Feature

The Full Measure of a School

Student test scores tell only part of the story. Observations can round out the narrative.

FOR NEARLY A QUARTER CENTURY, school accountability in the United States has centered on quantitative measures of school quality, especially student scores on standardized tests. The federal government now allows states to supplement test scores with other factors such as attendance and school climate, but the emphasis on quantitative evaluation remains.

What if state accountability systems also involved visitors—trained and experienced—walking the halls of schools, observing classrooms, and talking with educators, parents, and students, then reporting back with findings?

This more-qualitative assessment strategy is used in U.S. schools more often than you might imagine, though the topic tends to generate little public attention or media coverage. And the popular term in the United Kingdom and other European countries—"school inspections"—is mostly avoided here, even as the English model in particular has been touted from time to time as a potential paradigm for public schools on this side of the pond (see sidebar).

Some states, including Colorado, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, and Wyoming, carry out school visits—often referred to as school-quality reviews—and typically produce reports based on the findings. The Maryland effort, launched in the 2023-24 school year, appears to be one of the most ambitious, with plans to visit every public school in coming years, including 150 this academic year.

"At the beginning, [schools] were very nervous" about the visits, said Paula Cage, the director of the Office of School Review, Support, and Improvement at the Maryland State Department of Education. "But this is not an 'I gotcha.'"

Maryland school visits include classroom observations, an interview with the school principal, and focus groups with other school leaders, teachers, parents, and students. The visit results in a published report with detailed findings, including ratings and recommendations on curriculum and instruction, student support, and educator support.

In designing Maryland's approach, Cage said, her team did extensive research, including a look at the inspection system in England. "We are focused on the teaching and learning that is going on in the building. . . . The expert review teams are trained on all of the protocols."

Some individual school districts also use the strategy—perhaps best known is the longstanding program at the New York City Department of Education, which started up in the early 1990s. The public schools in Cleveland, Denver, and Norwalk, Connecticut, have also conducted school reviews recently.

Meanwhile, inspections are common in the charter school sector, especially during the periodic renewal process for these public schools of choice by their authorizer. In addition, charter networks such as Achievement

By ERIK W. ROBELEN

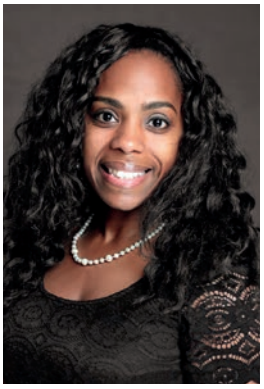
JOHN WEBER

First, IDEA Public Schools, and Uncommon Schools use formal school visits and related activities (such as reviewing student work) as a way to keep tabs on teaching and learning, help schools improve, and ensure fidelity to school-culture norms and the chosen instructional model.

"The majority of the day is observing classrooms—not just teachers who are struggling but also the best teachers on campus," said Dolores Gonzalez, the deputy superintendent of IDEA Public Schools, which serves about 90,000 students in four states. "A school review is successful if you are leaving that school understanding what they do well, plus one to three things that need improvement."

Varied Practices

It's not easy to get a reliable read on how widespread in-person reviews of school quality are in the United States. Practices seem to vary widely, as does the terminology used to describe the inspections: school-quality reviews, school visits, site visits, school evaluation visits, or, as in Maryland, visits by "expert review teams."



Paula Cage, director of Maryland's Office of School Review, Support, and Improvement

Also, review systems may come and go, depending on budgetary issues or competing priorities. From time to time, an op-ed or news article pops up that explores the concept, usually in an education-news outlet such as *Education Week* or *The 74* (including a 2012 story and blog post by this author).

Vermont drew some media attention, including in *Education Week*, for its "integrated field reviews," which included school visits. A visit would typically last one full day, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., said Josh Souliere, the director of the Education Quality Assurance team at the Vermont Agency of Education. "In classrooms, we were looking for instructional practices, looking at the classroom environment, the physical environment," he said.

