

ACTIVITIES

SECTION 2

Classroom Visits

Schools across the country have been inviting local professionals into the classroom for decades to talk about their work and careers in their fields. These classroom visits are a great opportunity to help students understand the relevance of their classroom work and gain exposure to STEM jobs and careers.

What Is a Classroom Visit?

During a classroom visit, one or more professionals from a local employer share information with students about their jobs and careers. Visiting professionals often lead fun activities or demonstrations that help students see how the topics they are studying in class are relevant to the employee's day-to-day work.

A good classroom visit also includes plenty of time for the professionals to answer student questions about their jobs, the educational and career paths that got them to where they are today, and how students can best prepare for careers in their fields.

Don't Just Visit the Usual-Suspect Schools ...

Classroom visits are often initiated by schools or teachers in search of STEM professionals who can speak to their students. Yet companies and their employees can also get the ball rolling by reaching out to local schools.

When identifying schools for classroom visits, employers should not just focus on the usual suspects—those schools where employees' children tend to be enrolled. In fact, classroom visits will have the most impact in schools where students do not have regular exposure to adults working in jobs and careers that require college degrees and advanced technical training. Employers should consider reaching out to schools in lower-income neighborhoods, for example, to showcase STEM jobs and careers to a more diverse population of students.

The Benefits of Classroom Visits

Benefits for the student:

- Students get to meet with actual professionals and gain real-world insights into jobs and careers in the STEM fields.
- Students gain a fresh appreciation of how workers use the STEM skills taught in class every day.

Benefits for the employer:

- Employers have the opportunity to nurture student interest in jobs and careers with their company and in their industry.

- Employers can help students understand the education and skills they need to secure jobs with their companies.
- Employers advance their reputation as supporters of education and community leaders among school leaders, teachers, parents, and students.

Benefits for the employee/presenter:

- Employees have an opportunity to connect with local students and pause and reflect on their jobs and careers and the skills they use every day.
- Employees gain valuable experience in public speaking and in serving as ambassadors for their companies and industries.
- Employees increase their job satisfaction after connecting with youth in their communities.

Making It Effective and Educational

BEFORE THE VISIT

Reach out and ask about logistics. Establish contact with the school or the classroom teacher so you know the agenda for the presentation and what is required of you as a presenter. Here are some questions to ask:

- How much time can the teacher spare for the visit?
- How many students will be in the room?
- How many employees can/should we bring?
- Can we use video, slides, or other media (if appropriate)?
- What equipment do we need to bring—e.g., audio/video, laptop for slides, etc.?
- Is it okay to bring handout materials and giveaways (pens, etc.)?

Connect it to the classroom. Find out who the students are and what they are learning *right now* in the class that could become fodder for your presentation and any hands-on demonstrations. Questions for the teacher include:

- What is the background of the students in the class? What do they already know about STEM jobs or STEM careers?
- What is the teacher's motivation for including this visit in his or her plans?
- What are students currently learning in their math and/or science classes? What general topics seem to excite them? What topics are they struggling with?
- Are there plans to have students report or reflect on what they have learned from the class visit? How can the visit lay the groundwork for this reflection?

For other tips on questions to ask teachers and schools, see "How Can You Put the 'Learning' in Work-Based Learning?" page 6.

Consider teaming up with someone else. If you think one visitor won't give students a complete picture of the variety of jobs and careers in your company and your industry, consider bringing one or two more with you. Select colleagues who represent different aspects of the company's work, different skill sets and educational backgrounds, as well as diversity in terms of gender and race/ethnicity. Also bring younger employees who might be able to relate to students more readily. Too many visitors can make for a confusing presentation, so try to keep it to two or three, tops.

Bring your gear. Think about any special equipment you use in your job that might be interesting to show the students. This could include lab equipment, outdoor gear, protective equipment, cool software, etc. Better yet, consider integrating that equipment or software into an interactive session where students can get some hands-on experience of work in STEM. Of course, any activities have to be safe for the students. Clear your plans with the teacher and your company first.

Bring leave-behinds and giveaways. Make sure you have attractive, informative, and, if possible, exciting materials to share about your company, including brochures and other handouts. Don't bring highly technical or jargon-filled materials. Also consider bringing notepads, pens, or other giveaway items for students. Think of clever giveaways that highlight what the company makes or does. Ask the teacher how many giveaways and other materials you should bring.

Bring video. Consider bringing a short video about the company to air during the presentation. But make sure any video you use is short (no more than two or three minutes) and that it's appropriate for the age level of the students—i.e., no jargon. Talk to colleagues in recruiting and marketing to see what is available. If nothing exists, consider putting together a video of interviews with various employees about their jobs—what they do on an average day and the skills and education their jobs require.

Secure appropriate permissions. If you want to post or share images or information about individual students who participated, work with the school to secure photo releases. Schools and businesses need parental consent to post or share images of minors.

