



A Union of Professionals

Seeing Progress: A Guide To Visiting Schools Using Promising Programs

For years, teachers, administrators, parents and others have struggled to find ways to turn around low-performing public schools. In an ongoing pursuit of “what works,” we have tried new teaching methods, used new curricula, bought new programs and more. While educators have found some success, we have seen too many fads come and go. And now, phrases like “schoolwide programs,” “reform models,” and “research-based” are being touted by educators, legislators and the general public as the future of education reform. Many educators feel bombarded by claims from new programs that promise to improve student achievement and bring success to struggling schools. What does it all mean? How are these programs different from the fads that have come and gone?

This guide will help you answer these questions. In addition, it will help you plan a visit to a school using a promising schoolwide reform program.

Why should we make the adoption of a promising program the foundation for our school improvement efforts?

Implementing effective *schoolwide* change is a massive undertaking because it touches upon all areas of a school’s culture and practice. To achieve whole-school improvement, educators must undertake a comprehensive set of initiatives including appropriate professional development, high-quality curricula and organizational change.

Some school faculties have taken on the enormous task of developing and implementing such across-the-board reforms themselves—and a small few have succeeded. But no school—especially one that is struggling—should be expected to find success by reinventing the wheel. According to AFT’s *Resolution on Redesigning Low-Performing Schools*, “The challenge before us is to take the research on programs and pedagogical approaches that have been proven to work and use it to ensure that all schools can succeed.”

Over the past decade, the AFT has identified several promising research-backed programs, including: Core Knowledge, Comer School Development Program, Consistency Management and Cooperative Discipline, Direct Instruction, High Schools that Work, and Success for All. When properly implemented, these programs can help to raise the achievement levels of “at risk” students in low-performing schools. They are based on years of research on successful practices. Simply put: *These programs provide schools with practices and materials that have been proven to work.*

These programs do not leave schools to implement these reforms alone. Instead, they provide step-by-step technical assistance and support that schools need to make progress and maintain improvement.

By combining proven programs and practices with ongoing support—including tested curricula, effective staff development and appropriate materials—struggling schools are now able to sustain improvements, outlast fads, achieve at high levels and succeed.

How can I choose the promising program that is the best match for my school?

Choosing the right program for a school is a lot like finding the right prescription for an illness. Like physicians, educators have to analyze the symptoms, diagnose the problems and use their knowledge of possible treatments (proven programs and practices) to prescribe a cure. And then, educators

move beyond the role of a physician as they daily apply the “medicine” that they choose until the problem is “cured.”

Selecting a proven program should be part of a careful and lengthy planning process. To ensure the success of any improvement plan, everyone who will be affected must be committed to it from the start. Therefore, schools or districts should begin by establishing a school improvement planning team whose members represent key people or groups who will be involved in reform efforts.

An effective school improvement planning team should include at least one teacher, paraprofessional, school support staff member, union representative, parent, school administrator and district representative. This team is responsible for creating the school’s improvement plan, which may include selecting a program. Creating a sustainable plan that involves all aspects of the school and involves the whole community generally takes a full year.

Q: Do proven programs really make a difference?

Just ask teachers in PS 159, an overcrowded school in the economically devastated East New York section of Brooklyn. As they searched for new ways to stem the increasing rate of reading failure among their students, the teachers kept coming back to what they knew worked: effective, research-based practice; ongoing professional development and support; family involvement; continuous assessment of student progress; and a structured framework to draw these elements together in a coherent, but not prescriptive way. With district support, the teachers identified a program that took these elements of success and packaged them in a way that enabled teachers to teach reading more successfully: Success for All [SFA].

The teachers read about and discussed the program, reviewed program materials, visited Success for All sites, participated in a presentation by Johns Hopkins staff, and decided to become an SFA school. This required that 80 percent of all the teachers vote to commit to the program for three years. “Our teachers are fantastic: hard working, committed and enthusiastic,” said Harriet Krohn, the SFA teacher facilitator. “SFA offers a structure for shaping their passion, their skills and their efforts. It makes sense and it works.”

“Make no mistake about it, this is hard work,” explained Chapter Leader Judy Esposito. “But good teachers have always worked hard. The difference for us is that now we can really see the impact of our hard work. Our children are reading.”

