



Handbook for Visiting Team Members

for visits to independent schools in the US

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The Team

The Role of the NEASC Commission on Independent Schools

The work of the NEASC Visiting Teams, including the Visiting Team Reports for both the Foundation Standards and the Program Standards, the school's Self-Study Reports and supporting documents, and the school's response to the Visiting Team Reports (if applicable) 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 when its next report is due. In some cases, actions such as a Special Progress or a Focused Visit may be specified.

Conflict of Interest

In carrying out its accreditation responsibilities, the Commission on Independent Schools of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges seeks to ensure that its decisions are based solely on the application of professional judgment to the information resulting from its processes. Therefore, it seeks to avoid both the reality and the appearance of conflict of interest.

For purposes of this policy statement, conflict of interest is defined as:

A circumstance in which an individual's capacity to make an impartial or unbiased accreditation decision may be affected because of a prior, current, or anticipated institutional affiliation(s), other significant relationship(s), or association(s) with the institution under review. The following examples are meant to be illustrative: Affiliation: employee, Governing Body and/or Board Member, appointee, consultant, or graduate. Other Significant Relationships: affiliation with another institution in the same educational system; having a close relative affiliated with the institution under review; sought or seeking a position at the institution under review; knowledge or personal interest concerning the institution under review which might prejudice decision making.

The Role and Responsibilities of the Program Visiting Team

Members of a Program Visiting Team are faculty and administrators representing various academic and professional positions from institutions similar in size and complexity to the school being visited. The Visiting Team's primary purpose is to understand the school, validate the Standards, write a report, rate the school's compliance with the Standards and make commendations and recommendations that will help further the school's improvement. Finally, the Visiting Team makes a recommendation to the NEASC Commission on Independent Schools regarding the accreditation status of the school.

Before the Visit

Respond appropriately to all communications from the Commission and the Chair. Thoroughly read the Self-Study and Foundation Visiting Team Report and the Program Standards Self-Study to understand the school on its own terms, given its mission. Take notes, compile questions, and create a list of potential school personnel to be interviewed.

During the Program Visit

Immerse oneself in the life of the school by gathering data through interviews, supplementary materials, observations, and classroom visits. Gauge the degree to which the mission guides decisions and defines the school life.

- Collaborate with your fellow team members and write the formal Visiting Team Report.
- Make a recommendation to the Commission regarding the school's accreditation status.
- All reports must be completed and submitted to the Chair by the end of the visit.
- Submit your expense vouchers to the Chair prior to leaving the school.

After the Visit

Read the draft of the report as finalized by the Chair of the Visiting Team and respond to the Chair with any comments, if needed.

All materials provided by the school are confidential and should be destroyed after the visit.

The Accreditation Process

The New England Association of Schools and Colleges is a voluntary peer accreditation association. It accredits institutions through three Commissions representing various segments of the educational community. The accreditation process is only as strong as its peer participation. The work of a Chair, an Assistant Chair, and the Visiting Team is one part of the peer process; decision making by the NEASC Commission on Independent Schools is another.

The Commission is appreciative of the voluntary participation of the Chair, the Assistant Chair, and the Visiting Team.

The Standards

The Foundation Standards (1-6)

are designed to help the school understand and reflect on the trends and organizational functions of the school.

The Program Standards (7-13)

focus on teaching and learning and its impact on the students, faculty, and community at large.

In both sets of Standards, the school is asked to generate clearly articulated and achievable steps leading to school improvement.

The Strategic Planning Standard (14)

focuses on the school's vision and planning.

The Self-Study Process

Every ten years a school begins the cycle of multi-faceted and comprehensive self-evaluation, following defined procedures, which is the core of the accreditation process and provides the focus for the subsequent visits.

1 The Initial Contact

Following receipt of the Foundation Self-Study Report there will be a meeting (either in person or electronically) between the Chair, the Assistant Chair and the Head of School. The purpose of the meeting is to establish priorities for the upcoming Foundation Visit, and to discuss the school's reflections and vision for the future.

4 Follow-Up

The school's process of follow-up, with the Commission's oversight, assures effective implementation of all recommendations from the Visiting Team and the Commission and subsequent plans made by the school. 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. A Five-Year Interim Report with a staff visit will occur in the normal course of events. Special Progress Reports and/or Focused Visits will be assigned at the discretion of the Commission.

