So You Were Asked To Serve On An ISACS* Visiting Team...

How was I chosen?
Every head of an ISACS accredited school is invited annually to submit the names and qualifications of faculty, administrators and trustees who would be well qualified to serve as an evaluator. From this database of over 2000 names, the ISACS Director of Accreditation Services selects and invites appropriate team members for each school being evaluated.

What will I do?
Tentative assignments are included with the invitation. The visiting team leader may adjust assignments once the team is assembled. Your job will be to find congruence between what the school describes about itself in its self-study and what is observable during a three-day on-site visit.

Can I be effective in such a short visit?
As in almost all professions, there is a body of knowledge and skills educators acquire through years of experience. Anyone who has visited someone else’s classroom, especially in another school, knows that it takes only a few minutes to get a feel for what makes the classroom good or even great. With careful observation and questioning, subtleties will be discovered that will lead to major truths about the school.

Who pays for this visit?
There are no out-of-pocket expenses to the visiting team member, one serves as a guest of the school. Since your head-of-school has recommended you for this service, your own school will provide either a substitute or coverage for your assignments.

How do I prepare?
Your recognized experience as a teacher, administrator or trustee, along with good skills of observing and communicating are all the background that is needed. The school to be evaluated will send the materials you need to read in advance of your visit. The visiting team leader will provide other coaching that may be needed in understanding the protocols and unique attributes of each school.

What will I bring on this adventure?
Along with whatever personal possessions will be needed for a four-day visit, it will be helpful, but not essential, to be able to bring your own PC laptop computer outfitted with MS Word. Since this experience involves work under pressure, a sense of humor is really helpful as well as a desire to be of service to others in our profession.

* Independent Schools Association of the Central States
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, and 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 owe it complete and uncompromising professional courtesy and empathy.
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 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. 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. An initial social gathering with the host school’s administration, faculty and board will be the preliminary, perhaps only, social event of the four days. Evenings will be required for meetings of the Team as a whole and for preparation of reports.

5. Avoid premature judgments, especially on the first day 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 Trustees 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.

**Writing The Visiting Team Report**

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 beginning the writing process, you remember the three audiences who will read the report. The Evaluation Review Committee will read the report, the only document reviewed by them on which they make their accreditation recommendation to the Board of Trustees. Therefore, each report must be informative about the area it covers and it must offer recommendations intended to achieve school improvement. The school faculty, administrators and trustees 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. And finally, it will likely also be read by some parents (based on the discretion of the school). Therefore, the document should be tactful in the tone and manner in which it is written.

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 must 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.

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 to give sincere recognition where deserved. Do not search for Commendations just to round out a list although it is suggested to include at least as many Commendations as 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 believes 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 on the action taken. If you have had to prepare Reaction and Progress Reports, you understand this 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 25 to 30 individual reports. If each report includes three Recommendations, this would result in from 75 to 90 Recommendations – a very manageable number. But if each report includes five or six Recommendations, the net result would be anywhere from 150 to 180 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. It simply means 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 must be consistent with the Philosophy and Mission of the school. Recommendations should not cost the school large sums of money. 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.

At the end of the Visiting Team Report, a listing of Major Commendations and Major Recommendations will be presented. These should also arise from information presented in the individual reports. 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.

Content of Report Areas

Use the following as guidelines when you read the school’s self-study or when you interview school personnel.