Excerpt from “Success for All in East New York,” *New York Teacher*, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 22, June 16, 1997. Full article is available in AFT’s *Raising Student Achievement: A Resource Guide for Redesigning Low-Performing Schools*.

Before selecting a program, a planning team should conduct an assessment of its school’s needs. Once a school’s most pressing problems have been identified, school staff should be able to match these needs against programs that work.

But it seems that each day, more school reform programs emerge—each with unique features and each offering promises of research-based practices and increased student success. Making sense of a program’s claims and sifting through this information can be confusing.

The key to selecting a program “is to approach the choice of a school reform program as an important and complicated consumer decision,” suggests Dr. Samuel Stringfield (“Choosing Success,” *American Educator*, Fall 1998).” To make an informed consumer choice, educators need objective and in-depth information about available programs. When considering a program, educators should use the following criteria:

- Does the program help all students acquire the skills and/or knowledge they need to successfully perform to high academic standards?
- Has the program proven to be effective in raising the achievement levels of “at-risk” students in low-performing schools based on *independent evaluations*?

- Has the program been effectively implemented in multiple sites beyond the original pilot school(s)?
- Does the program provide necessary support structures—professional development, materials and ongoing implementation support—either through the program’s developer, independent contractors or networks established by schools already in the program?

Resources are now available to help answer these questions. For example, AFT’s *What Works* series and *An Educators’ Guide to Schoolwide Reform* provides descriptions of program components, outlines program costs and reviews the research evidence of several schoolwide programs.

The *Educators’ Guide* also suggests steps that educators should follow when researching a school reform program, including asking the program developers questions, calling a random sampling of program schools and—whenever possible—visiting program schools. This last step—the school visit—is crucial.

How can a visit to a program school help me make a better choice?

Visiting a school using a promising program is an important “seeing-is-believing test,” according to Dr. Stringfield. While literature and phone conversations can be useful, visiting classrooms and talking with staff, students and community members provides an opportunity for you to gain a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of a particular program. By examining the program in action, you can compare the challenges facing your school to the efforts of other schools.

This guide provides key questions, considerations and procedures to help you make the most of visits to schools using promising programs.

DOING YOUR HOMEWORK

Who will plan the visit?

Your school improvement planning team will complete the initial planning for the school visit. As mentioned earlier, this should represent key people or groups who will be involved in reform efforts, such as teachers, paraprofessionals, union representatives, parents, school administrators and district representatives. Once established, your school improvement planning team should begin by conducting an assessment of the school’s needs and by generating a list of programs that may meet these needs.

Once your team has identified one or more programs for further research and consideration, plan to contact the program developers and to visit schools using the program(s). Your school improvement planning team should appoint at least one person to act as the visit coordinator. This person will be responsible for completing all calls, logistics and plans for the visit.

Which school(s) will you visit?

Call the program(s) under consideration. Get program materials, data and a list of schools. Explain that your school/ district is considering the program and ask a program representative to send you materials on the program. Share this information with your team. Also, ask the program staff for a list of all program schools and for a list of program schools that accept visitors (particularly schools in your area). Some promising programs provide contact information and lists of schools on their Web sites.

Always ask the program for independent evaluations of the program and student achievement data on the program. Promising programs, such as those profiled in AFT's *What Works*, must be able to provide more than one independent evaluation that shows positive effects on student achievement over several years. If a program cannot provide you with this basic information, proceed with caution and consider looking at another program. Sam Stringfield warns that "the absence of adequate data is just as damning as data pointing consistently in the wrong direction...any group asking school people to spend tax dollars, and the time and work of teachers and others, must understand that its word that a program will work is not enough ("Choosing Success," *American Educator*, Fall 1998)."

Q: How can I contact a program?

Program contact information is listed in AFT's *What Works* series and in *An Educators' Guide to Schoolwide Reform*. Consider inviting a program representative to your school to discuss the program. You may opt to schedule a presentation for your team as a preview of your school visit. Or you might choose to arrange a presentation for a larger audience of staff and community members after your visit. Work with your team and with the program contact to decide when it would be best to schedule a presentation.

Using the list of all program schools, make calls to several schools. If your school or district lacks the financial resources to make one or more school visits, these calls will be essential to your research and planning process. Work with your planning team to decide who will make the calls and to generate a set of questions about the program and the school.

