results, it runs the risk of its charter being revoked. The Department will conduct site visits to all charter schools up for renewal in the 2015-16 school year. However, charter school visits will be differentiated based on a school's academic standing. For example, the Department will conduct an abbreviated site visit for charter schools that are currently in Tier 1 status. Charter schools that are in Tier 2 status, Tier 3 status or on probation will receive a more comprehensive Renewal Site Visit. The table below provides general guidelines for a Renewal Site Visit based on a school's academic standing.

School Status	Approximate Length	Site Visit Components
Tier 1 Schools	2-3 Hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 2-3 Reviewers• Interviews with board president, school leader, special education staff and ESL/bilingual staff• Classroom walk-throughs• Document Review• End of Day Debrief
No Tier, Tier 2, Tier 3 or Probation Schools	Full Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 4-8 Reviewers• Interviews with board of trustees, school leader, teachers, data administrator, special education staff, ESL/bilingual staff, parents and students• Classroom Observations• Document Review• End of Day Debrief

Please note that schools that fit into multiple categories or have unique circumstances may warrant additional oversight by the Department through the renewal process. Additionally, charter schools that do not meet fiscal management/compliance standards or present concerns regarding their fiscal viability are subject to an on-site financial review. *The length and type of site visit and required elements will ultimately be determined by the Department and be communicated to schools directly.* The Department will provide adequate notice to all schools of any scheduled visits but reserves the right to visit schools unannounced at any time during the charter term.

Renewal Site Visit Components

Scheduling visit dates

The Department typically conducts renewal site visits between October and February. If the Department's proposed date creates a serious conflict for the school, the Department and school will work to find a mutually agreeable alternate date. However, planned visit days are generally not changed unless a serious conflict exists. Once the school leader knows the day of the site visit, s/he should relay that information to all relevant stakeholders and ensure that the day selected has regular programming.

Pre-visit planning and preparation

The Department assumes that the school leader will act as the coordinator and liaison for site visits although the school may designate another person to assume this role. The visit coordinator should be knowledgeable about the school's schedule, be able to communicate quickly with various stakeholders, and work with colleagues to resolve any scheduling issues. A representative from the Department (site visit team leader) works with the designated person to ensure that key documents are either submitted to the Epicenter prior to the visit or provided to the team during the site visit. A list of pre-visit and on-site documentation is found in the Checklist for School Leaders/Designees ([Appendix A](#)).

Site visit team members

All site visit teams are led by a Department staff member or designee. The site visit team leader facilitates the day and coordinates the efforts of the team members, who bring expertise in various areas, such as fiscal management, curriculum and instruction. There may be between 2 and 8 reviewers depending on a school's status going into the renewal process.

On-site visit

Team members will conduct interviews, observe classroom and review documents during a typical renewal site visit. On the day of the visit, the school may be asked to make available a number of documents for review. For details regarding required documentation, see [Appendix A](#), Checklist for School Leaders/Designees.

End of visit debrief

At the end of the visit, the team leader shares initial observations and findings with the school based on the day's visit. Please note that these initial observations and findings are preliminary and are subject to change during the site visit report writing process and after additional analysis of available evidence.

Renewal Site Visit Summary Report

During the site visit, the review team will gather evidence and data based upon the standards laid out within the Performance Framework. After the visit, the review team will aggregate the evidence and data collected to create a Renewal Site Visit Summary Report. Tier 1 schools that are not undergoing a full day renewal site visit will receive a streamlined version of this report. This written report becomes part of the school's record and is included in the body of evidence that the Commissioner will consider before a final renewal determination is made.

Organizational Performance Framework

The Department will develop findings and ratings based on the standards set within the Performance Framework. The [Organizational Performance Framework](#), summarized in [Appendix B](#), will be the main tool that will be utilized to gather and analyze evidence obtained during the site visit. Classroom observations, group interviews and document review will be used to gather information on whether or not the school is meeting the standards set within the Organizational Performance Framework. The site visit team may report out on the following performance areas during the renewal site visit:

- *Education Program*
- *School Culture and Climate*
- *Board Governance*
- *Access and Equity*
- *Compliance*

Within each performance area, the Framework provides a number of indicators and criteria by which the Department evaluates charter schools. During a full day renewal site visit, the school will be rated on each of the indicators within the Organizational Performance Framework.