**Philosophy**  Does the statement express clearly the mission of the school? Has it been reviewed and adopted by the governing board of the school? Is it published prominently and included in various school publications including the faculty handbook? Are faculty, students, parents, and trustees familiar with the statement? Can someone tell you the mission of the school, either by reciting or paraphrasing the mission statement? Is there provision for periodic review of the statement? Within the philosophy statement itself and elsewhere, is there full disclosure of the school’s mission and program? Is there a high degree of congruence between the stated mission of the school and the actual program and practices of the school? (See ISACS Standards for Membership – Section B: Purpose, Goals, and Philosophy)

**School and Community**  This report should review the school both as a community and in its geographic community. How does the school define and describe its internal community? Describe this community and its unique characteristics. Is the school attentive to the quality of life of all members of the learning community? Does the school take appropriate action to create a positive learning and social environment? Do all segments of the school family feel a part of this community? Describe the geographic community of the school. What is the school’s role in this community and the attitude of this community toward the school? Are resources available in this community, and does the school use them? To what extent is the school involved in the life of the community? (Note: Information provided in the School Climate report need not be repeated in this report.) (See ISACS Standards for Membership – Section C: Community of the School)

**Financial Management**  Provide a brief description of financial and accounting procedures: budgeting, billings, financial reports, etc.. Has a full-opinion financial
audit been conducted for the year prior to the evaluation visit and during Year 5 of the seven year accreditation cycle as required by ISACS? Is the school fiscally stable and responsible? Is it efficient and effective in its financial operations? Is there adequate provision for insurance coverage, bonding, security, backup of records, etc.? Does the school have sufficient financial resources to provide and maintain facilities, plant, equipment, and personnel to adequately support the programs of the school? Is there a written contract of enrollment? Are parents fully advised in advance of their financial obligations?

Governance and Administration Describe the organizational structure of the school, and explain briefly how it operates. Is the school truly “independent” (see the ISACS definition of independence)? Is the head granted sufficient autonomy to carry out board-established policies? How is the entire school community kept advised of board policies, and especially of changes in policy?

Governance Does the school carefully delineate between the Board’s role as a policy-making body and the Head’s role as the chief operating officer, responsible for the day-to-day operation of the school? How are board policies established, and procedures disseminated? To what extent is the total school community involved in the decision-making process? Is there an established, written procedure for regular evaluation of the board and the school head? Is the procedure followed on a consistent basis? Most importantly – does the school have a current, comprehensive Strategic (Long Range) Plan?

Administration Are clear lines of communication established between faculty and administration, between administration and board, and (perhaps) between board and faculty? Are there written job descriptions for the school head and for significant administrative positions?

(See ISACS Standards for Membership – Section E: Governance & Administration)

Personnel This report should include information regarding both administrative and teaching personnel as well as support staff. In addition to general information regarding structure, numbers, organization, teaching load and such, it should also include information regarding the recruitment and selection of personnel, contractual provisions (written? benefits? assignments?), qualifications, opportunities for professional growth, in-service training, internal communication, meetings, and evaluation. While some very general comment may be made regarding quality and effectiveness, individual teachers should not be evaluated, and there should be no reference – directly or indirectly – to any individual. Does the school accept and follow the “Principles of Good Practice” as published by ISACS? (See ISACS Standards for Membership – Sections E and F)

Admissions and Financial Aid Does the school employ an Admission Director, and provide a job description? Provide general information regarding the school’s total admissions process; advertising, recruitment, testing, interviewing, past school records, admission decisions, etc. Is there a formal contract of enrollment, which clearly states parental rights and obligations? Who is responsible for the final decision regarding enrollment? What types and amounts of scholarships and financial aid are provided? What are the criteria? What procedures are followed in determining
awards? How are such awards funded? Who is responsible for decisions regarding financial aid?

School Climate and Morale  This report should determine – through use of the ISACS Constituent Survey findings, interviews, and observation – the feeling and attitudes of students, teachers, administrators, staff, parents and trustees. What impressions does the visitor receive? Are there a “school spirit” and/or a “school culture” in evidence? Is there generally a good feeling about the school? What factors most prominently contribute to this good feeling? Are there existing conditions or situations which could contribute to low morale? Identify them. Are the avenues provided for internal communication between and among faculty and administrators adequate and satisfactory?  Note: Since this can be a highly subjective area, take great care in making generalizations and in reaching conclusions. Whenever possible, rely on concrete solutions.

Gender and Diversity, Equity  The visiting committee should make sure that the school has an established, written, board-approved and adopted policy of non-discrimination in all areas, and that the policies are carried out in actions and in attitudes. Special attention should be given to gender and racial distribution, and practices in employment, admissions, evaluation, promotion, and offices held, awards, and activities to insure gender and minority equity. There should exist a high level of “awareness” on equity issues. The visiting team member should examine the curriculum in relation to courses offered and textbooks studied and read to see if appropriate representation of women and minorities is present. Does the library collection show the same broad representation? Check on enrollment patterns in math/science classes and in fine arts classes. Are the sexes adequately represented in both? In Honors sections? Review awards won recently, and honors granted for evidence of equity.

School Plant and Facilities  Do the school plant and facilities adequately accommodate the school program? Is the plant adequately maintained with appropriate janitorial care? Is the school in compliance with all health and safety codes (asbestos, radon, lead, etc.)? Are health and safety primary concerns? Are boilers regularly inspected? Fire extinguishers properly maintained? If there is on-site food preparation, are health standards properly maintained? Adequate safety provisions, especially in labs and art rooms? Are written emergency procedures? Does the total facility enhance the school program? Does the school have an established policy and procedures regarding visitors entering the school?  Note: Usually included in this report section is information regarding transportation and food service. Generally a brief description of the service provided, together with any commendations and important recommendations, is adequate for these to areas.

Student Services  This general area includes several sub-areas; the team member may write a single unified report, individual reports, or a single report with specific divisions. Specific descriptive reference should be made to the provision for guidance/counseling services (or alternative procedures), the method of reporting student progress to parents, the conduct of testing programs together with the dissemination of test results and the filing of testing records, description of the college admissions program and college admissions records (if applicable) and a listing and very brief description of the various clubs, organizations, and activities available to
students. This report usually also includes information regarding the athletic program unless it is specifically included in the Health/Physical Education report under academic program. Specific attention should be given to the provisions in place for student orientation, discipline, recognition, and assessment. In general, do the services provided live up to the promises of the school, and do they contribute in important ways to the realization of the school’s philosophy and goals?

Library/Media Center  Describe the school library (media center) as a total facility; location, access, hours, appearance, usage, circulation, etc. Assess the quality and quantity of the collection in three areas: print, subscription, and technology/audio-visual. Is there adequate representation of diverse writers? Is each academic area and school division adequately represented in the collection? Are reference resources adequate? Describe briefly library policies and/or procedures regarding staffing, supervision, cataloging, budget, circulation, record keeping, acquisitions, book selection, etc.. Most importantly – is the quality, quantity, and diversity of the collection adequate for meeting students needs? NOTE Unless information regarding the application of technology to the library is covered in the report on Technology, this report should include information on the extent to which computer hardware and software are available and utilized in the library program.

School Advancement: The several areas under this report area may be presented as a single report, as separate reports, or as a single report with sub-divisions. Fund-raising should describe all of the school’s regular and special efforts to raise funds over and above tuition for annual giving, special projects, and/or capital campaigns. It should also describe record keeping and thank you procedures. Some statistical information should be presented regarding level of participation of the various constituencies as well as information regarding endowment and foundation grants. Describe the personnel in this office and how the office operates. Do the people involved have job descriptions? Is there a Development Plan? Who is responsible for the marketing efforts of the school? Does the school effectively and honestly market itself? How is the school marketed? Describe the school’s public relations efforts including the quality of various school publications. What is the image of the school within the community? Is the public perception of the school accurate and favorable? What attention does the school pay to its Alumni? Is there an alumni organization or association? Is it active and effectively involved? What is the level of alumni support, both in giving and in participation and other forms of support? Are appropriate alumni records kept?

Academic Program Areas: In a traditional report, the academic program areas are covered in separate reports, discipline by discipline, or, perhaps, (depending on the size of the school and of the visiting team) by school divisions. If the school has followed a non-traditional or alternative approach to its self-study of program, the visiting team should follow the format of the self-study. But regardless of the format followed, every visiting team report should introduce this section of the report with a report on Curriculum Overview. This report is to serve as an introduction to the individual subject area reports or other reports, which will follow. It should include general information describing the organization and content of the curricular program from the lowest to the highest grade level and should address the specific goals and objectives of the curriculum as a whole. While the subject area reports reflect the vertical component of the curriculum and are micro in nature, this report should
address the horizontal curriculum and be macro in nature. Does the total curriculum provide adequate depth and breadth without omissions or unnecessary duplication (scope and sequence)? Is there continuity? Interdisciplinary integration? Is there a reasonable balance among disciplines, and among standard components of learning? Is provision made for the development of study skills? How are achievement and outcomes assessed? How is the curriculum reviewed and evaluated? Are the curriculum and the teaching methodologies utilized consistent with the school philosophy? (Please keep in mind that this report is of critical importance to the Evaluation Review Committee as it reviews the team report.) If Individual Learning Area Reports are written, they should provide in greater detail the course offerings at the various grade levels within each discipline. Information regarding the textbooks and other materials used should be provided, as well as information regarding the use of audio-visual aids, instructional aids, and technology. What teaching methodologies are used? Are they consistent with the school’s philosophy statement? Is there variety in the format of presentations? What is the level of student involvement and participation? Are provisions made for “special needs” such as tutoring, one-on-one instruction, honors or Advanced Placement sections, etc.? What evidence is there of student interest and achievement? Is student work appropriately displayed? Comment on the overall classroom appearance and atmosphere. Most importantly – is the academic program provided within this area or discipline congruent with the mission, philosophy, goals, and objectives of the school? (See ISACS Standards for Membership – Section D: Program, Activities, and Student Services)

Avoiding the Most Common Writing Errors

**Wrong**

Ramsey School should develop an accurate profile of who you are.

The school has a palpable school climate. They should be commended for their efforts in developing and maintaining it.

In a series of three or more terms with a single conjunction, use a comma after each except the last.

The administration, faculty and students are to be…

Enclose parenthetical expressions between commas.

The best way to increase faculty motivation,
motivation unless financial circumstances make it impossible, is to provide many more opportunities for professional development.

Do not join independent clauses with a comma.

The student assemblies appear to be entertaining, they are significant in the lives of the students we met.

A participial phrase at the beginning of a sentence must refer to the grammatical subject.

Walking around the campus, it was apparent that school climate is very positive.

Being in a dilapidated condition, the school is not well served by its current gymnasium.

Use definite, specific, and concrete language.

The faculty at the school appear to be generally satisfied.

The school has been through a difficult time.

Omit needless words.

There is no doubt that…

In a hasty manner…

The focus should be on how to develop professional satisfaction.

Owing to the fact that…

Does not pay much attention to…

No doubt (or doubtless)

Hastily

The focus should be on developing professional satisfaction.

Since (or because)

Ignores
Express co-ordinate ideas in similar form (parallel construction).

Formerly, science was taught by lecture, while now the laboratory model is employed.

Formerly, science was taught by lecture; now it is taught by the laboratory method.

The Board, the administration, faculty, and students…

The Board, administration, faculty, and students…

In classes, assemblies, or in activities…

In classes, assemblies, or activities…

Either the school must develop higher salaries or continue to experience increased faculty turnover.

The school must either develop higher salaries or continue to experience increased faculty turnover.

This is a time no longer for words but action.

This is a time no longer for words but for action.

The School has most congenial and caring constituencies. The extraordinary voluntarism of your parents is most impressive.

The School has most congenial and caring constituencies. The extraordinary voluntarism of the parents is impressive.

**WRONG**

In summaries, stick to one tense.

**BETTER**

The campus is neat, orderly, and well maintained. The entire school community – administration, faculty, and students – were proud of the ambience.

The campus is neat, orderly, and well maintained. The entire school community – administration, faculty, and students – is proud of the ambience.