Create a list of possible schools to visit. Depending on your budget and your interests, consider the following: Is the school close to you? Are the school's students similar to the students in your school or district? Has the school just begun the program, or has the program been in place for some time? Is the school successful or is it still struggling? Consider visiting multiple program schools to see how/if the program varies at different stages of implementation and from school to school.

Contact the local union once you have generated a list of possible sites. The union representative on your school improvement planning team should be responsible for this call. He or she should ask for background information on a particular school(s) and discuss whether it would be appropriate and productive for union members to visit one or more of these schools. If a visit to a particular school would not be appropriate, perhaps the local union can refer you to another school using the same program.

Contact the building representative once you have checked in with the local union and pinpointed a school to visit. The building representative (or chapter chair/chapter leader) may be able to provide valuable first-hand information about the school and the program. Again, the union representative on your school improvement planning team should be responsible for this call. He or she should ask the building representative to help arrange your visit or refer you to a school administrator who can. At this point, you should seek clearance for your visit from the administration at the school or district. Be sure to ask the building representative whether he or she would be willing to meet with you sometime during your visit.

Who will go?

Bring a team. Visiting with a few carefully selected people can help you build consensus and collaboration in your school or district. A team visit helps everyone develop a common understanding of the program and can help your team work together to choose the best program for your school/district. You might use the information you have gathered on the program and school you'll be visiting to generate interest and recruit "visit team" members. Your visit team should include members of your school improvement planning team and may include other representatives from key groups that will be involved in, or affected by, the reform. Consider inviting one or more of the following people:

- ✓ Counselor
- ✓ Community Representative
- ✓ Curriculum Advisor
- ✓ Facilitator
- ✓ Local Foundation Representative
- ✓ Local Government Representative
- ✓ Local Union Leadership
- ✓ Paraprofessional
- ✓ Parent Representative
- ✓ Principal
- ✓ School Board Member
- ✓ School Support Staff Member
- ✓ Superintendent (or designee)
- ✓ Teacher
- ✓ Union Building Representative

Q: Should we invite the press?

No if:

- your team is in tentative, early stages of the program selection/planning process,
- your team is uncertain about the quality of the school you'll be visiting,
- your team is divided or uncertain about a particular program or reform process.
- your team's school or district is engaged in any controversies, which although unrelated, might deflect public attention from the improvement process.

Yes if:

- your team is in the final stages of the program selection/planning process.
- your team is confident about the quality of the school you'll be visiting,
- your team is unified around a particular program and the reform process,
- your team is ready to spotlight effective programs and build public confidence that the union, management and others are working together to improve schools.

Identify potential dates. Once you know who is going, pinpoint several dates that would be possible for all team members. Remember, there are times when you should NOT visit: at the start or end of the school year, during student testing, and around holidays or major school vacations. Once you've scheduled a date with the school (*see the next step*), confirm that date with all members of team.

Send the school a letter to confirm your visit and to initiate planning the structure of your visit. In the letter, you should:

- **Ask the school to send pertinent materials on the school, its community, its improvement plans, the school's program(s), and the school's results.** Schools or their districts should be able to provide you with a complete school report for the past three years. The school profile should include: information on attendance rates, student mobility, staff mobility, principal turnover, staff qualifications, student demographics and discipline referral rates. The profile must include student achievement data (standardized test scores) from at least the past three years. If possible, ask the school or district for data from the year before they adopted the program and for each consecutive year to date.

Save any documents from the school—you will use this information later to plan the content of your visit. You can use this information to generate interest in the visit and recruit visit-team members (as outlined in the next step). One week before your visit, you'll also need to distribute copies of this in an information packet to all visit team members.

- **Ask which of your potential dates will work best.** Provide the list of possible dates that your team has identified and ask which date works best for the school.
- **Provide the names and titles of visit-team members.** Include visit-team members' job titles (i.e. teacher, principal, paraprofessional, parent...) to give the school a sense of the audience and what each visitor's particular concerns may be.

- **Identify specific questions or concerns your team has about the program or the school.** If your team has already pinpointed specific features of the program they would like to observe or specific persons they would like to speak with, list them in the letter. Note: If your team has not yet identified a specific set of goals for the visit, carefully review the next two steps of this guide. Once you have completed these steps and identified goals, share your team's goals with the school you'll be visiting.
- **Discuss any logistical questions.** These concerns might include questions about transportation, meals or nearby hotels.
- **Provide your contact information.** Though you will be calling your liaison at the school to finalize all plans, you should at least provide a phone number where you can be reached in case the school staff has any questions or concerns.