Financial Review

The Department also conducts a comprehensive financial review during renewal to ensure that a charter school is fiscally viable and that the school materially complies with applicable laws, rules, regulations and provisions of the charter agreement relating to financial management and oversight.

School finances will be thoroughly examined by a rigorous review of documents including, but not limited to, the following:

- Renewal Application
- 2015-16 Budget to Actual
- 2016-21 Projected Budget
 - Budget Summary
 - Budget Narrative
 - Cash Flow Schedule (2016-17 only)
- Performance Framework Financial Ratios
 - Near Term Indicators
 - Debt to Asset Ratio
 - Total Margin
 - Cash Flow
 - Debt Service to Coverage Ratio
 - Sustainability Indicators
 - Current Ratio
 - Unrestricted Days Cash on Hand
 - Enrollment Variance
 - Default on Loans
- Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports (CAFR)-four years
- Auditor's Management Report & Findings (AMR)-four years
- Audit Corrective Action Plans
- Annual Fiscal Questionnaire

- Board Minutes
- Board Secretary’s Reports
- Treasurer’s Reports (Bank Reconciliations)
- Facility Plans
- Leases/Mortgages/Appraisals
- Enrollment - per CHE System reports
- Enrollment Expansion Plans
- Purchasing Process
- Standard Operating Procedures
- Fiscal Internal Controls
- Other Agency Reports if applicable

In addition to a desk audit, members of the fiscal team may complete an on-site visit depending on a school’s financial status. Department staff from the fiscal team will connect directly with the School Business Administrator to collect additional financial documentation.

Renewal Site Visit Structure

The following chart provides a general overview of the structure for the day:

<p>A. Pre-Visit</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schedule and protocol will be sent to school. • The schedule for the day is reviewed and group interview times are established.
<p>B. Meet and Greet</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Board members and school leadership team greet site visit team members. • Site visit team lead conducts introductions and establishes goals, purpose and norms for the visit. • School administration orients the site visit team to the school and building. • Schedule and group interviews are confirmed.
<p>C. Site visit team conducts group interviews, classroom visits, document review, and additional information gathering</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Site visit team members may participate in a combination of group interviews, classroom visits, document review, and additional information gathering depending on specifics of the school visit. • Conversations with groups will be informed by the site visit protocol and Performance Framework. • Classroom observations will be guided by the school’s mission and the key elements of its educational program.
<p>D. Group Interviews</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information regarding the opportunity to participate in the Renewal Site Visit should be made public. Please do not hand-select interview participants. • NJ Department of Education staff or designees will conduct the interviews. • Respondents will be asked to respond interview questions openly and honestly. The review

team will not use any names when writing a site visit summary report based on the findings from the visit, including the interview.

- Use facts and data to respond to questions when possible.
- Team members will be taking notes, as needed. Follow-up questions may be asked.
- Board of Trustees' interviews will be conducted in the morning to allow for as many board members as possible to attend. Only VOTING board members are invited to this interview. The school leader or School Business Administrator is not invited to attend this interview, whether or not they serve on the Board.
- While school administrators will be needed throughout the entire day, we have set aside an hour in the morning to sit down with the administrators directly responsible for academics and operations.
- The NJ Department of Education staff will meet with the Special Education and English as a Second Language program coordinators, or staff responsible, to address the academic program focusing on these special populations.
- The NJ Department of Education staff will meet with the Data Administrator(s) or staff responsible, to address the academic program focusing on the use of data as a driving force in instruction and school decisions.
- This group should include a minimum of 4 and a maximum of 10 parents or family members representative of a broad range of grades, years spent at the school and academic performance levels. The group should be prepared to tell the NJ Department of Education staff how they were recruited for this meeting, how they found out about the Office of Charter Schools' visit and how they were prepared.
- All teachers should be offered the opportunity to participate in the renewal site visit. The NJ Department of Education will require a minimum of 4 teachers representative of experience, time at the school, subject and/or grade level. Please make an effort to schedule those teachers who play a significant role in developing and implementing the school's educational program.
- Student interviews will be conducted for students in Grade 4 and above. Students should represent a variety of ages, grade levels, and time spent at the school.
- If members of the finance team attend the site visit, the School Business Administrator should make him/herself available throughout the day.

E. Classroom Observations

- School staff is informed of visits before the day begins. The site visit team will observe multiple grade levels and subjects during a full day renewal site visit.
- Class visits are arranged throughout the day in hopes of seeing lessons at various stages.
- Class visits should not disrupt the classroom or lesson.
- Teacher lesson plans should be available for all classrooms.
- The purpose of classroom visits is to collect evidence and capture school wide trends and not to evaluate individual teaching and/or teachers.
- Classroom visitors will be taking notes.

F. Document Review

- Site visit members will review documents uploaded to Epicenter prior to the visit.

- Site visit members will review documents on-site such as student files, personnel files and special education files.
- Additional documents will be required

G. Team Debrief

- Team Lead conducts conversation with school administration and board members outlining preliminary reports and findings.
- Team Lead describes next steps in renewal process. Final decisions regarding renewal will not be available at this time.

Site Visit Schedule

The schedule for the renewal site visit will depend on a school's status. Below you will find sample schedules for different visit types that may be revised depending on a school's circumstances. The school leader should work with the Department site visit team leader to create a workable schedule for the school. The finalized schedule must include locations for each group interview and an assigned private location where the site visit team will be stationed throughout the entirety of the day. While on site, team members may schedule additional meetings if necessary. The team leader will remain in contact with school leadership throughout the day to ensure for a productive and efficient site visit.

No Tier, Tier 2 or Tier 3 SAMPLE Schedule						
Time	Team Member 1	Team Member 2	Team Member 3	Team Member 4	Team Member 5	Fiscal Team
8:30AM – 9:30AM	Class Visits					
9:30AM – 10:00AM	Meet and Greet with Board and Administration					
10:00AM– 11:00AM	Board of Trustees Interview	Board of Trustees Interview	Class Visits	Class Visits	Document Review	Board of Trustees Interview
11:00AM– 12:00PM	Administration interview	Administration Interview	Class Visits	Document Review	Class Visits	Meet with SBA
12:00PM– 1:00PM	Lunch/ Team Prep					
1:00PM– 2:00PM	Teacher Interview	Class Visits	Teacher Interview	Class Visits	Class Visits	Document Review
2:00PM– 2:30PM	Student Interview	Student Interview	Parent Interview	Parent Interview	Class Visits	
2:30PM– 3:15PM	Data Administrator Interview	Spec Ed/ESL Coordinator Interview	Data Administrator Interview	Spec Ed/ESL Coordinator Interview	Document Review	
3:15PM– 3:45PM	Team Preparation (extra doc review if needed)					
3:45PM– 4:00PM	Debrief					

Tier 1 SAMPLE Schedule

Time	Team Member 1	Team Member 2
9:45AM – 10:00AM	Meet and Greet with Board President / Administration	
10:00AM–10:30AM	Board/Administration Interview	
10:30AM - 11:00AM	Class Visits	
11:00AM - 11:45PM	Spec Ed/ESL Coordinator Interview	
11:45AM- 12:00PM	Debrief	

Appendix A

Site Visit Checklist for School Leaders/Designees

The Department has created the following checklist to help schools prepare for the renewal site visit.

The following list outlines the preparation for a [Full Day Renewal Site Visit](#).

Approximately six to eight weeks prior to the visit:

- Review the Site Visit Protocol.
- Speak with the school's board of trustees, staff, families, students and community to orient them to the purpose of the site visit, what their respective roles will be during the visit, and what to expect when the team visits. Inform teachers that classroom visits will be part of the visit; however, assure teachers that the purpose of classroom visits is to collect evidence and capture school wide trends and not to evaluate individual teaching and/or teachers.
- Begin to gather the required pre-visit documents (listed below).

Three weeks prior to the site visit:

- Send all of the following documents in electronic format to the team leader via email, as indicated below.** *The Department will send an email / letter reminding each school of this step.*
 - Parking** instructions for visitors.
 - A **master class schedule** for the day of the visit that clearly indicates the teacher, subject, time, and location (room assignments) for all classes. Please identify on the schedule which classes are special education inclusion, pullout, or substantially separate placements.
 - A **staff roster** that includes administrator and teacher names, number of years of teaching and/or administrative experience, number of years at the school, and subject and/or grade taught or administrative role. Please identify any staff who have ESL or special education licensure. Please use the template provided in [Appendix C](#).
 - A copy of your school's **response to intervention plan**, if available. This plan is developed by the school to ensure that the needs of diverse learners in the general education program are met.
 - Finance and Compliance documentation** that are needed will be specified separately by a finance member of the site visit team.
 - Additional documentation may be requested** and you will be notified by a Department representative.