2 The Foundation Visit

The Chair, the Assistant Chair, and other members determined by the NEASC staff will spend time at the school to affirm and validate the Foundation Standards section of the Self-Study. The visit will highlight the school's strengths and relative weaknesses and assist the school in making recommendations for school improvement. The Foundation Visiting Team will submit their report in the portal. Additionally, the Foundation Visiting Team is expected to assess the school's alignment with the Foundation Standards and make a recommendation to the Commission as to whether they should proceed with the Program Standards Visit or remediate any major weaknesses with the school's alignment with the Foundation Standards before proceeding.

3 The Program Visit

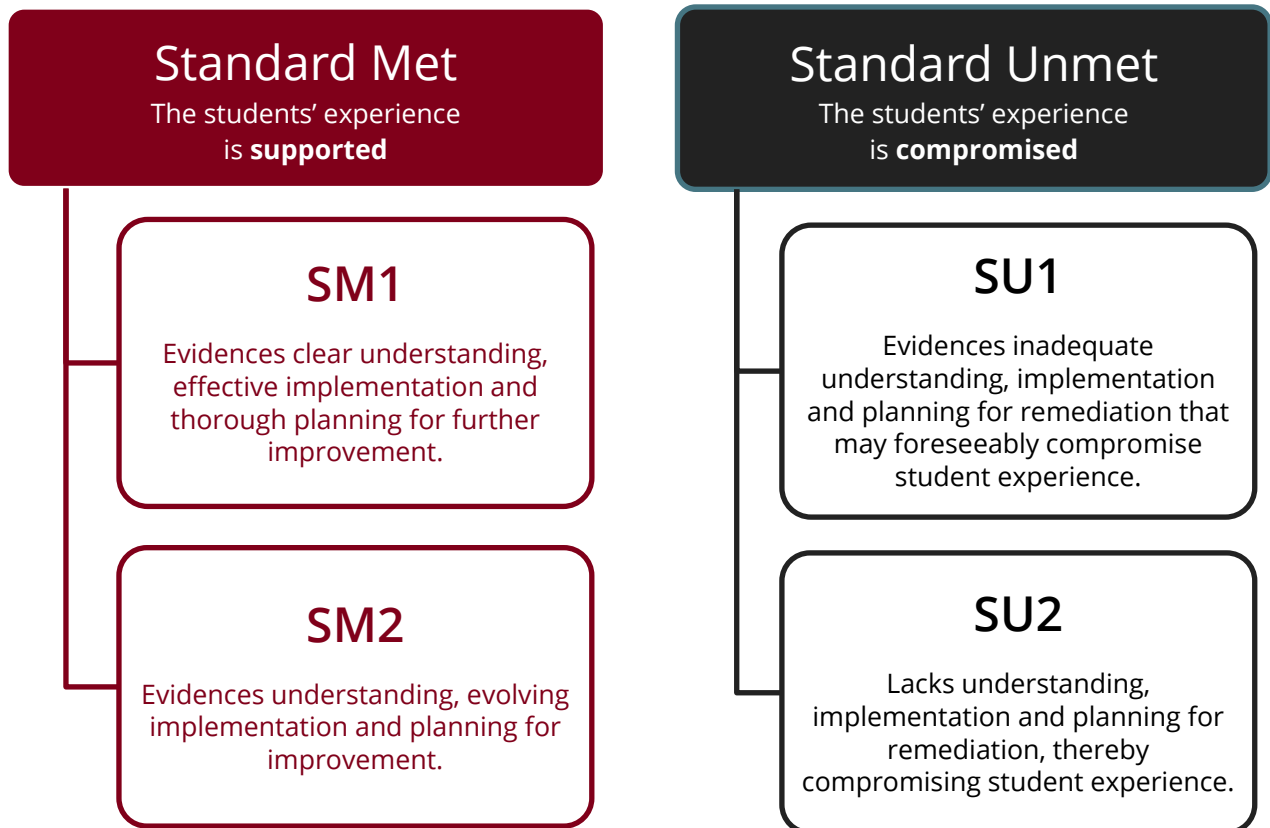
The Program Visiting Team, composed of the Chair, the Assistant Chair, and peers from other member schools, validates the Program Standards portion of the Self-Study and provides the school and the Commission with the observations and recommendations of experienced outside educators. In a collegial manner, the Program Visiting Team comments on a school's self-assessment, highlights the strengths and relative weaknesses of the school, and reviews its planning for continued improvement. The Team is also expected to assess the school's alignment with the Program Standards. Finally, this Visiting Team is charged with making all major commendations and recommendations.