What are your expectations of the visit?

Working with your team, create a written set of expectations for your visit. Together, review your school's needs and create a list of issues or concerns your team may have about the program you are going to visit. Use this list of concerns to help your team decide what to see and whom to talk to during your visit. Also use the information your team has gathered about the program and the school you'll be visiting to help you plan the structure of your visit: Does the material describe aspects of the school or program that you want to observe? Does it raise questions about the school or program that can be answered during your visit?

Evaluate the school's data carefully—if there is a shift in scores, try to determine to what extent the results are tied to the program or to other changes in the school or district. For example, a change in a school's scores could be tied to a turnover in school/district administration, shifts in demographics, changes to assessment systems or other programs in the school. A move from open enrollment to a selective admissions program could also affect a school's performance. When you examine the school's data, look for any factors that may have influenced achievement and use this information to develop your expectations for the visit.

Finally, consider providing information about your team's expectations to the contact at the school you'll be visiting. Sharing these goals may help you and your contact work together to plan the content of your visit.

Q: Getting there - Who pays?

Most schools or districts are able to use Title I, professional development, school improvement or discretionary funds to pay for the visit. Check with your local superintendent and school board for funding possibilities. Local non-profit foundations, reform groups, and business or community organizations may be another source of funds – particularly if a representative of such a group participates in your school or district planning team. Also, most states offer funds for school improvement or professional development. Ask your state superintendent's office or Title I coordinator for more information.

Who Stays?

If you visit a school that is more than a day's drive away, remember that you will have to make travel arrangements and reservations at a nearby hotel/motel for all members of the visit team. In this case, your team will have to decide: will team members make arrangements independently or will the visit coordinator handle all arrangements? Also, how will team member get to the school? Will ground transportation (like a bus or van) be required? Who will provide the transportation? Remember that the school you visit may be able to recommend nearby accommodations and transportation options to suit your budget.

Seeing Progress – A Planning Checklist

At least 8-12 weeks before the visit:

- Assemble school improvement planning team (this team will do most of the initial work).
- Work together to assess your school's/district's needs.
- Search through publications and resources to evaluate possible programs for your school/district (for example: *An Educators' Guide to Schoolwide Reform.*)
- Create a tentative list of programs your school/district will consider.
- Appoint one person to act as the visit coordinator.
- Contact program(s) under consideration to:
 - Ask for program information, materials and student achievement data.
 - Ask for a list of schools and visitation sites.
- Share the program materials with your team members.
- Research the program by randomly calling several schools on the list of program schools.
- Create a list of possible schools to visit.
- Contact the local union in the districts you wish to visit.
- Pinpoint at least one site to visit and contact the school's building representative.
- Get final permission for your visit from administrators at the school or district you'll be visiting.
- Determine who will visit the school. Create a visit team composed of key people or groups in your school/district.

At least 6-8 weeks before the visit:

- Identify several dates for the visit that are possible for your visit team.
- Send the school administrator a letter:
 - Ask the school to send information on the school, its community, its improvement plans, its program(s) and its results (including student achievement data).
 - Ask which of your team's dates will work best.
 - List the people who will be visiting (specify names and job titles).
 - Identify specific questions or concerns your team has about the school or program.
 - Discuss logistics: transportation, meals or nearby hotel accommodations.
 - Provide contact information where you can be reached.
- Work with your team to review your school's needs and to create list of goals for your visit.
- Determine what your team hopes to see, with whom you will talk and when.
- Contact the school administrator to finalize the date of your visit and to begin scheduling the content of your visit.
- Assign each team member a role or focus for the visit.
- Ask one team member to act as the recorder during and after the visit.
- Compose a list of questions to use during the visit. Distribute this list to team members.
- Contact the school administrator to finalize the date of your visit and your visit agenda.
- Plan to meet for a debriefing session immediately after the visit.
- Identify possible "next steps" after the visit. Decide how team will use visit findings and how team will report back to school and community.
- Confirm that all team members have completed any travel arrangements they will require.

