IES Institute of Education Sciences

Fact Sheet | Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic

Strategies and Considerations for Effective School Inspection Systems

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Measuring how school processes and practices promote student outcomes is key to building a comprehensive framework for understanding school performance. One way to achieve this objective is through school inspections or quality reviews. These inspections are often conducted by teams of experienced educators and involve classroom observations, interviews, focus groups, analysis of school data, and document reviews. Inspection teams share a report, sometimes publicly, recommending ways to improve internal school policies and practices.

At least 13 countries employ school inspection systems. England's system dates back to the 19th century, with the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) now responsible for inspecting all schools. More recently, school inspections have gained traction in the United States in districts such as New York City and Oakland and states such as Massachusetts and Vermont. A handful of independent nonprofit or consulting organizations, such as SchoolWorks, School Empowerment Network, and Education Resources Consortium, also conduct school inspections for districts.

Although there is not an extensive body of literature showing the effectiveness of these systems, some studies suggest inspections may lead to small positive improvements in test scores (Hussain, 2015). Other literature on how schools improve their processes and practices as a result of school inspections are mostly descriptive and anecdotal (Ryan et al., 2013; Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). Regardless, theory suggests school inspections that focus on promoting improvement—and creating a comprehensive narrative of a school's strengths and weaknesses—can facilitate organizational learning that helps increase a school's effectiveness (European Commission, 2018).

To produce actionable insights for school improvement, inspection teams need a common rubric, a process for collecting data, and a way to share findings. State education agencies, school districts, charter authorizers, and inspection teams can consider several strategies when developing or improving inspection system processes.

Develop a rubric to provide a clear set of criteria for evaluating school processes.

Rubrics for school inspections typically include the following domains: (1) curriculum and instruction; (2) student support; (3) educator support; and (4) management and operations. A common practice is to ground these topics in local context—mirroring the structure and language of a particular education system—to create a cohesive shared foundation for assessing school quality and driving improvement.

Rubrics also vary in their prescriptiveness and flexibility. SchoolWorks, for example, uses a rubric that describes specifically how practices should look. Under the instruction domain, SchoolWorks includes multiple criteria to measure whether classroom interactions and organization ensure a

Rubric examples

- Maryland
- Massachusetts
- New York City Department of Education
- Ofsted
- SchoolWorks

classroom climate is conducive to learning, including clear behavioral expectations that students understand (criterion 1.1.1.); a highly structured learning environment that maximizes learning time through effective planning and guidance (criterion 1.1.2); and cooperative classroom interactions that are conducive to learning (criterion 1.1.3). Specific practices, such as sharing an agenda of the day's class activities, are listed under each criterion.

On the other hand, systems such as Ofsted are less prescriptive in their measures, leaving space for flexibility and variation in how schools accomplish broad goals. Agencies should consider their priorities carefully in determining whether more flexibility will promote school improvement, or whether they should focus on specific measures to create clear expectations on how education should look in their schools.

Develop a process for collecting data.

Inspection teams can gather high-quality data for accurate and actionable school inspections by reviewing documents and data, conducting site visits, and administering surveys.

Document and data reviews

Inspections often include evidence from a variety of documents, including documents created for the review process. The inspection team can collect evidence from various sources; however, some evidence must be submitted directly by schools. Document reviews may include any of the following:

- **Quantitative evidence of school quality**, such as standardized assessment results, enrollment data, staffing data, or data on attendance or behavior.
- **Documents describing policies, processes, and official reports**, including strategic plans, minutes from relevant meetings, use of funding and other financial information, curriculum materials and descriptions of curriculum policies and review processes, descriptions of data analysis and data use policies, policies for students with disabilities and English language learners, and policies for evaluating educators. Documents might also include official reports such as complaints about the school submitted by students or parents.
- **Self-review**s submitted by the schools before on-site visits. For example, in New York City, each school evaluates its own practices using a self-evaluation form. These self-reviews cover the same domains included in the review rubric. They seek to promote self-reflection as a way for the school to highlight strengths and weaknesses for inspection teams to focus on. The opportunity to contribute to the review process through a self-assessment may also increase receptiveness to feedback among school leaders.

Site Visits

On-site visits are a central component of inspections and typically span one to two days. To help navigate their visits, it is important for inspection teams to gather logistical information, such as school maps, schedules, and organizational charts. They should also obtain administrator contact information to facilitate interactions with the right people. Interactions may include the following:

- **Classroom observations** to learn about instructional practices. These observations often employ the same protocols used for teacher evaluations, such as the Classroom Assessment Scoring System observation tool or the Danielson Framework for Teaching.
- **Interviews with key staff**, such as school leadership, to get an overview of school practices and policies.
- **Focus groups** to learn from groups of school staff, families, and student group representatives.
- **Informal data gathering** to learn from others who are in the school building during the site visit. Ofsted inspectors, for example, will sometimes hold informal meetings with students and parents at the start or end of the school day, using evidence from those conversations in their review.

Sharing the rubric and relevant process details with schools in advance can promote transparency, build trust, and lead to smoother on-site visits. Some inspection protocols include checklists for schools to set expectations and help them prepare.

Surveys

School review processes can include data from surveys routinely administered to students, educators, and staff (often to assess school climate). Though some schools may also administer family surveys, these surveys typically yield much lower response rates—and respondents are unlikely to be typical, which could make those survey results biased. If surveys of staff and students are not routinely available, they can be administered specifically for the review process to solicit an overview of opinions about school quality.

Develop a report to share findings.

A school inspection results in a report that highlights a school's strengths and areas of growth to inform continuous improvement. These reports are often publicly available to inform other education partners and community members about the overall quality of the school.

Consider:

✓ **Aligning reports to your rubric**

Reports are organized in different ways depending on the school review system in place. Reports should mirror the rubric used by inspection teams so they are accurate to the review itself, easily understandable, and actionable for schools.

✓ **Including the following sections:**

1. A description of the review process and methods used by the review team.
2. Contextual information about the school, including external factors that may affect what is happening at the school at the time of the review as well as internal factors, such as changes in leadership.
3. Summaries of performance in different areas. This will often look like a score or rating on every section of the rubric. Depending on the level of detail required, it might be necessary to report a score for only main categories. However, further detail on subcategory ratings can be included in an appendix. Some school review systems include an overall score or rating, but this information is not essential.
4. Detailed descriptions of findings with evidence to support any judgments or claims made about school quality overall or on individual elements of the rubric.
5. Specific recommendations for improvement linked to findings from the review.

✓ **Keeping the report concise and including any extra information in appendices**

The length of each school review report varies depending on context. Although longer formats are needed when inspections are conducted less often or when they cover many domains, it is beneficial for reports to focus on what schools need most. Reports should be short enough to guide school improvement priorities while also providing details about what exactly needs to be improved. Keep any narratives brief and objective, ensuring the report does not speculate or make unsupported conclusions. Short reports can be used; long reports are likely to be shelved. Some reports provide detailed information in appendices while maintaining a concise and focused main body.

Report examples

- Massachusetts
- New York City
- Ofsted
- SchoolWorks/ Cleveland
- Vermont

Providing recommendations, action steps, and resources in school review reports

Though some school review systems result in summative judgments of a school's quality and others are geared toward supplying formative information for continuous improvement, almost all reports include some type of recommendations in areas where schools can improve.

Recommendations tend to emerge directly from inspection findings and to be organized according to each domain or indicator. Recommendations should be concise, focused on specific areas of improvement, and directed especially at school leadership. Although the review process includes observations and interviews conducted within individual classrooms, it often results in high-level recommendations, discussing how leadership may support teachers or make school-wide changes to instructional practice, rather than specific classroom-level recommendations about teaching.

Sources of recommendations and resources

- **Reviewer expertise**

  Because inspection teams are experts in education, they bring knowledge in how schools might make necessary changes revealed through the review process. Thus, inspection teams might pair recommendations with specific resources that can supply strategies for improvement, tailored to each individual recommendation.

- **General resources for improvement**

  Inspection teams can include a general list of resources for each domain, connecting resources created by the state department of education or school district that align with strategic priorities to areas of growth identified in individual school review reports.

- **Strategies with strong evidence of effectiveness from the What Works Clearinghouse**

  An initiative of the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) is a source of scientific evidence on education programs and policies. When determining what strategies to suggest as recommendations, inspection teams can refer to WWC practice guides, which provide evidence-based recommendations to improve student outcomes by topic area, and intervention reports, which summarize high-quality research on the effectiveness of an intervention.

- **Build up best practices over time**

  When school inspections first begin, inspection teams may rely heavily on external resources for improving in different domains. However, in places where school review systems have existed for some time, the inspections themselves can elevate best practices that schools can learn from each other. For example, after identifying promising practices through school inspections, the Vermont Agency of Education created a video series to help other schools learn from these approaches. Over time, a review team is likely to learn about particularly successful practices and strategies in schools that rate highly on some domains and indicators of the review rubric, that can be used to provide recommendations and resources to schools that need improvement in those areas.

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