But the pandemic shutdown halted the process, and it still has not resumed. Likewise, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district had inspections for a few years but ended them in 2013, citing budget constraints.

The new Maryland system is part of the state's Blueprint for Maryland's Future, an initiative passed by the state General Assembly in 2021 that aims to "transform public education" in the state.

In the 2024–25 school year, state-assembled teams are conducting 150 school visits across Maryland, up from 50 the previous school year. Not every school will get a repeat visit; the reviews are more frequent for schools identified for "school improvement" under the state's accountability system.

The state department of education published reviews online for all schools visited in 2023–24. Full reports typically run to 20-plus pages. They focused on three domains: curriculum and instruction, student support, and educator support. For each "measure" in each domain, the state provided the visiting teams' rating of the school, from "accomplishing with continuous improvement," the highest, to "accomplishing," "developing," and "not evident," meaning the team did not observe any plan for implementing the measure or attaining a given outcome. The reports also identified "strengths" and "areas for growth," with recommended actions.

The reviews underwent some changes for 2024–25. For instance, they now focus exclusively on elementary schools and on English language arts and math. Also, they address two domains: 1) instruction and student support and 2) professional learning and educator support. The reviews no longer include ratings but continue to identify "strengths" and "areas for growth" plus recommendations and action steps, Cage said.

Under the Maryland statute, the report and recommendations, starting in 2025, could impact "all or a portion" of a public school's annual increase in state funding if the school fails to develop a "satisfactory plan" for use of funds consistent with the expert review teams' recommendations.

Representatives of the Maryland school districts and statewide education groups who were contacted for this story all declined to comment or did not respond.

Rosalyn Rice-Harris, a senior director at the Council of Chief State School Officers, has experienced formal school visits from several vantage points, including as the "recipient" of a school visit when she was a principal in Virginia, as a school-visit team member at a district level, and as part of the visiting teams for Maryland.

"I think everyone needs and deserves feedback," she said, and inspections help to provide a "holistic picture" in tandem with achievement data. Rice-Harris says that while the classroom observations are a key ingredient, she also greatly values the conversations.

"You could always worry that it would be this show that is being put on" by the school, she said. "And that is why in the school visit, it's so important to talk to the parents, kids, and teachers and also talk to school leadership."

For many years, Massachusetts has had a system of in-person quality reviews for low-performing schools. Unlike Maryland, though, Massachusetts does not publish its reviews, and members of the public can only access them by submitting a Freedom of Information Act request. About 90 Massachusetts public schools receive a visit each year.

Maryland's school review effort appears to be one of the most ambitious, with plans to visit every public school in coming years, including 150 this academic year.

Charter School Networks

The charter school sector is fertile ground for inspections in both the charter authorizing process and the work of charter management organizations, or CMOs.

Some CMOs view school inspections as an important way to support their schools and to ensure both academic quality and fidelity to the model.

Take IDEA Public Schools. With 146 charter schools in four states, the CMO is larger than most school districts. In addition to conducting classroom observations, its school visitors also engage with students.

"It is very typical to ask students, 'Tell me what you are learning today: What are the goals of this class?'" said Gonzalez, the deputy superintendent. "And then looking over their shoulder at their work."

School visits are also a prime opportunity for IDEA to "look at school culture in general. We have a culture rubric," she said. "Does it look and feel like an IDEA school?"

In Texas, IDEA is launching a new, more intensive review process for schools that receive below a C rating from the state's A–F accountability system. This will involve monthly visits, plus—in some cases—weekly or biweekly calls to review data, Gonzalez said. "It is almost a school review on steroids for schools that really, really need that support."

While the word "inspections" is rarely uttered in American education circles—some say it sounds too clinical—the Uncommon Schools charter network embraces the term.