One to two weeks in advance:

- Send a briefing packet to each team member that includes:
 - A copy of program/school information.
 - A schedule of the day's events.
 - Directions to the school.
 - A list of each team member's role.
 - Information on when and where to meet immediately before the visit.
 - Information on when and where the debriefing session will take place after the visit.
- Contact school and/or program to confirm all arrangements.

The day before:

- ❑ Meet for a final review of team plans and roles. Be sure team members have necessary materials.
- ❑ Contact the school to reconfirm.

The visit:

- ❑ Try to get as many perspectives as possible by talking to teachers, paraprofessionals, support staff, union representatives, students, principals, parents, program staff, school facilitators, and community or business partners.
- ❑ Use the questions your team identified before the visit to generate discussion.
- ❑ Observe classrooms, libraries, computer labs, hallways between classes and special facilities of the school or program.
- ❑ Use the tips for classroom observation to guide you.
- ❑ Take notes when possible.

Immediately after the visit:

- ❑ Meet immediately after the visit to share observations and create a plan of action.
- ❑ Keep running notes of this meeting (this role is part of the team recorder's duties.)
- ❑ Each team member should share observations about his or her assigned role.
- ❑ List outstanding practices and areas of concern.
- ❑ Use your notes, the tips for classroom observations and the sample questions to guide your discussion.
- ❑ Identify follow-up questions about unclear aspects of the school or program. Decide whom your team will call for this information and assign appropriate people to make those calls.
- ❑ Schedule a meeting to discuss the answers to your follow-up questions.
- ❑ Plan follow-up actions: What will your team do with the knowledge gained during the visit? How will you gain support for any next steps? Prepare a written report and plan to communicate with the school and community. You might schedule a formal presentation for key people or groups from your school/district; invite a program representative to your school/district; or visit another school using the same program.

Following-up after the visit:

- ❑ Carry out your follow-up plans. Remember to seek input and consensus from staff, students, parents, community members and other key groups in your school/district.
- ❑ Decide as a group whether you will recommend a staff vote on adoption of the program, further exploration of the program, research of a supplementary program, or rejection of the program and research into a new program.

What will you see? When?

Use your list of goals and the information you've received about the program and the school to determine what you want to observe. Work with the school contact to schedule the content of your visit. The length of time you have to visit will determine how much you will be able to see and how in-depth your observations will be. A typical visit usually begins with a tour of the school and a brief orientation with school administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals and/or program staff. Your schedule should also allow ample time for classroom visits, discussions with staff, students, program representatives and more.

To see teaching and learning in action, your team should try to observe at least one classroom and stay long enough to view a substantial amount of the lesson. Observing more than one classroom will allow your team to understand how different staffers have adapted to the program/instructional approach.

Also, consider observing the following:

- ✓ library or resource center;
- ✓ computer lab;
- ✓ hallways between classes and/or cafeteria during lunch. (This may help give a sense of school climate and will certainly be useful for you to observe if behavior management is a concern.)
- ✓ any special facilities at school. Examples: a teacher center/resource area, parent center, discipline center or guidance office.

Arrange the visit so that your team is able to observe any unique features of the program. For example, Success for All and many Direct Instruction schools conduct a 90-minute reading period, usually at the beginning of each day. If your team wants to see this event, work with the school to schedule your visit accordingly. Also, if your team plans to stay for lunch, be sure to check with the school and make special arrangements.

How will you structure your team during the visit?

Assign every person on the team a specific set of responsibilities. Giving each team member a focus or role will help your team gain in-depth information on each area of concern. For instance, if your school is concerned with discipline or management, be sure that one person on your team is focused solely on that issue. During the visit, that person fulfills this role by asking for a copy of the discipline code, talking to the person responsible for enforcing that code, watching student behavior in class, noting teachers' classroom management techniques and observing behavior in hallways between classes. Try to match each team member's role with his or her interests and with your team's list of goals. Make certain that the team agrees upon each member's assigned role.

Assign one team member to act as the team recorder during the visit. This person will be responsible for keeping all documents received from the school and program, recording the team's observations after the visit and keeping notes on the team's action plans/ideas.

Q: Does your visit team represent everyone who will need to support the program?