Assessment of the Standards

One purpose of a Visiting Team is to assure that the school meets the Standards for Accreditation. Teams often conduct straw votes on Standards early in their visits to identify areas requiring focus; however, the formal vote on Standards usually does not take place until after all sections of the report are substantially complete, probably on the last day of the visit. The Chair will document the team’s rating for each Standard.

Standards should be assessed through the lens of student experience.

The fundamental test is whether or not students are supported. When a Standard is “Met,” student experience is reasonably whole, positive, and creative. When it is “Unmet,” students are — or may be — adversely affected. While some Standards have more direct or immediate student effects, every Standard ultimately makes itself felt in the lives of a school’s students.



During the Self-Study, schools rate themselves on every applicable Standard.

During a Visit, the Visiting Team also rates the school on every Standard. When the Team’s ratings differ from the school’s rating, the Team will explain its conclusions.

Assessment of Accreditation Status

Foundation Visit – Possible Recommendations

The Foundation Visiting Team will take a vote at the conclusion of their visit regarding the successful completion of the Foundation Report and compliance with the Standards. One of the following recommendations will be made:

| School has met all the expectations of the Foundation Visit | School has completed the Foundation Visit | Foundation Visit and/or expectations incomplete |
|--|---|--|
| Move forward to host a Program Visit without reservation. | Move forward to host a Program Visit while also taking specific action(s) recommended by the Team. Please note that the Program Visiting Team can further address the Foundation Visit recommendations if appropriate. | Program Visit should be tabled pending specific action(s) determined by the Commission. |

Program Visit / Accreditation Status – Possible Recommendations

The Program Visiting Team will also vote on the accreditation status to be recommended to the Commission. The following types of recommendations are possible:

| Recommendations for a school seeking Initial Accreditation | Recommendations for a school seeking Continued Accreditation |
|--|---|
| <p>Accreditation (if all Standards are met)</p> <p>Accreditation and some specific stipulation (if all Standards are met)</p> <p>Tabling of action pending completion of a specific response from the school (action will be tabled if a school has a rating of SU1 or SU2 on any Standard)</p> | <p>Continued Accreditation (if all Standards are met)</p> <p>Continued Accreditation and some specific stipulation (if all Standards are met)</p> <p>Continued Accreditation with Unmet Standard(s) rating of SU1 or SU2 (the school will have no more than one year to correct and the Commission will work with the school to address these unmet Standards)</p> |

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 Team. It gives the school an opportunity to address a deficiency. Note that the Visiting Team makes recommendations to the Commission, but the Commission has the final decision on accreditation status and follow-up requirements for the school.

Reports

Writing the Visiting Team Reports

Visiting Team members must remind themselves that data gathering has the primary purpose of providing information to write both the Foundation Visit Report and the Program Visit Report. Each team member is responsible for writing one or more sections of the report in the portal. The Chair is the final editor and will ensure that the two reports speak with one voice.

**There are two primary audiences for these reports:
the school community and the NEASC Commission on Independent Schools**

The most important audience is the school community for whom the reports are a validation of months of self-study work. Also, the team represents the NEASC 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 affects the style of writing. For the Commission, the reports must be comprehensive and self-contained since it is likely the only source of information available to the members. For the school, the reports provide support and assistance to their efforts at improvement. To be effective in this latter function, the reports must communicate clear understanding and appreciation of the school, be sensitive to issues the school is grappling with, and offer recommendations designed to help guide the school in the years ahead. The reports should be written in a professional manner which recognizes that the text will receive wide distribution within the school community and in some cases may even become public. It is essential that the reports be concise and clear and that there is ample explanation and evidence provided to support the ratings and recommendations.

Each Visiting Team Report is structured in the same fashion as the school's Self-Study Report with sections on each Standard. All major recommendations, Unmet Standards, or changed ratings in either direction must be clearly explained. This clarification prevents the need for 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 NEASC Commission on Independent Schools cannot interpret a recommendation made by a Visiting Team that has not been explained.

**Remember that conclusions flow from observations
and recommendations flow from the conclusions.**

The writing of the Visiting Team Report is an art that is developed over time. Veteran team members can be a tremendous resource. Please keep in mind the following when writing the various sections of the report:

- Specific names of school personnel are never used in the report. References should only be used such as “the principal”, “the secretary”, “the Music teacher” etc. Try not to single out any one individual.
- Follow the direction of the Chair for capitalization and abbreviations.
- In the body of the report and the writing of the recommendations, the language must not be prescriptive. The team’s recommendations are written with language that “recommends” but does not dictate. Use words such as “review”, “consider”, “explore”, “investigate”.
- Major recommendations are numbered based on importance, with #1 being the most urgent with highest priority.
- Before any recommendations can be written for any of the sections, an explanation or evidence must be contained in the body of the report.
- The writing of commendations and recommendations begin with the following:
“The Visiting Team recommends...”
“The Visiting Team supports the school’s recommendation to...”
“The Visiting Team commends...”

If the Team changes the rating (up or down) for any Standards, make sure to substantiate the reasons why the rating was changed. The reader must have ample information to understand why and how the team arrived at each rating. If the Visiting Team is lowering the rating on a Standard, the reasons for that change must be reflected in the Standard-specific recommendations and, in some cases, in a major recommendation. The final pages of the report will contain the Ratings Table for all applicable Standards and the Major Commendations and Recommendations.

Everyone’s writing style is different. If unsure of language to be used or simply need assistance with phrasing, ask the Chair or any veteran team member. The Chair has the task of editing the final report to ensure that it reads in one voice and is consistent in its messaging. The entire report must be completed in draft form before the team disperses at the end of the visit. From time to time during the visit, the team will conduct a review to determine the status of each section and what needs to be done to complete the writing. As a cohesive team, everyone should assist in the completion of the report and the review of all sections. This precludes any team member leaving early without the Chair’s approval.

The Foundation Visiting Team focuses on Standards 1-6
The Program Visiting Team will address and document both the Program Standards 7-13
and the Strategic Planning Standard 14

Each individual Standard will be documented following the same format as the Foundation Visit.

The Program Visiting Team will determine the Major Commendations and Recommendations after a thorough review and discussion of the Key Foundation Recommendations *as well as* the insights

gained from their own visit. These Major Commendations and Recommendations should reflect the totality of the accreditation process.

Confidentiality

The Visiting Team Reports will become the property of the school. Team 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 team members should not discuss specific team findings or information about the school with others.

Sample Visit Materials

Visiting Team Report – sample template

(For both the Foundation and Program Visits)

| Assessment of Standard | |
|--|---|
| Standard Met The students' experience is supported. | Standard Unmet The students' experience is compromised. |
| SM1: Evidences clear understanding, effective implementation and thorough planning for further improvement. | SU1: Evidences inadequate understanding, implementation and planning for remediation that may foreseeably compromise student experience. |
| SM2: Evidences understanding, evolving implementation and planning for improvement. | SU2: Lacks understanding, implementation and planning for remediation, thereby compromising student experience. |

School's Rating:

SM1 SM2 SU1 SU2

Visiting Team's Rating:

SM1 SM2 SU1 SU2

EXPLANATION OF RATING

In this section, the Visiting Team offers conclusions, based on the Observations and Conclusions section, that provide background for the commendations and recommendations which follow. There should be a specific explanation for any Unmet Standard, or for any Standard where the rating of the school differs from the rating of the Visiting Team.

OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on observations and interviews conducted on site as well as the reading of the Self-Study Reports this narrative provides the necessary evidence for ratings, commendations and recommendations.

COMMENDATIONS

This is an opportunity to commend the school for exemplary activities or accomplishments as well as demonstrate that the Team has recognized and appreciated the distinctive strengths of the school. Commendations are typically numbered, listed, and should not exceed five. 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 report.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The school has included recommendations for itself in each section of the Self-Study Report. The Visiting Team may endorse the school's recommendations and/or make additional recommendations in areas where the Visiting Team feels that change or improvement is needed. The Team will make Standard specific recommendations as well as a limited number of major recommendations. All recommendations must flow from the observations and conclusions and should refer to carrying out the school's mission and fully meeting the Standards for Accreditation. At times, members of a team might wish to recommend something that refers to a commonly accepted educational practice, but care must be taken not to impose any specific framework or educational philosophy on the school. All recommendations should identify issues that warrant attention and should not be prescriptive. The Foundation Visit should generate no more than three major recommendations and the Program Visit no more than five major recommendations.

Recommendations should be listed in order of priority:

1. A recommendation which the school has made for itself in its Self-Study Report.
2. A Standard which is not fully met, for which the school has not made a recommendation.
3. A discrepancy between the school's mission and/or stated policy and its practice.
4. A Standard for which the school has not demonstrated thoughtful improvement plans.
5. A recommendation which strengthens a met Standard.

