

Listening and Learning Visit Plan and Conversation Guides

What is a “listening and learning” visit?

The first thing an effective school change coach does is *listen and learn*. Before we can figure out how best to help the school move forward, we must listen to teachers, administrators, board members, and other relevant stakeholders talk about what is working and what is not, their hopes for the school and how they imagine their role. We must learn about the school’s culture, its history, the relationships among key players, and the structures for teacher learning already in place. Spending time listening and learning does not only help you plan your strategy as a coach. It also builds trusting relationships, which are the key to getting anything done. And if you carefully document what you learn (by tape recording conversations or taking careful, verbatim notes) a listening and learning visit can give you valuable “data” to *use* in your coaching as a basis for the leadership team’s reflection.

Therefore, we recommend that after you agree to coach a new school the first thing you do is schedule a Listening and Learning Visit. On the Teacher Learning Project, we scheduled these as two to three consecutive days of focused time in each school. If you live near your school you may choose to make more, shorter trips to listen and learn. But we urge you not to skimp on the time. Sit in on faculty meetings. Be a fly on the wall at a leadership team meeting or scheduled professional development. Request meetings with everyone you can think of and agree to meet with anyone who requests it of you. Ask lots of questions. Listen carefully. Take notes.

People at the school will have some questions about who you are, why you are there, and how the coaching partnership will work. Answer them as best you can. The purpose is here is not for you to withhold information – rather, it is important for you to share enough about yourself and your goals so that your coachees can relax. However, the overall focus should be on them.

Here we provide the templates that the Teacher Learning Project coaches have used for Listening and Learning visits. We do so with an important caveat: Every school is different. Every coach has his or her own style. And every listening and learning conversation has its own tone and rhythm. Therefore, there is no one-size-fits-all plan, and we encourage you to adapt this document to suit your needs and context.

Overarching questions to guide the visit

- What structures of strong, school-based induction are currently in place?
- What is working well and what is not working well?
- What *shared understandings* about teaching and learning to teach guide decision-making at this school?
- What is it like for novices to learn to teach here?
- What is the school’s current approach to teachers’ ongoing professional development?
- What are the different stakeholders’ hopes and dreams for the school? What are their fears?

Activities to schedule

Over the span of two days, we suggest that you

- Schedule 30 to 45 minute “listening” meetings with the head, other administrators, the induction leader (if there is one), and up to five first and second year teachers. If there are experienced teachers who have been officially or unofficially mentoring new teachers, make sure to hear from them.
- Sit in on a faculty meeting.
- Sit in on a leadership team meeting. Introduce yourself, tell them that your goal is to listen and learn, and then use all of your willpower to do just that.
- Sit in on a class or two *with a supervisor, mentor or induction leader*, and then ask them what they thought about the lesson, how they might give feedback to the teacher, etc. (*The goal here is for you to learn about what kind of teaching they value, how they approach observations, how they think about teacher learning, etc.*)
- Sit in on a board meeting, if you can manage it. You’ll learn a lot.

Before the visit

- Explain to the head, the induction leader and anyone else that the visit has two purposes: first, to introduce yourself to stakeholders and address questions. Second, to learn as much as possible about the school and what it is like to learn to teach there. This is so you can embark on your coaching work with a clear understanding of what is currently happening in the school.
- Explain that you’d like to meet and listen to teachers to hear about their experiences. These meetings will be confidential in the sense that you won’t quote those teachers directly to the head or induction leader. Instead, you will summarize what you learned and perhaps pull out key quotes to facilitate future discussions with school leaders. Emphasize that it is important to have these conversations individually in quiet, private places and that maintaining confidentiality is important.
- Work with the induction leader to create a schedule for the visit. Ask him or her not to cherry pick the teachers you interview but to try to give a representative sample. If you can get to all of the first year teachers, that would be great.
- Adapt the questions listed below or prepare your own.

Sample Schedule for Listening and Learning Visit

Day 1

Arrive in the evening (if traveling from far away)

Day 2

Tour of school

Interview Head of School

Interview first or second year teacher #1

Interview first or second year teacher #2

Lunch with the induction leader

Sit in on a class with the induction leader or a supervisor and debrief

Sit in on Leadership Team meeting

Interview first or second year teacher #3

Evening Board meeting (brief presentation)

Day 3

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Interview first or second year teacher #4

Interview first or second year teacher #5

Interview induction leader

Lunch in the faculty lounge

Interview experienced teacher who has been informally mentoring novices

Sit in on faculty meeting

Sit down with Induction Leader to plan the next steps

Leave in the evening

DRAFT Interview Guide for Head of School

Note to coaches: This is a set of suggested questions and wordings, not a strict protocol. There are a lot of questions here, touching on a range of issues related to induction. This is deliberate in part, because by asking about all of these things you are signaling that induction is about more than just mentoring. Still, you might choose to skip some. Or you may word them slightly differently. I think that if you asked every single question on this guide it would take about an hour.