When assigning roles, you might find it's time to rethink the composition of your team. For example, Consistency Management and Cooperative Discipline (CMCD) is a program that involves every adult in the school – from administrators to teachers, specialists, paraprofessionals and support staff. Each of these groups should be represented on your visit team if you will be visiting a school implementing CMCD.

With whom should your team speak?

Use your team's list of goals to decide whom your team will meet with during the visit. Plan the context of these meetings carefully. Try to get as many perspectives as possible. Consider talking with teachers, union representatives, students, principal, paraprofessionals, support staff, parents, program staff, school facilitators and community or business partners. Remember to schedule discussion time after your classroom observation or at the end of the visit to meet with staff and ask questions about what you observed. Note: The role of paraprofessionals and support staff will vary depending on the program you will observe. Ask both the school and the program about the role of paraprofessionals and support staff in the program. If these faculty members are involved in the program, plan to observe and/or talk with these staffers during your visit.

When planning the format for these discussions, think about how formal or informal you want these conversations to be. Would you prefer a scheduled block of time with certain people? Will you also try to spark an informal conversation during an appropriate free moment? If you'll schedule a meeting, will it be with an individual or a group of people? Consider how you can create a risk-free

environment to encourage open, candid conversation. Work with your school contact on these plans, and make arrangements so that each person you wish to meet with will be available during your visit.

What questions will you ask?

Once you've decided what you'll see and with whom you'll speak, work with your team to compose a list of questions to ask your hosts. The questions should address your team's concerns about the program and the school and should focus on program implementation, program costs, program effectiveness, school organization and school plans. Give each team member a copy of the team's list of questions.

How will you follow-up?

Before the visit, work together to identify next steps your team plans to make after the visit. First, plan to meet with your team immediately after the visit for a debriefing session. During this session, your team will share observations, identify outstanding practices, pinpoint areas of concern and plan to gather more information to answer any lingering questions.

Second, your team should consider possible next steps in the improvement process. Before you go, think about how you might report back to your school/district on your visit findings. Plan to prepare a written report and to share your observations with your school and community.

ARE YOU READY?

One week before the visit: send a briefing packet to each team member. Assemble this packet using the program and school background information that you requested in earlier steps. Include information about the school (newspaper stories, school brochures, school evaluations) and the program (description, implementation information, results).

Also provide directions to the school; a tentative agenda or brief description of how the visit will be structured; and a list of each team member and their assigned roles for the visit. Finally, suggest a place for the team to meet immediately before the visit (usually at the school) and a place to meet afterward to discuss and plan (e.g., a nearby restaurant or hotel). If each team member is familiar with this information before the day of the visit, you may be able to cut down on "introductory" or "overview" activities and spend more time on in-depth observations and discussions.

One week before the visit: Confirm all arrangements. Call the school to confirm the visit agenda. Ask where to park (you may need special passes). Be sure all travel arrangements have been made. Double check with team members to ensure that they have read all background materials on the school/program, have directions to school and a schedule of the visit. Remind team when and where to meet before and after the visit.

A day or two before the visit, meet with your visit team for a final review of team plans and roles during the visit.

THE VISIT

When you get there, do a last minute check to be sure that everyone is clear about his or her responsibilities during the visit. As you visit, each team member should focus on his or her assigned role.

Use the set of questions your team created before the visit to guide your observations. Consider the following:

- **Classrooms.** Are students engaged? Are the lessons challenging? Are the teachers comfortable with the program? What special materials are being used? Are there computers in the classroom? Are they well used? What, if any, differences are there across classrooms. Would this approach be appropriate for your school? (*See Page C52 for classroom observations tips.*)
- **Library.** What are the materials like? Is it well used? Would your school's library meet the needs of the program?
- **Computer lab.** How is it staffed? Who has access to the computers? What are the computers used for? Are the computers a required component of the program? Who staffs the lab? Do the teachers and/or paraprofessionals receive training? Can your school accommodate this technology?
- **Hallways** between classes and/or cafeteria during lunch. Is the environment safe and orderly? Are the students well behaved? How do school staffers manage these times?
- **Program facilitator.** (Some schools will have an on-site school improvement facilitator who is employed by the program or by the district.) Who employs the facilitator? What is the facilitator's role in the school? How often is he/she in the school? How long after program implementation will this facilitator work in the school?
- **Paraprofessionals and support staff.** What role do these staff members play in the program and the school? Are paraprofessionals and support staff included in staff development? Do paraprofessionals and support staff feel properly trained for their positions?
- Any **special facilities** at the school such as a teacher center, parent center, resource area, or counseling office. Are these a required part of program? (Some Success for All schools, for example, have set aside a special room for tutoring.) How did the school establish them? What resources are required to implement and maintain them? How are they used? Does the staff find them useful? Would this be possible and helpful at your school?