"We do call them inspections, and we've been conducting them since 2006," said Juliana Worrell, the chief of K–8 schools for the CMO, which serves about 20,000 students across 52 schools in New York City, Boston, Camden, New Jersey, and Rochester, New York. Worrell has been on more than 100 such inspections herself.

"There is a team of folks who come into the schools, conduct observations, conduct leader and teacher interviews," she said. The goals are to assess the "general health and wellness of the school" and identify recommendations to "directly drive accelerated results for student achievement."

The visitors also talk to teachers: "We ask the same questions: How would you rate your school around rigor, climate?" Worrell said. "What was the last piece of feedback that you received? How did that impact you? . . . If you could wave a magic wand and change three things, what would they be?"

Nearly every school in the network gets at least one visit each year, she said.

"Everyone is human, so of course folks are nervous," Worrell said. "There is a healthy nervousness that happens; it's a big deal. But because this is not a punitive process, they will get feedback to be a better teacher, better leader."

Success Academy, which operates 57 schools serving 22,000 students across the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens, also conducts regular site visits.

During classroom observations, "we want to see scholars having fun, learning, not bored. We look for that," said LaMae de Jongh, the CMO's chief schooling officer. "That is obviously very important."

Reviewers look for other markers of quality as well. "Are the adults in the building [showing] fidelity to our school design?" she said. "Are they being insistent with our scholars? Are they elevating the scholars' thinking, pushing them in an appropriate way when analyzing a poem or working through a gnarly math problem?"

As part of its oversight, Success Academy reviews student work at individual schools. "The scholar work tells us so much—not so much about the student performance, but the efficacy of the teaching and learning," said de Jongh. "We are looking at the strategy that scholars are using to problem-solve. . . . We are looking at the effort level that is put in."

LaMae de Jongh, chief schooling officer for Success Academy charter schools in New York City

The network's leadership does not hesitate to intervene when it sees reasons for concern stemming from a school visit and supporting data.

"We may work with the principal to make some different assignments" of staff, she said. "Move them to different grades. We may actually move educators or staff from one school to [another]." She added, "In some instances, the intervention may be that we need to transition to a new principal."

Elements of High-Quality Inspections

Authorizers play a key role in oversight of charter schools and ultimately make decisions on allowing a new school to

open and on extending the life of an existing school.

Karega Rausch, the president and CEO of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, or NACSA, said site visits are an important component of authorizers' oversight role. Such visits typically include observing classrooms as well as talking with teachers and administrators, students and families.

One key ingredient that sets apart high-quality site visits is careful preparation and planning, Rausch said.

"A mediocre [approach] would be a loose plan, and more like being able to 'check the box' that we went to schools and talked to people," he said. "That is very different from a high-quality process with a very thorough plan, with a number of different, very specific, and intentional elements."

One such element is a clear classroom observation protocol, he said. Another is speaking with the charter school's leadership ahead of the visit to explain what the review will entail and what the intent is, and to ask "what good instruction would look like" from the leadership's perspective. And, in discussions with students and parents, Rausch said, it is important to make sure all grade levels and student populations are represented.

He cited as strong examples the site-visit protocols of the District of Columbia Public Charter School Board, the Massachusetts Department of Education, and the SUNY Charter Schools Institute.

Rausch said a "robust site-visit report" includes both strengths and items the reviewers see as deficiencies. Good reports and conversations, he said, are "actionable." However, he added: "An important point is that it does not tell schools how to fix things."

With that said, Rausch emphasized that these visits are just one component of effective oversight.

Practices among authorizers vary widely, and some analysts note that the level of oversight and support varies widely.

"The truth is, there are some authorizers that are pretty well funded and . . . are concerned about quality," said Paul Hill, the founder of the Center on Reinventing Public Education and professor of practice at Arizona State University. But this is by no means true across the board. For example, Hill points to Ohio as a state in which the caliber of authorizing runs the gamut. Ohio has an array of authorizers, including school districts, education service centers, the Buckeye Community Hope Foundation, and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. Some oversee one or two schools; others oversee dozens.

The District of Columbia Public Charter Schools Board, a highly regarded authorizer, takes seriously its responsibility for visiting schools.

"Our version of the inspection process really comes together at critical points in the life cycle of a charter, especially when they are up for renewal every five years," said Michelle Walker-Davis, the organization's executive director.

"We are looking in general at instruction, looking at the classroom environment. Is it structured for appropriate learning?" she said. "We're looking at the rapport between the educators and the students. The level of engagement."

The authorizer also asks for samples of student assignments in English language arts and mathematics, she said.

Outsourcing School Reviews

"Quality reviews have been the anchor of the work we have done for 26 years," said Kim Perron, the president and owner of SchoolWorks. The service is sought "by a whole host of [education-focused] organizations, whether they are philanthropic organizations, state departments of education, city school districts, school management organizations—both for-profit and not-for-profit—and individual schools themselves."

Current and recent SchoolWorks clients include the Rhode Island Department of Education, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Denver Public Schools, and Baltimore City Public Schools, among others.

Perron said quantitative and qualitative measures go hand in hand.

"The quantitative measures of school quality lead the direction, but . . . it's always important to understand what is happening on a day-to-day basis in a school or district, to explain what those numbers mean," Perron said. "Without that understanding, it's really impossible to move that school forward."

Fees for a school visit and report by SchoolWorks range from about $16,000 to $50,000 "depending on the scope of the review," she said. A typical visit lasts from one day to two-and-a-half at most.

Kim Perron, president of SchoolWorks, an organization specializing in school reviews

The American Institutes for Research, or AIR, is working with the state education agencies in Illinois, Massachusetts, Wyoming, and elsewhere. Last school year, in Illinois alone, AIR-led teams visited more than 270 public schools as a part of a new relationship with the state agency.

"You have to have a rubric, so schools know what they are gunning for," said Susan Therriault, an institute fellow at AIR. "It's like a common

Success Academy, which operates 57 schools serving 22,000 students across the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens, conducts regular site visits.

language you start to speak with folks."

For its classroom visits, AIR uses the CLASS tool, a structured observation method, to assess the quality of teacher-child interactions.

Consistency is integral to a high-quality review system, experts say. That includes so-called "inter-rater reliability." Put simply, how can you be sure a school review will produce consistent results, regardless of who conducts the inspections?

AIR typically hires educators, retired principals, and researchers, all of whom are trained in the process, according to Therriault. "Every single person is certified annually," she said.

SchoolWorks uses a team of "trusted consultants," Perron said, former educators and administrators, who also get trained each year.

Both for the expertise and the appearance, analysts say, school visitors should be experienced educators who will have credibility in the eyes of the school.

The review must be done "quickly, consistently, and with limited burden on schools," said Therriault. "You don't want a school to be spending all their time on an inspection."

Also, experts say a "one and done" approach is ill advised, especially when reviewers identify issues of concern. And given high turnover among school principals—the average tenure nationally is about three years—circling back is important to all schools.

Is the Juice Worth the Squeeze?

Are school inspections—whether organized by a state, district, charter network, or authorizer—worth the time, effort, and expense? Some observers say that's an open question that is difficult to answer with confidence.

"The question of payoff is number one: Do these inspections reveal things that lead to changes in schools that make them better? That is a pretty long chain of logic," said Bryan Hassel, an expert on school turnarounds, charter schools, and other K–12 issues, who is co-president of the consulting firm Public Impact.

AIR's Susan Therriault said it's "difficult to create a direct connection" between school reviews and improved student achievement. So a key goal is to help schools better focus on evidence-based instructional practices.

"One of the things we observe in struggling schools is that they often have many not-so-coherent strategies going on," Therriault said. "It is really important to cut through this noise and focus schools on what matters."

And what does the research say? A 2012 study by the economist Iftikhar Hussain found evidence that the English inspection model led to "substantial" increases in math and English achievement for schools that received a "fail rating," with the strongest benefit for low-achieving students (see "The School Inspector Calls," *research,* Summer 2013). The study suggested that inspection ratings can help distinguish between "more- and less-effective schools," even after controlling for test scores and other school characteristics. It also indicated that the test-score gains for elementary students following a "fail rating" remain evident after the students transition to secondary school.

However, a 2018 report by the education analyst Bob Rothman, "School Quality Reviews: Promoting Accountability for Deeper Learning," concluded that the research was "mixed." And a 2020 analysis by Sarah Hofer and colleagues summarized 30 years of international research on school-inspection effectiveness—with the majority of the studies conducted in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and an Austrian state—and found "no strong indication for positive inspection effects on school improvement." The study did indicate, though, that "accountability pressure and attitudes toward inspection influence its effectiveness."

Though the research may not be conclusive—and more is needed, especially in the United States—the appetite remains strong among states, charter networks, and school districts for the kinds of qualitative insights that a robust inspection can deliver.

The international organization Cognia conducts school-quality reviews in 95 countries, including the United States. Its main focus is on using such reviews as part of the periodic school accreditation process.

Evaluation and improvement are "tied at the hip," said Cognia's president, Mark Elgart. "There is no substitute for the in-person visit. It is the best vehicle to figure out what is happening in any school." As for the most valuable element, he added, "schools will tell you, it's the classroom observation."

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England's School Inspections Get a Makeover

"Ofsted" seeks to implement a more comprehensive system for evaluating British schools

THE ENGLISH SCHOOL INSPECTION system made headlines in the U.K. in early September 2024 when the government announced plans for big changes, most notably abandoning an overall rating for every school visited. No longer will school quality in England be boiled down to an official label of either "outstanding," "good," "needs improvement," or "inadequate."

Still more changes will take effect in 2025 to overhaul the inspection system, which has been cited from time to time as a potential model to inform U.S. school improvement and accountability systems.

The September announcement marked the second time in the past couple of years that the inspection system itself—rather than the reviews it produces for thousands of state-funded schools across England (and some independent schools as well)—became the story. The death of headteacher (school principal) Ruth Perry in early 2023 was widely seen as a catalyst for change. Perry committed suicide after learning that Caversham Primary School, the Reading school she led for 13 years, was about to see its official rating plummet from "outstanding" to "inadequate."

The coroner's report linked Perry's death to the inspection conducted by the Office for Standards in Education and Skills, known as Ofsted. While the tragedy grabbed public attention, educators and other observers have long voiced concerns about the system.

"Single-headline grades are low information for parents and high stakes for schools," said British Secretary of State for Education Bridget Phillipson in a statement the day the first stage of inspection changes was announced. The overhaul plan calls for school "report cards" to be introduced in September 2025 to give families a more "comprehensive assessment" of school quality "and ensure that inspections are more effective in driving improvement," according to the official statement.

"Parents deserve a much clearer, much broader picture of how schools are performing—that's what our report cards will provide," said Phillipson, who also serves as a member of Parliament for the Labour Party, which won back control of the government from Conservatives in July 2024.

In March 2024, Ofsted—which reports to Parliament—launched the "Big Listen," a campaign to gather feedback from educators, caregivers, parents, and others to inform plans to revamp the inspection system. The project was described as the "largest consultation in Ofsted's history," with surveys completed by more than 20,000 people.

Many education groups—including the National Association of Head Teachers, the Association of School and College Leaders, and NASUWT, the U.K. teachers union—voiced overall approval for the plans to overhaul inspections.

DAVID LEVENE / *GUARDIAN* / EYEVINE/REDUX

The Office for Standards in Education and Skills (Ofsted) in the U.K. came under scrutiny when headteacher Ruth Perry took her own life after it rated her school as "inadequate."

The National Foundation for Education Research (NFER), an independent research institution, was generally upbeat but raised some issues of concern.

"We welcome Ofsted's openness and willingness to listen and take action," said NFER chief executive Carole Willis in an email. "One of the most positive changes is the commitment

to greater transparency from Ofsted," as well as its plans to be more collaborative with schools and provide more "context" for review findings.

Willis cautioned, however: "Research has raised questions over the reliability and consistency of Ofsted judgements. . . . There remains a question over whether inspections are long or deep enough to allow robust conclusions to be drawn about the quality of provision in the complex areas Ofsted inspects."

Two former Ofsted inspectors, concerned about the direction of the Big Listen, launched the "Alternative Big Listen," an independently funded survey that drew more than a thousand responses, mostly from educators, and considerable media coverage.

"The Big Listen asked questions in a very closed manner, and it didn't ask [certain] questions," said former senior inspector Frank Norris in an interview. Ofsted, the alternative report concludes, has "lost very significant levels of trust and confidence from the school sector," and faces an "existential crisis."

The purpose of the English school inspections is threefold, the government explains in a published guide for parents: provide information to parents, promote improvement, and "hold schools to account for the public money they receive." The guide says: "School inspections are required by law. We provide an independent assessment of the quality and standards of education in schools, and check whether pupils are achieving as much as they can."

The English inspection system has drawn some attention over the years in the United States, including through a 2012 report produced by U.S. education analyst Craig Jerald that provided an especially in-depth look at how the English model works and how it might be adopted here to inform states' school accountability efforts.

"[T]he English example suggests that inspections offer a way to make much more nuanced judgments about school performance, provide richer information to parents and the public, [and] offer better formative feedback to schools," Jerald wrote. They "leverage expert judgment rather than relying solely on spreadsheet formulas."

School inspection systems are common across Europe and also have emerged in places such as Hong Kong, New Zealand, and South Korea, as education analyst Robert Rothman noted in a 2018 report for the National Center on Education and the Economy. The Standing International Conference of Inspectorates, an association of national and regional education inspectorates founded in 1995, now counts 43 members, including England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Ukraine.

In England, most state-funded schools receive an inspection every four years, but those rated as "needs improvement" or "inadequate" get a follow-up visit sooner. An inspection typically lasts two days, and schools usually get just one or two days' notice beforehand. Inspectors currently make judgments in four areas:

- quality of education
- behavior and attitudes
- personal development
- leadership and management

During the visit, inspectors talk to the headteacher and other school leaders, school governors (overseers), staff, and students. But inspectors devote most of their time, the parent guide explains, "observing a wide range of lessons and looking at the quality of education in the schools, and the impact of the curriculum."

If the inspectors issue any "key judgements" of "inadequate" or "failing," a school is placed in one of two "categories of concern": "special measures" or "serious weaknesses." A school designated as needing "special measures" is deemed to be "failing to provide pupils with an acceptable standard of education" and "not showing the capacity to make needed improvements," according to Ofsted. Such schools are supposed to receive intensive support, but they also can face consequences if they do not show improvement over time, including the removal of staff and even a full takeover or school closure.

In an interview shortly before the plans to overhaul Ofsted inspections were announced, an Ofsted official described the agency's work and the inquiries it receives from other countries.

"We get about 50 requests [for information] per year, but hardly any come from the U.S.," said Verena Braehler, the deputy director of research and evaluation at Ofsted. "It is getting more and more global."

Braehler noted that "inspectors . . . consider the performance data, they speak to the leaders of the curriculum and how they are planning, and they visit a lot more than one lesson. They might look at yearbooks, at the curriculum, ask students to come out separately" for conversations, for example.

She emphasized, though, that responsibility for making improvements does not rest with Ofsted.

"We can point to the strengths and weaknesses, but we are not the improvement agency," Braehler said. "We diagnose. We don't treat." —E. W. R.