Introductory Comment

Thanks so much for taking time to talk with me. As you know, the purpose of this visit to the school is primarily for me to listen and learn, though I will take the opportunity to share a little bit my role as coach when appropriate. In learning about the school and how it operates, I wanted to start with you, as you have an eye on the big picture. I will be listening to other administrators and teachers during my stay here, as well. I'd like to take notes while you are talking, because I am meeting a lot of people in two short days and taking notes will help me keep everyone straight in my head. I know you are busy and I want to be respectful of your time. I think this should take about 45 minutes. (Agree on a way to keep track of the time.)

Background and School Function

First I want to ask you a little bit about your background and about how the school is organized.

- How long have you been head of school here?
- What attracted you to this particular school?
- How would you describe the student population here?
- And how would you describe your teaching staff, overall?
- Are there other administrators? What do they do?
- Do any teachers hold administrative roles or duties?

Lets talk about teaching and learning in a school. I want to understand a bit about what you all are striving for here in terms of excellent teaching. When you walk into a classroom, what do you hope to see?

- What does "good teaching" look like at this school?

What do you see as the major strengths of the school right now? (What is going well?)
And what areas are you focused on improving?

What it is Like to Learn to Teach Here

What do new teachers typically struggle with in their first year here?

- Do you think those struggles are typical for all new teachers or specific to this school?
- What kinds of support do they receive in meeting those challenges?

Mentoring and Collegial Collaboration

Have you designated mentors for beginning teachers in the past? If so

- What were mentors expected to do?
- Were they given stipends or release time to fulfill their role?

- Who oversaw the mentoring?

Do teachers have regular opportunities to talk together about teaching and learning?

- Are there any team structures in place?
- What kind of work happens in those teams?

Curriculum

How do new teachers know what they are supposed to teach?

- What curricular resources are available for teachers?
- What are the expectations of teachers in terms of creating or finding their own curriculum?

Assessment and Evaluation

How are teachers evaluated? By whom? How often?

- What kinds of things do teachers need to be successful at in order to get rehired?
- Did any teachers receive unsatisfactory evaluations this year? Did you decide not to rehire any of this year's new teachers? How come?

Wrap Up

As we kick off this partnership, what are your hopes?

Do you have any concerns or questions for me?

Draft Interview Guide for Induction Leader

Introductory Comment

Thanks so much for taking time to talk with me. As you know, the purpose of this visit to the school is primarily for me to listen and learn, though I will take the opportunity to share a little bit about how I see my coaching role. I'd like to take notes while you are talking, because I am meeting a lot of people in two short days and taking notes will help me keep everyone straight in my head. I know you are busy and I want to be respectful of your time. How much time do we have for this conversation? (Agree on a way to keep track of the time.)

Background and School Function

First, tell me a little bit about your background and the roles you have held at this school.

- How long have you been here at this school?
- What roles have you played over the years?
- Are you currently teaching?

What interested you in the role of induction leader?

- What do you know about what the role will entail?
 - Have you worked with new teachers before? In what capacity?
 - What are you excited about?
 - What are you worried about?

What do you see as the major strengths of the school right now? (What is going well?)
And what do you think could be improved?

If the Induction leader is primarily a teacher:

What do you consider good teaching?

- When you picture one of your best lessons, what is happening?
- Do you think other teachers in the school would agree with your ideas about good teaching? What makes you say that?
- How do you know if a colleague is a good teacher?

What it is Like to Learn to Teach Here

What do new teachers typically struggle with in their first year here?

- Do you think those struggles are typical for all new teachers or specific to this school?
- What kinds of support do they receive in meeting those challenges?

Have beginning teachers had mentors in the past? If so

- What were mentors expected to do?
- Were they given stipends or release time to fulfill their role?
- Who oversaw the mentoring?

Do teachers have regular opportunities to talk together about teaching and learning?

How do teachers know what they are supposed to teach?

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- What curricular resources are available?
- What are the expectations in terms of creating or finding your own curriculum?
- How much variation is there within individual grades or subjects?

Assessment and Evaluation

- How are new teachers evaluated? By whom? How often?
- What kinds of things do teachers need to be successful at in order to get rehired?

As we kick off the induction partnership, what are your hopes?
Do you have any concerns or questions for me?
Is there anything you want to add?

Draft Interview Guide for New Teachers

Note to coaches: Like the interview guide for heads of school, this is a list of suggested questions but it is not a strict protocol. If you asked every question on this guide it would take between forty five minutes and an hour. This guide is for individual interviews.

Introductory Spiel

Thanks so much for taking time to talk with me. One of the things I am hoping to learn about on this visit is what it is like to be a new teacher here. That's why I asked to meet with you. I want to learn about your particular experience teaching at this school, starting at the very beginning: when you were hired. I do want to take notes while you are talking, because I am meeting a lot of people in two short days and taking notes will help me keep everyone straight in my head. However, I want you to feel free to speak your mind, so you should know that I won't share what you tell me directly with (the head) or anyone else at the school. I will feed back what I learned, in general, from listening to new teachers, and I might quote your words but I won't attribute anything you say directly to you. I know you are busy and I want to be respectful of your time. (Agree on a way to keep track of the time.)