Look for appropriate, unplanned moments to ask a question or gain insight from a student or staff member. You may find a free moment in the hallways or in a staff room to privately speak to a student or staff member in a non-disruptive and more informal manner. These unplanned moments, when the students or staff are not "on display," often allow visitors to get candid responses that provide useful insight into the school or program.

Remember to consider how this school operates as a whole: Are there other initiatives taking place at the school? Do these initiatives complement the program or detract from it? Does the staff recommend additional initiatives to supplement the program? Would your school need to consider additional initiatives to make the program work?

Q: What should we ask staff of schools using promising programs?

Note: Staff members will answer these questions differently based on their experience and role within the school. Keep this in mind as you try to appropriately target questions to school faculty and administrators.

- How long has your school been using this program, and why did your school select this particular model?
- In your opinion, what are the strengths of this program?
- What are the major challenges of adopting this program?
- Has your school made any adaptations to the original design provided by the developer? Example? Why did your school decide to make that particular adaptation?
- How did you begin implementing this program in your school? What do you think were the benefits and disadvantages of your decisions/implementation?
- Did you receive extra assistance/resources to help your school implement the program? Please describe.
- Please describe any professional development you attended to implement the program. Who provided the professional development? What are your feelings about this experience? Are professional development opportunities still available to you? Who provides them?
- What is the role of paraprofessionals and support staff in the program? Are these staff members included in whole school staff development or do they receive separate training?
- How does this program fit into state or district requirements in your school?
- In your experience, is this program equally effective for all of your students or have you found it to be more/less effective with some (i.e., special needs students)? If there is a difference, what do you think explains this difference?
- Do you think this approach would be equally effective for all types of schools and districts?
- How have you reacted/adapted to the program? Have your feelings concerning this approach changed over the course of the time you have been using it? Do you think most of the staff shares your feelings? Please explain.
- Has this program either helped staff work more collaboratively or created/exaggerated differences among staff? Please describe.
- Please describe the costs of the program. Is the cost per pupil? If so, please specify how many students the costs cover. What are the extra costs associated with the program for the first year of implementation? Are your school's costs the same as when you first started using this approach? If not, what is the same and what is different? Did costs include: additional personnel (full and part time)? Materials (required and supplementary)? Staff development (release time, stipend, travel/per diem, trainer, fees, other expenses)? Other costs?
- Has your school attempted to involve parents and the community in improvement efforts? How? Have these efforts been successful?
- What process is followed for evaluating the effectiveness of the program? Are these evaluations used to guide planning? How?
- Given a second chance, would you choose to adopt this program? Have you learned things while using this approach that would lead you to do things differently?
- What, if any, steps are you planning for future reforms?

(Some sample questions have been adapted from *An Educators' Guide to Schoolwide Reform*, page G-4)

Q: What should we look for during classroom observations?

Note: Use the following questions to help focus your classroom observations. You can also use these questions to guide discussions with staff after your observations and with your team after the visit.

Learning Environment

- ✓ Is the classroom environment safe and orderly?
- ✓ Is the classroom arrangement conducive to classroom activities? For example, if students are expected to work in groups for part of the lesson and then make presentations to the class, is the classroom arrangement flexible enough to suit each activity easily? Or is the arrangement too rigid or congested?
- ✓ Is the classroom comfortable and attractive? Do the classroom displays, bulletin boards and other decorations reflect high expectations of behavior and achievement? Is the decoration of the classroom directly connected to the class curriculum and to student learning?
- ✓ Is a particular strategy, technique or classroom arrangement part of the promising program used in this school, or is it an adaptation of that individual teacher or school? Was that method part of the school's staff development?
- ✓ Do you feel welcome as a visitor in the classroom? Why or why not?