Program Visit – sample schedule

Sunday

- 2:00 p.m. Visiting Team members arrive at the hotel
- 3:00 p.m. Organizational meeting at the hotel
- 3:45 p.m. Transfer to the school
- 5:00 p.m. Campus Tour
- 6:00 p.m. Reception and dinner hosted by the school for the full team and appropriate members of the school community
- 8:00 p.m. Visiting Team reconvenes. Follow-up to campus visit. Extended discussion of first draft of the Standards, in particular, Standard 7/Mission

Monday

- 7:00 a.m. Breakfast/observe student arrival routines
- 8:00 a.m. All school meeting (optional)
- 8:15 –11:30 a.m. Interviews with faculty, students, and service personnel. Details will be worked out at the organizational meeting. Classroom visits
- 11:30 a.m. –12:15 p.m. Lunch
- 1:00 –3:30 p.m. Continued interviews/meetings/classroom visits
- 4:00 –5:30 p.m. Visiting Team reconvenes
- 5:30 –6:30 p.m. Dinner
- 7:00 p.m. Visiting Team reconvenes at the hotel. Brief reports on most of the Program Standards and suggested ratings.

Tuesday

- 7:00 a.m. Breakfast
- 8:00 –11:30 a.m. Continued interviews/meetings/classroom visits
- 11:30 a.m.–12:15 p.m. Luncheon with representatives of parents and alumni/ae
- 1:00 –3:30 p.m. Continued interviews/meetings/classroom visits
- 4:00 –5:30 p.m. Visiting Team reconvenes
- 5:30 –6:30 p.m. Dinner
- 7:00 p.m. Visiting Team reconvenes. Updates on all Program Standards. Extended discussion of commendations and recommendations

Tuesday or Wednesday if needed

- 7:30 a.m. Breakfast
- 8:15 a.m. Visiting Team completes drafts of all sections of the report, identifies major commendations and recommendations, and conducts final vote on Standards. Draft Report is approved by the team and submitted to the Chair for final editing.
- 12:00 p.m. Team members depart
- 1:00 p.m. Exit interview by Chair and Assistant Chair with Head of School

Program Visit Interviews – sample schedule

It is the responsibility of the Chair, in collaboration with the Head of School and/or Self-Study Coordinators or designated staff member, to create a meeting schedule for the Visiting Team. Thoughtful and careful planning in advance allows for the most efficient and effective use of time for both the Visiting Team and the school community. Once the Chair has received team members questionnaires regarding areas of interest, a schedule can begin to be created.

During the Foundation Visit, the Chair discussed with the Head of School how to best schedule any group meetings needed by the Program Visiting Team. It is neither necessary nor practical for all Visiting Team Members to attend every meeting. At least two members should be present for group meetings. The Chair and the School Head may decide on additional group meetings, as appropriate. Some Chairs or Heads of School may request an All-School Meeting to introduce the visiting team. To the extent possible given the size of the school, Visiting Team Members should try to meet with all members of the faculty and staff.

Considering the limited time frame of the visit, Monday should be scheduled with as many meetings as possible. Below is a snapshot of a potential Monday morning schedule. The Head of School should provide the Chair with information regarding both teacher and space availability.

| Time | Interviews | Visiting Team Member(s) | Location |
|----------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|
| 8:00-8:40 a.m. | Parent Group | Alan, Bob, Carol | Cafeteria |
| | Mrs. Jones, Title I Teacher | Diana | Room 121 |
| | Mr. Ki, History Dept Chair | Ellen | Room 12 |
| | Classroom Aides | Gail, Helen | Library |
| 8:40-9:20 a.m. | Parent Group Continues | Alan, Bob, Fran | Cafeteria |
| | Mrs. Smith, Grade 5 | Diana | Room 212 |
| | Science Dept. | Helen, Carol | Room 145 |
| | Ms. Kay, Admin. Assist | Ellen | Business Office |
| | Mr. Ole, Spanish Teacher | Gail | Room 123 |

About us

NEASC Mission Statement

NEASC partners with schools to assess, support, and promote high quality education for all students through accreditation, professional assistance, and pursuit of best practices.

Commission on Independent Schools

To assure the positive and equitable development of all students, inspire creativity, foster excellence, and promote institutional well-being, NEASC Accreditation engages schools in aspirational, mission-driven self-study and peer review.

Resources

Accreditation resources are available on our website at www.neasc.org

Contact us

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Email: cis@neasc.org

Staff directory: www.neasc.org/our-team