General / Background

First I'd like a little background information about you and what you teach.

- Is this your first or second year at the school?
- What courses /subjects /grades do you teach?
 - (If a second year teacher, did you teach the same thing last year?)
- Is this your first teaching job?
 - If not, where did you teach before? What subjects? For how long?
- Did you go through a teacher training program? Which one?

Curriculum

So I understand that you are teaching XXX.

- How do you know what you are supposed to teach?
- What materials did the school provide related to this topic?
- Did you bring any materials of your own?
- Do you have the resources you need to teach this successfully?

Interaction with Colleagues

Now I want to ask you about the opportunities you have to interact with your colleagues.

- Do you have a mentor?
 - How often do you meet?
 - What kinds of things do you talk about?
- Has anyone in the building ever watched you teach?
 - Who?
 - When/ how often?
 - Did they give you feedback about your teaching afterwards? Was that feedback helpful?
- Have you watched anyone else in the building teach?

- Who? When?
- For what reason?
- Have other teachers shared curricular ideas or lesson plans with you?
- Do you ever co-plan with other teachers? How often? Who?
- Who do you go to when you need help planning or problem solving something that came up in your classroom?

Assessment

Finally, I want to ask you about how your teaching practice is evaluated at this school.

- How do teachers know if they are successful at this school?
- Is there a formal evaluation process for teachers?
- Have you been formally evaluated?
- When and by whom?
- Did you get any feedback during the process? What was it?
- Are you returning next year?
 - If not, why not?
 - If so, do you know the criteria administrators used in deciding to rehire you?

Overall Impressions

What do you like best about teaching here? Why?

What has been most challenging for you about teaching here?

Do you think you have had a successful year?

- What leads you to believe that?

Do you think you are a better teacher now than you were at the beginning of the year?

- What leads you to believe that?
- In what areas do you think you have most improved?
- To what do you attribute that improvement?

Sample Conversation Prompts for Experienced Teachers

Even if you don't formally interview experienced teachers (though you may choose to) you may end up sitting next to one at lunch. Or waiting for a faculty meeting to begin. Or dinner. If so, you might as well grab the opportunity to learn about the school. Here are some sample questions.

So tell me about what it is like to teach here.
What are the students like?
What is the community like?
What role do parents typically play in the school community?

Have you taught in other places before?
How is this school different than other places you have taught?
What attracted you to teaching here?
What do you think is most challenging about learning to teach here?
What was most challenging for you when you first started teaching here?
How did you deal with it / learn about it?

What subjects or grades do you teach?
Does anyone else teach what you teach?
Who do you work most closely with?
How often do you meet or collaborate with that person/those people?
What kinds of things do you do together?
What do you talk about?

How often does the whole faculty get together?
What kinds of things do you do when the whole faculty is together?
Do you ever meet with your grade level team or department?
What happens during those meetings?
What do you talk about?
How often do they happen?

Do you have any responsibilities outside of classroom teaching? (e.g. committees, leading pd, etc)
What are they?
(If on a committee or working group) what is the purpose of that committee?

Template for Recording Information Listening and Learning Visit

This template is designed to help you consolidate what you learned and put it in a format that will be easier to interact with than 30 pages of notes.

1. Basic Information

Name of School:

Coach:

Dates of Visit:

Name and position of Induction Leader:

Current number of teachers new to the school:

Current number of those new teachers who are new to teaching:

<i>Whom did you interview on the "listening tour"?</i>		
Name	Position in School	Experience teaching / in school
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		
8.		
<i>Please briefly describe the other things you did during the visit.</i>		
Description of activity	Who else was there?	What was your role?

1. Nuts and Bolts: What Structural Elements of Induction are in Place?

The purpose of this section is to summarize what elements of induction are currently in place in the school. In the "coach notes" section please summarize the basics and use the "Administrators say" and "New Teachers say" sections please to capture any relevant quotes, particularly anything you want to feed back to the leadership team later. You may not have quotes for every box.

<i>What is available to teachers in the way of curricula? What is expected of them?</i>
Coach notes:

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Administrators say:
New teachers say:
<i>In what ways do new teachers currently interact with their more experienced colleagues?</i>
Coach notes:
Administrators say:
New teachers say:
<i>What are the criteria and process for new teacher evaluation?</i>
Coach notes:
Administrators say:
New teachers say:

2. The Bigger Picture: What is it like to be a new teacher in this school

These may require more inference and synthesis.

<i>What kind of teaching is valued at this school? How much agreement is there about what good teaching looks like?</i>
Coach notes:
Quotes or other evidence:
<i>Based on what criteria are new teachers evaluated and rehiring decisions made?</i>
Coach notes:

The Teacher Learning Project
Tool for Coaches

Administrators say:
New teachers say:
<i>What is challenging about being a new teacher in this school?</i>
Coach notes:
Administrators say:
New teachers say: