

Advice and Tips

The ISACS *Evaluation Guide* offers the following advice:

Purpose of the Evaluation Visit: The school you will visit will have completed an intensive self-study of itself and all its components before you arrive on campus. The purpose of the Visiting Team is to add the objective, professional view of people outside the school to the evaluation process. You will be primarily concerned with reviewing and validating, or questioning, the school's own findings, but you will also be asked to help determine what, if anything, the school may have overlooked in the course of its self-study.

Your specific tasks will be to:

- Review the data and materials prepared by the school.
- Observe the school in full operation to ascertain the degree to which the actual situation coincides with that reported by the school.
- Seek, collect, and interpret data necessary to reach conclusions concerning the effectiveness of the school and its programs.
- Prepare a written report summarizing the findings of the Visiting Team, including both commendations and recommendations for each part of the school as well as for the school as a whole.

Your Tripartite Role: Adding to the complexities and importance of the Evaluation visit is your need to balance three different roles you have to fill as an evaluator.

1. You have been invited to serve by the school; you are, therefore, a guest of the school and you owe it all the professional courtesy and empathy you can muster.
2. You are also a representative of the Independent Schools Association of the Central States and are on a fact-finding mission for the Association.
3. You are also a member of a team, which will report, as a whole, to both ISACS and the host school. Your individual observation, assessment, and ideas are critical to the process, but what ends up in the formal report is limited to what the Team can agree upon.

General Exhortations:

1. It is of the utmost importance to remember, as every judgment is made, to evaluate the school and its operation in the light of **its own philosophy**, and not yours. Nothing can undermine the credibility of an evaluation more rapidly than comments such as, "At our school, we do this...".
2. It is the overall quality of the school's effectiveness that is most important; your emphasis must be on the major factors affecting the school, not minuscule defects.

3. You must constantly be alert to your professional conduct, both during and after the Visit. You must not talk in your community about your recent visit, or about the school or the personnel, especially in derogatory ways. When visiting classes, be as unobtrusive as possible; do not take notes in the classroom and do not interrupt the normal follow of class procedure. In conversations with faculty, you should strive to create an atmosphere of understanding and mutual trust so that the school staff members will be able to explain what they are doing, rather than feeling that they have to defend it.
4. Except for an initial social gathering with the host school's administration and faculty, do not expect any social activities. Evenings will be required for meetings of the Team as a whole and for preparation of reports.
5. Avoid too premature judgments, especially on the first days of the Visit. Try to keep your eyes, ears, and mind open until observations begin to fall into a pattern. When you begin to form conclusions, be sure to test them against specific observations, data and documentation provided by the school.
6. You should never make criticisms or suggestions directly to members of the school staff. All findings should result from Team discussion and action.
7. You are **not** evaluating the performance of individual teachers. In making classroom visits, you are observing teaching techniques, use of educational materials, and the outcomes of classroom procedures on an aggregate basis.
8. Your Visiting Team is **not** approving or censuring the school being examined; the ISACS Board of Directors has sole authority for that final action. You are, however, collecting data and reaching findings that will be submitted to the ISACS Evaluation Review Committee (ERC) and the Board on the basis of which their decision will be reached.
9. Always remember that the Visiting Team's discussions and findings are **confidential** in nature and must not be aired in public or private conversation after the Visit.

Other Tips for Evaluators

The main strengths an evaluator can bring to this task are strong professional insights, broad experience in education, proven expertise in the field, and sound common sense. The following suggestions may help enhance your efforts.

- Try to understand the school as a whole. Your segments are important parts, but not the entire picture.
- Don't be distracted by surface matters, try to arrive at in-depth conclusions and judgments.
- Keep the initiative in your hands and avoid being briefed to exhaustion. Politely move on when you have heard enough.
- Avoid being dogmatic. Although what goes on at your school may be cutting edge, this is their school; try to see it through their eyes.

- Ask opening, not leading, questions of the staff. Ask for an illustration or example to support or corroborate statements.
- Listen carefully to what people tell you, but listen with a third ear. Be aware of why a person is responding in a particular way, as well as to what the person is saying.
- Don't take any crucial statement, written or spoken, at face value. Check it out by getting an independent reading on it.
- Avoid too early closure. Keep your eyes, ears, and mind open. Only as pieces begin to fall into patterns should you make initial and tentative conclusions.
- Discuss and compare your findings with other members of the team. Their own findings and insights frequently will reinforce your own; at other times, they might cancel out some of your own untenable conclusions.
- Don't be superficial in your approach. Don't search out inconsequential information, or ask insignificant questions. Don't write a report that could have been written without visiting the school.