Site Visit Protocol

April 2021

The Annual Report Toolkit is a product of CA 2.0—Advancing Equity and Access through Quality Authorizing—an initiative led by the California Charter Authorizing Professionals (CCAP).

Contents

[SITE VISIT 1](#_Toc63770226)

[Introduction 1](#_Toc63770227)

[Authorizer Considerations 2](#_Toc63770228)

[Types of Site Visits 2](#_Toc63770229)

[Differentiated Site Visits 2](#_Toc63770230)

[Scope of Site Visit 3](#_Toc63770231)

[Activities 3](#_Toc63770232)

[Bright Lines 3](#_Toc63770233)

[Protocol: Preparing for the Visit 4](#_Toc63770234)

[Protocol: During the Visit 5](#_Toc63770235)

[Protocol: After the Visit 5](#_Toc63770236)

[Tools and Resources 5](#_Toc63770237)

SITE VISIT PROTOCOL

Introduction

Education Code §47604.32(a)(2) states that each chartering authority, in addition to any other duties imposed by this part, shall . . . visit “each charter school at least annually”. Annual site visits are a regular, systematic examination of a charter school’s program in action and the school’s performance relative to its obligations under law and commitments in its charter.[[1]](#footnote-1) In addition to compliance with the law, the purpose of the site visit is to monitor each school’s progress in achieving the academic, operational, and fiscal expectations set forth in the law (i.e., Criterion 2: Sound Educational Program and Capacity) and operationalized in the performance frameworks. In this way, the site visit is an extension of the authorizer’s oversight and is used to gather evidence of compliance and performance to inform the annual report and the school’s trajectory toward renewal.

The site visit also offers a unique opportunity for the authorizer to appreciate the nuance of the school’s operation and education program by seeing it in action. Authorizers often look to formal documents (e.g., school accountability designations, financial audits, enrollment reports) to provide evidence of compliance or performance. However, the site visit affords the authorizer an opportunity to observe and discuss the school’s challenges and its response to corrective action plans with the school leadership team. The documentation from the site visit addresses not only nominal answers to questions posed in the frameworks, but also contextual information to provide a more fulsome view of charter school performance, and creates a strong feedback loop between the authorizer and the school.

For the purposes of this Toolkit, the site visit protocol is purposefully structured to be a foundation that can be modified to meet the needs of an authorizer.[[2]](#footnote-2) For example, one authorizer may adapt this site visit protocol for use prior to a school’s opening (e.g., to assess readiness to open), while another may adapt this protocol to execute its differentiated approach to site visits based on a school’s track record of performance. To accommodate the required site visit as well as variable use by authorizers, the following is a protocol rather than a framework. The protocol provides the necessary ingredients for a successful site visit, rather than being a deployable framework that presumes many aspects of how the site visit fits within an authorizer’s ongoing oversight responsibilities. Authorizers may use this protocol to reflect on their existing structure for site visits and to seek improvement, or may develop new aspects of their site visit protocol.

Authorizer Considerations

Types of Site Visits

Since site visits are annually required, many authorizers establish a predictable pattern and purpose for their site visits, depending on the year of the charter school’s operation.

Example:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Type of Visit | Occurrence | Purpose of Visit |
| Pre-Opening | Summer prior to opening | Determine school’s readiness to open and serve the community |
| Year 1 (Initial) | Fall or early winter of school’s first year in operation | Ensure successful opening; identify challenges |
| Years 2–3 (Operations, Performance) | Fall | Perform ongoing oversight, document measures by school, communicate in relation to renewal standards |
| Year 4 (Renewal Tier) | Fall or spring | Prepare for renewal application, identify eligible performance tier, conduct ongoing monitoring |
| Year 5 (Renewal/Transition) | Fall/Winter | Address matters related to transition to new term of charter, verify claims in renewal application |

Differentiated Site Visits

Since site visits are annually required, many authorizers conduct more frequent visits, and differentiate their site visits depending on the performance of the charter school. For example, if a material weakness or concern is found during the annual cycle of oversight, the authorizer may use the site visit to assess progress made to address a deficiency. Authorizers using a differentiated approach for their site visits are encouraged to articulate the rationale and possible results of such an approach.

Scope of Site Visit

Each school’s performance profile will dictate specific areas of focus for the site visit. The Charter Authorizers Regional Support Network (CARSNet) identified five areas that an authorizer may use as a foundation for its site visits:

* Education Program: Overview of the education program, English learner and special education services, curricular materials, professional development, teacher credentials and staffing, and assessment and use of data.
* Facilities: Condition/appearances, adequacy, and compliance with standards.
* Fiscal: Systems associated with attendance, record-keeping, inventory, budget, and accounting.
* School Operations: Training, handbooks, admissions, discipline, health and safety, parent notifications, and policies.
* Governance: Board management and meetings, policy development, and stakeholder involvement.

