

Writing The Visiting Team Report

(from the ISACS *Evaluation Guide*)

The school being evaluated has expended a great deal of energy, time, and money in preparation for the ISACS evaluation process, and it deserves a good report: complete, thorough, honest, helpful, and well written. The quality of the evaluation process will in large part be determined by the quality of the report, which you and your team prepare.

All of the reports should follow the same basic format. As a title, centered at the top of the page, please use the name of the general area being reported on. Each report will then include three sections:

- The GENERAL APPRAISAL
- The COMMENDATIONS
- The RECOMMENDATIONS

As team members begin the writing process, they should be reminded of the *three audiences* who will read the report. The school faculty and administrators will read it, so it should be directive without being prescriptive, and it should provide a planning document for continuous use, which will result in school improvement. It will also be read by trustees, parents, and perhaps by a wider community at the school. Therefore, the document should be tactful in the tone and manner in which it is written. And finally, it is written for use by ISACS and especially by the Evaluation Review Committee.

The GENERAL APPRAISAL section, which introduces each report, will probably be three or four paragraphs in length. It should contain factual and descriptive material and information regarding the area being covered. This is essential. Even though the school already knows this, it is important for use by the ERC readers because it will provide them with the information necessary to understand the program and the situation as it exists, and help them to understand the Commendations and Recommendations, which will follow.

This appraisal section should be very objective in tone, presented in a straightforward manner without editorial comment. Importantly, it should contain the background information on which the recommendations are based, and it should not contain direct or indirect reference to any single individual. All of the recommendations presented in a later section should arise from information provided in this section, and the rationale for the recommendations should be given here. If properly written, a good appraisal obviates the need for lengthy recommendations; a simple statement should suffice.

Frequently, the team member wishes to make suggestions, or to ask the school to review or examine certain policies or practices, but not present such with the full force of a recommendation which the school is required to respond to and to act upon.

These should be included in the General Appraisal and not in the list of Recommendations, which will follow.

The COMMENDATIONS section is simply a numbered listing of the qualities and characteristics of this portion of the school program, which are particularly unique or well done. Try to avoid Commendations, which could apply to any reporting area, or to the personnel in any school. The listing should provide you an opportunity to recognize and commend particularly strong aspects of this area of the school program. Do not try to flatter, but do give sincere recognition where deserved. Do not search for Commendations just to round out a list, although it is probably good to include at least as many Commendations as you provide Recommendations. And do not damn with faint praise.

The RECOMMENDATIONS section is perhaps the most critical segment of the entire report. It is a numbered listing of the specific actions, which the team feels the school should undertake in order to realize significant improvement in the school's program. The school is required to respond to each and every Recommendation made by the visiting team, and to report twice on the action taken. If you have had to prepare Reaction and Progress Reports, you know that this is no mean task! Therefore, all Recommendations included should be meaningful. The test for inclusion is simply this: **Would implementation of this Recommendation result in meaningful improvement within the school?** If it does not meet this test, do not include it.

The "average" team report will include from twenty to twenty-five individual reports. If each report includes three Recommendations, this would result in from sixty to seventy five Recommendations – a very manageable number. But if each report includes five or six Recommendations, the net result would be anywhere from one hundred to 150 Recommendations – probably far too many for almost any school to deal with efficiently and effectively. This does not mean important Recommendations should be omitted, or that one is forbidden from including more than three in any one section. But it does mean that you should be judicious in what you include.

If the General Appraisal section has been properly prepared, the individual Recommendations should not need to be more than a single statement stating specifically the desired action and outcome. While the Recommendation should not be **prescriptive**, it should be **directive**; it should state clearly the action which the team feels the school should take, and it should probably at least imply the desired outcome ("The school should...in order to.."). It is the duty of the visiting team to identify the problem but not to attempt to provide the solution.

A strong word of caution: In writing a recommendation, it is best to avoid words such as "examine, review, consider, evaluate, assess, discuss, recognize, encourage, explore, strive, investigate, continue to, etc., unless the reason and desired outcome of such action is also presented. Schools are at a loss as to how to respond to a Recommendation that asks them to do one of these things. If they did not feel it was the right thing to do, they would not be doing it. Why does the team want them to do

this? To what end? Unless this is provided, the school can fulfill its obligations simply by performing the specific action requested without implementing any change whatsoever.

Several other considerations should also be kept in mind. The Recommendations should be presented in some priority order, and if necessary, identified as short-term or long-term. All Recommendations included should be realistic in terms of physical facilities, finances, and personnel. They should apply distinctively to the area under consideration, and should not single out any individual by name or position. And any recommendation made should be consistent with the Philosophy and Mission of the school. Recommendations should not cost the school large sums to be accomplished. Hiring another English teacher, for example, is not a reasonable recommendation unless there is evidence in the self-study that this is going to happen anyway.

Either at the beginning or at the end of the Visiting Team Report, a listing of Major Commendations and Major Recommendations will be presented. They should as well arise from information presented in the individual reports. Generally, it is not advisable simply to reproduce Recommendations made in individual reports as Major Recommendations. Listing them once should be sufficient. The Major Recommendations should address school-wide issues and should be broader in concept and application than the Recommendations made within the individual reports. Major Recommendations should be succinct, however many find it effective to include an italicized rationale following each Major Recommendation.