Approximately two weeks prior to the visit:

- Identify a secure and private place that can serve as a meeting room for the review team throughout the day.
- Finalize the site visit schedule with the site visit team leader, including rooms that will be used for the interviews/document review.

Approximately one week prior to the visit:

- Speak with the site visit team leader to review and finalize the site visit schedule, as well as discuss logistics and materials. Please ask questions about the site visit and protocol at this time.
- Confirm interview participation from board members, teachers, students, families, and staff.
- Begin to assemble the on-site documentation (listed below).

The day before the site visit

- Distribute the site visit schedule to the school community.
- Remind teachers to make copies of any lesson materials available to site visitors (though they should not create any materials solely for this purpose).
- Ensure that the **following materials are available, organized, and clearly labeled** in the team's private meeting space.
 - A **school map**, with corresponding teacher room assignments or marked with teacher names and showing the location of special education and ELL instructional spaces (provide one copy for each team member)
 - Aggregated family, teacher, and student **survey** information, if available
 - Samples of educator and administrator **evaluation tools**
 - Professional development calendar/agendas**
 - Curricular documents** may include scopes and sequences, unit plans, and any relevant testing data not already provided to the team. Please have someone available who can guide a site visit team member through these materials. If curriculum is stored electronically (for example, a shared drive or folder), provide written directions for how to access these materials, as well as staff to guide a site team member through the files.
 - A copy of the **special education and ELL policies and procedures manuals**
 - Any other materials** that the school believes will assist the team in efficiently reviewing the school's performance under its charter contract.
 - Place **schedule of classes and supports** happening on the day of the visit outside each classrooms (*optional, but preferred*).

During the visit:

- Ensure that the team's meeting room remains private and all requested documents are provided and clearly labeled. Please also ensure that adequate power outlets are available for laptop usage, which may require providing a power strip and/or extension cords.
- Schools are asked to provide the team with lunch menus from nearby restaurants that deliver. The team may ask school staff to accept delivery of meals; cash will be provided by the team to cover all costs. Please note that team members are required to pay for their own lunch during the school site visit.
- Bring concerns and questions to the attention of the team leader as they arise.
- Attend the debrief meeting to discuss the site visit team's preliminary findings. Invite additional staff or board members to attend the meeting as needed.

Appendix B

Organizational Performance Framework Indicators

The site visit team will gather evidence and create findings on the school's performance based on the Performance Framework. Please refer to the [Organizational Performance Framework Guidance](#) for detailed criteria for each performance area.

Organizational Performance Framework Indicators	
Education Program & Capacity	Key Design Elements: The school is faithful to its mission and has implemented the key design elements included in its charter.
	Curriculum: The school has a comprehensive curriculum.
	Instruction: The school demonstrates high-quality instruction across all classrooms.
	Assessment and Program Evaluation: The school has an assessment system that improves instructional effectiveness and student learning.
	Organizational Capacity: The school has a clear and well-functioning organizational structure that leads to continuous improvement.
Culture & Climate	School Culture and Climate: The school promotes a culture of high expectations and is safe, respectful and supportive.
	Family and Community Engagement: The school actively engages families and the community towards achieving its mission.
Board Governance	Board Capacity: The board has the capacity to govern the school effectively.
	Compliance: The board complies with relevant laws and regulations.
Access & Equity	Access and Equity: The school demonstrates a commitment to serving and meeting the needs of all students, especially the highest need students requiring special education services, students who are English Language Learners, students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and other underserved or at-risk populations.
	Students with Disabilities: The school complies with state and federal special-education laws and provides a high-quality learning environment for all students.
	English Language Learners: The school complies with applicable laws, rules and regulations relating to English Language Learner requirements.
Compliance	NJ SMART Compliance: The school submits critical information punctually and accurately via NJ SMART.
	EpiCenter Compliance: The school submits critical information punctually and accurately via EpiCenter.
	Financial Management and Compliance: The school follows Generally Accepted Accounting Principles and meets financial reporting and compliance requirements.