Activities

Authorizers should consider the types of activities they will engage in with the school during the site visit. The activities should align with the scope of the site visit. Determining the activities is as much of a logistical concern as it is a way to ensure that the qualitative method or activity will yield the information sought by the authorizer. There are three general activities that authorizers typically engage in during a site visit:

1. Interview/Discussion: The authorizer may interview the leadership team, school staff, the board, parents, students, or other important stakeholders.
2. Observation: The authorizer may observe classroom instruction, staff meetings, board meetings, or meetings with parents.
3. Document Review: The authorizer may review documents such as Individualized Education Program (IEP) records, teacher credential documents, and school safety plans.

Bright Lines

Authorizers are encouraged to consider clear standards, or “bright lines,” for what they will not include or evaluate during their site visit. Such clarity avoids any confusion by the school and staff when the authorizer conducts the site visit. A good example of a bright line for many authorizers is in the area of teacher/classroom observation: many authorizers include clear language that such an observation is intended to be a general assessment of the learning environment, rather than an evaluation of the teacher.

Protocol: Preparing for the Visit

A formal site visit should not be a surprise. Authorizers should provide the scope, activities, and schedule of the process to the school at least two months in advance of the visit. Authorizers are encouraged to consider the following topics as they structure and prepare for the site visit:

* Scheduling Visit Dates: The site visit dates should be scheduled within the time period described in any general oversight calendar published by the authorizer and during a time period of the school year when relevant materials are available (see the previous “Types of Site Visits” section).
* Point of Contact: There should be single points of contact at the authorizer and at the school, so that information can be communicated clearly and directly.
* Team Composition: The authorizer should strive to ensure that the composition of the visitation team includes the necessary expertise to address the school’s unique program and performance profile.
* Visit Schedule: Publicizing the site visit schedule and activities is critical to an effective, professional site visit. Many examples of visit schedules exist, including [here](https://charterschool.wa.gov/documents/WSCSC-Site-Visit-Guide.2019-1.pdf).
* Submitting Pre-Visit Documents: Prior to the visit, authorizers may use pre-visit documentation to gain familiarity with the organizational structure and programs of the school. Authorizers should take care to only request documents that they do not already have and to not request documents that they could easily retrieve (e.g., board minutes available on the school’s website). Examples of pre-visit documents may include:
  + Teacher schedules;
  + Teacher credentialing documents;
  + Supporting evidence showing adherence to essential terms of the education program;
  + Enrollment forms;
  + Calendar of professional development activities for the year; or
  + Site map.
* Logistics: Authorizers should communicate their needs to the school well in advance of the visit. Such considerations include a designated meeting space, meals for visitors (the school should not provide food), and parking.
* Visitation Team Preparation: Prior to the visit, the visiting team should review relevant documents that include, but are not limited to, the following:
  + Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP);
  + Up-to-date financials;
  + Active corrective action plan(s), if any; and
  + Background on any recent complaints or concerns regarding the school.

Protocol: During the Visit

The scope, activities, and schedule associated with the site visit should be shared in advance of the actual visit. The flow of the day will center around the specific activities outlined by the authorizer, and include interviews/discussion, observations, and document review. Importantly, each interaction within the day should be purposeful and connect back to the areas of concern or interest held by the authorizer.

CARSNet guidance, available at the link in the following “Tools and Resources” section, provides a nice summary of the visiting team’s end-of-visit report. The visiting team provides this verbal report to the school leadership at the end of the site visit—this report should be a scheduled part of the visit. According to CARSNet, it should be noted in speaking with the principal that any analysis presented during the initial report-out is preliminary. The visiting team does not make suggestions for improvement or direct the school to change operations or programs. If there are issues that will require further discussion or documentation, they should be noted at this time.

Protocol: After the Visit

Following the site visit, the authorizer prepares a written report that includes the visiting team’s findings and references to supporting evidence. Whether a draft of the report is shared in advance with the school principal is an authorizer's decision. A site visit may result in specific findings. When the findings are associated with one of the performance frameworks (typically the Operations and Governance Framework), the finding is noted within the framework and included in the annual report. It is also possible that the site visit results in a finding that either must receive immediate attention (e.g., a health and safety issue) or falls outside of the framework. Authorizers should rely upon their corrective action procedures to ensure that the finding is addressed.

Tools and Resources

CARSNet

<http://carsnet.org/resources/downloadable-resources/>

NACSA

<https://www.qualitycharters.org/authorise/>

1. http://carsnet.org/wp-content/files/Published%20NorCal%20COE%20Authorizer%20Procedure%20Manual.v.5.14.2020.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This Toolkit is intended as a resource for authorizers. Authorizers should consult legal counsel before finalizing their templates and guidance. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)