DURING THE VISIT

Dress the part. Don't "dress up," "dress down," or dress differently than you would on a normal day at work. Wear your work clothes (lab coat, outdoor gear, suit and tie) so students see how you look on an average day.

Be a greeter. If possible, greet the students at the door with a handshake as they come into the classroom. This creates a personal connection to the students and models positive workplace behaviors they will need to sharpen over time.

Give students something exciting to do. Many students think it's boring to just sit and listen to someone talk. Engage them in the steps of conceiving and designing a solution to a problem your company tries to solve. For example, have them discuss a product in your industry and how it could be improved. Take them through the process of writing simple computer code that does something fun. There are endless possibilities for interactive projects you can do with students, but each one requires serious thought and careful planning before the event—often in consultation with the teacher. The best projects connect to what students are learning in the classroom, demonstrate real-world challenges STEM professionals have to wrestle with, are fun and exciting, and engage as many students as possible.

Arrive with answers. Be prepared to talk with students about topics such as:

- What does your company do, and to what extent is it operating in a thriving industry?
- Why is your company's work important and relevant? What key problems does the company address in the world?
- How does the company express its values through activities such as honoring diversity, supporting important community causes, protecting the environment, etc.?
- What are the job and career opportunities in your company and your industry?
- Are these job opportunities likely to increase in the years ahead, and in what job areas do you see the most growth?
- What is it like to do your work (including a description of your typical day and your responsibilities)?
- How does your work make the world a better place?
- What are the educational and skill requirements for people in your position? For others in the company and the industry?
- What are some of the skills you apply on the job on an everyday basis, including math, science, writing, communications?
- How much do you work alone, and how much do you work as part of a team?

While you don't need to answer all these questions, you should be prepared to leave students with an exciting picture of what it is like to do your job, and what kind of educational pathway they need to take to follow a career in your industry.

Don't run off. Talk to the school or the teacher in advance about whether you can stick around to share lunch with students or answer questions after class.

Following Up

Reach out and say thanks. Follow up with the school after the presentation to express your thanks and to offer additional support and resources for students, as appropriate.

Evaluate it. In your follow-up contacts with the school, evaluate whether the classroom visit met the school's goals and your goals. For more ideas on evaluation, see "How Can You Put the 'Learning' in Work-Based Learning?" page 6.

Think about what's next. Consider offering follow-up activities to give students an even closer look at your company and jobs in your industry, such as job shadowing, company tours, and other activities explored in this guidebook.

Telling the Story

Internally

Write it up. Consider writing up an account of the classroom visit for your company's intranet, newsletter, or other employee-focused publication. Emphasize the value of speaking with and inspiring young people in STEM careers. If the event is covered by local media, include that in your write up.

Externally

Send a press release. Determine, with your company's communications department and the school's, whether it makes sense to send a press release or coordinate with media outlets about the event.

Share on social media. Send the school a tweet, Facebook post, or Instagram photo from your personal or company account thanking them for including you. Coordinate with your communications department to strike the most appropriate tone for these communications.

Resources

10 Tips for Making a Strong Presentation

1. Be prepared. Just because you are speaking to a group of students (vs. making a more formal business presentation) doesn't mean you can wing it. Outline your talk and practice it a few times before you get there so you have it down pat.

2. Don't read. It's hard to connect to your audience if you are reading from a script and looking down all the time. Bring notecards or notes so you can move easily from key point to key point, but make sure to maintain eye contact with the group throughout.

3. Get there early. Arriving just in time or a few minutes late is a sign that the presentation is not important to you—and it can add to your stress level. Get there early so you can get a feel for the room and figure out your needs in advance (water, power, video, etc.).

4. Tell a good story. People of all ages like a good story. Ground your visit in engaging anecdotes about your own time as a student, how you got your job, and your experiences on the job. We all have good stories to tell—think about yours.

5. Keep it simple. Any audience (and especially an audience of young students) will be put off and confused if you try to focus on too many topics. Keep your presentation focused on three or four things you want students to know about your job and your company. And avoid the jargon—be sure to explain acronyms and workplace lingo.

6. Go easy on the PowerPoints. PowerPoint slides should never be the focus of a presentation. If you are using slides, make them simple and brief and don't include too many.

7. Take. It. Slow. All of us tend to speed things up when we are speaking in public. Remember to talk slowly and to pause between sentences and ideas so they can sink in.

8. Project your voice. Teachers know how to command a classroom with their voice. Imagine you are talking to the students in the back row, and keep your head up so you are not talking down at your notes.

9. Keep it short. Shakespeare said it best: "Brevity is the soul of wit." Keep your presentation short and animated, and save ample time for student questions and hands-on activities.

10. Add a little humor. Think about humorous experiences you had as a student, or funny experiences you have had on the job. Humor creates a strong connection with your audience and makes you more approachable.

For more ideas about how to speak to a young audience about STEM careers, see "How Do You Connect With Young People," page 8.