

SOME NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS FOR CHAIRS AND SUPERINTENDENTS

FROM FIRST REVIEW EXPERIENCES FEBRUARY-MARCH 2003

I am sure that you have already done a lot of thinking in preparation for your upcoming review. After talking with a number of chairs and superintendents, I thought it might be useful to provide some suggestions based on recent experiences with the reviews held since the February training. I hope you find this helpful.

–Judy Halbert

Suggestions for Chairs:

At the opening team meeting it is important to emphasize the following:

- Be clear about the purpose of the review—the focus is on student achievement and district effectiveness based on the 10 points of inquiry.
- It is important to make the distinction clearly between school accreditation and the district review. In accreditation the focus was very much on how the growth plan was developed and how committed staff members were to the plan. In the district review the focus is very much on results and how schools and districts are using student achievement data to understand the needs of their learners, to develop and implement plans for improvement and to monitor progress.
- Emphasize the necessity of suspending judgement until you have heard the district presentation on the accountability contract, met with partner groups and visited schools. There is a danger of forming judgments based solely on the ministry data and the school and district plans. Teams have found the school visits an essential part of gaining a more complete understanding.
- Stress the need for confidentiality of team discussions. If the host district is using drivers to get team members from school to school, the car conversations must be kept neutral. Avoid coming to premature judgments and sharing team observations until the review is complete.
- Make sure team members appreciate the importance of sensitivity to the board-superintendent relations. This is a high stakes assessment and every aspect of the review needs to be carefully considered. You may want to consider just having the team chair serve as spokesperson and as liaison with the superintendent.
- With a range of team members (i.e., parents, teachers, and principals) reinforce the importance of all team members and the contribution they will make. This work requires everyone to feel he/she is an equally valuable member of the team right from the start.
- Set some time every day (even just 30 minutes) for some down time for team members. Try to establish a finishing time for each evening so team members know what to expect. Most teams have found that a 10:00 p.m. finish on the first two nights is reasonable, with the probability of a later finish on the last evening.

School Visits:

- Help team members develop an explicit understanding of the purpose of the school visits and then convey that to the school team members at the beginning of each visit.
- Make it clear that team members are there to listen, learn and understand the district and school plans for improving student achievement. There may be a tendency for some team members to use their own district and/or school as their reference point (“in *my* school...” or “in *my* district...”). Avoid making any suggestions during school visits unless expressly asked.
- The template for the 10 points of inquiry is the framework for the review. It is important to use the template during schools visits to honour the work the schools have done in preparation, for consistency among team members and for consistency across teams. At the same time, mechanically going lock step through the questions may not always elicit the best information. Take some time at the first team meeting to talk about the best ways to get all the information covered in the school visits so that team members can develop greater comfort with the template.

Process Suggestions:

- Laminated charts will be provided for the next teams with the 10 points of inquiry and the guide preprinted. Teams have found that using post-it notes to visually capture their assessments after school visits help to build a picture of the district.
- Start identifying a list of promising practices and strengths on Day One. This can be revised, amended and adjusted as you progress.
- Maintain a spirit of inquiry by focusing at the end of each day on the questions that will lead to greater understanding of the district’s efforts to improve student achievement. It is very important that although team members may have questions about staffing, budgets, maintenance, resources, etc., this information should only be considered if relevant to the 10 points of inquiry. **Any requests for additional information need to be considered very carefully and should be directed from the chair to the superintendent only.**

The Report and Reporting Out:

- It is important to have a draft report ready for the superintendent by the afternoon of the last day. Balance the need for efficiency and speed in completing the report with the importance of careful consideration of the content.
- Remember that there are a variety of audiences for the report. Keep the language simple, clear and to the point.
- Think carefully about the process for reporting out. This will vary team to team and should be considered in the context of the district. Ensuring adequate time for clear communication in reporting out and clarification of all key points is very important. PowerPoint may be helpful and the ministry will provide a template for teams to use in reporting out if they so choose.
- The report needs to be finalized within a week of the conclusion of the team visit. The media releases are scheduled from this point on for the Friday a week after the conclusion of the team visit. For instance, if the team starts on March 24, the press release is scheduled for April 4.

Suggestions for Superintendents:

- Make sure your principals understand the purpose of the school visit and appreciate the distinction between accreditation and the district review.
- Schools should be prepared to explain their improvement plans within the framework of the 10 points of inquiry.
- Having additional school level data as they relate to the school plan is helpful for the visit BUT make sure that principals know that providing binders of information is not required.
- Ensure that key members of your educational community (trustees, parent representatives, teachers' union representatives, principals, members of the Aboriginal community, etc.) are involved in the review from the outset. Having the key players present for the reporting out is very important for clarity and consistency of communication.

Again, I want to thank all of you for your leadership, both in your districts and provincially through this work. I will look forward to your feedback once your review experience is complete.

All the best!!

–Judy Halbert