Instructional Strategies

- ✓ What are the objectives of the class? How are students made aware of these objectives? Are the objectives met?
- ✓ What does the teacher do to highlight important concepts in the lesson? Does this seem effective?
- ✓ How does the teacher encourage/discourage student participation? How does the teacher ask questions (what questioning techniques are being used)? What verbal or nonverbal cues does the teacher use?
- ✓ Does the teacher check for student understanding? When and how?
- ✓ Does the teacher use examples or special techniques to clarify concepts? Are these effective? Will they help students remember the concept?
- ✓ What kinds of activities and assignments are involved in the lesson? Seatwork? Groupwork? Presentations? Quizzes? Discussions? Debates?
- ✓ What is the role of paraprofessionals in the classroom? How do teachers and the paraprofessionals coordinate their roles? Do they integrate their planning and work?

Student Performance

- ✓ What evidence of student learning is apparent? Try to look at samples of student work. Does the level of student work seem appropriate? Does it reflect high standards?
- ✓ Do the classroom activities reflect high expectations of achievement and behavior? How?
- ✓ How often and in what manner do the students interact with the teacher? With each other? Is this interaction positive? Are most student interactions productive or disruptive (be sure to separate the two)? What particular incidents support your opinion?
- ✓ Are all students engaged? Are all students participating? What are students' attitudes about the class or particular activities? How are these attitudes made apparent?

Classroom Management

- ✓ What routines and procedures does the teacher use to manage classroom activities (i.e., attendance, homework collection, bathroom requests, pencil-sharpening, etc.)?
- ✓ How does the teacher manage student behavior? Does the teacher reinforce or reward positive behavior? What are the consequences for negative behavior?
- ✓ What is the role of paraprofessionals in classroom management?

Cross-Classroom Observations

- ✓ How has the program affected the practices of each teacher?
- ✓ Do teachers use common techniques, practices or materials? Are these similar features part of the promising program used in the school?
- ✓ Does each teacher approach the program in the same manner? If not, how do teacher approaches vary? Does this variation positively or negatively affect the quality of the program's implementation?

AFTER THE VISIT: DEBRIEFING

Meet immediately after the visit to share information and create a plan of action. The team recorder should gather all documents, record team observations and prepare a written report.

What did you think?

Team members should share observations about his or her assigned role. Try to focus the conversation on goals or concerns your team had identified before the visit.

Identify outstanding practices as well as any areas of concern. What did each team member like or dislike about the program? Is the approach appropriate for your staff, students and community? Is this a program you would recommend for adoption in your school/district? How would this program fit into your school's/district's strategic improvement plan? Do you need to know more about specific aspects of the school or program? How will you get this information? Can you get this information from the program? The school? A review of research? Do you need to visit another site?

Contact the program and/or school with follow-up questions. Create a set of follow-up questions for the school and/or the program based on your team's needs, identify one or more team members who will make those calls, and establish a timeline for gathering and sharing this information with your team.

Note: If your team identifies a large number of follow-up questions for the program or the school, you may need to gather this information before your team moves on to plan further action. If this is the case, use part of your debriefing session to set a deadline for gathering information and schedule a follow-up meeting so you can review this information and plan next steps.

FOLLOWING-UP: WHAT'S THE PLAN?

Decide what your team will do with the knowledge you gained during the visit. Work together to reach consensus on the program and to plan concrete next steps. Your team should decide how the group will report back to your school/district on your visit findings.

Prepare a written report and plan to share this report and your team's impressions with school staff and community members. Sharing information with your school and community, and gaining their support for any further plans, is an action that is too often overlooked. Yet this step is essential to ensure the success of any next steps in the school improvement process. Your school improvement team should consider who will be affected by a decision based on your visit. How will you gain the support of these people? Consider informal conversations as well as a more formal presentation or debriefing session with members of key groups (school staff, parents, administrators, school board members or other community groups). Decide who will present this information? To whom? How? When? Will you distribute materials on the program or the school? Will you require assistance from a representative of the program or the school? How will you seek feedback?

Will you make recommendations about the program? The recommendations that your team makes will vary according to your team's plans and your team's position on the program under consideration. If your team is uniformly favorable to the program, you might recommend that staff be allowed to vote on adoption of the program or to further explore its options. If your team's position on the program is mixed, you might suggest follow-up and further research into that program. Or, your team might recommend researching a program that would work well in conjunction with the program you visited. If your team is uniformly opposed to the program, you might suggest rejecting it entirely and searching for another program.