

AN OVERVIEW OF THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS
Joint Accreditation with the Council of International Schools (CIS)
Leiden, Netherlands

Introduction

The accreditation process has long been recognized in the United States and in international school circles as a highly effective means of initiating and maintaining school improvement and demonstrating adherence to a set of publicly stated standards. The information contained in this Overview is intended to clarify the various aspects of the accreditation process, its declared purpose, the procedures involved in the self-study and team visit components of the process, and the benefits that accreditation offers to a school.

A. Accrediting Associations

CIS and NEASC collaborate in a joint evaluation process for American/International Schools. Because a single set of standards and procedures have been endorsed by both groups, the school produces one Self-Study and hosts a single Team Visit. The Chair and Co-Chair, representing the two associations, convey the recommendations of the Visiting Team to their respective organizations. Each association then makes its own decision with regard to the terms of accreditation for the evaluated school.

B. Purpose of the Accreditation Program

There are a number of benefits associated with the award of accreditation to a school, but the main aim of this evaluation program is to provide an opportunity to improve the quality of the education offered at the school through a rigorous process of self-examination followed by an objective external appraisal by a team of peers. The resulting Visiting Team Report and the independent actions of the accrediting association(s) attest to the quality of education at the evaluated school.

C. Criteria for Evaluation

Each school is evaluated against two basic 'benchmarks', these being:

1. The School's own Philosophy and Objectives

Each school is required to have a clear statement of Philosophy and Objectives and is evaluated in terms of how successful it is in meeting its own stated purposes.

2. The Standards for Accreditation

Each school is required to meet a set of written standards in each area of its operation. These common standards have been developed and endorsed by educational peers representing the accrediting organization(s).

The Standards are designed to reflect the characteristics of a high quality educational experience. However, they do not pre-suppose any specific model of excellence nor do they suggest comparing the characteristics of one school with those of another. The guiding principles of the accreditation program are that a school will be evaluated against prescribed standards but in terms of its own Philosophy and Objectives and that the school's programs are appropriate to its unique demography.

D. Outline of the Accreditation Process

The process involves these five essential stages which are repeated on a routine ten-year cycle:

1. The Preliminary/Preparatory Visit

A school seeking accreditation for the first time hosts a *Preliminary Visit*, usually lasting two to three days and normally involving two visitors, one from each of the two accrediting associations. The purposes of the visit are both to clarify the various aspects in the accreditation process and to ascertain the school's readiness to undertake the self-study. When the school concerned is seeking re-accreditation a similar visit is conducted, the main differences being that the school remains in accredited status throughout and that the visit is entitled *The Preparatory Visit* in order to highlight this distinction.

2. The Self-Study

The self-study, lasting approximately two years, is the most important part of the entire evaluation and accreditation process, both in the commitment of time and effort involved and in the value to be derived. The self-study begins with the Part One Committee collecting and analyzing data from the opinion surveys applied to all constituent groups in the school community and then generating a school profile. In Part Two, the school conducts a searching review of its own operations with each self-study committee using the results of the recently completed data collection and profile and its own philosophy and objectives as the starting point for its work.

Part Two of the self-study is divided into seven Sections, listed below. Each Section covers a major area of the school's operation, for which there are Standards for Accreditation against which the school will rate itself. Indicators for each Standard will guide the school in assessing its own adherence to the stated Standards.

- A PHILOSOPHY AND OBJECTIVES
- B CURRICULUM
- C GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT
- D STAFF
- E STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES
- F RESOURCES
- G STUDENT AND COMMUNITY LIFE

For each of the Sections A and C-G, an assigned self-study committee will collect, assemble and analyze certain requested data, complete a descriptive narrative or fact sheet, rate its current practice against the Indicators and the Standards for Accreditation, and write a statement of conclusions which will include plans for improvement in areas determined by the school to be weak or deficient with respect to the standard at hand.

For Section B, the school will assign a number of self-study committees to look at curriculum from both "horizontal" and "vertical" perspectives. The number of "horizontal" reports to be completed will be determined by the school, according to the number of divisions or levels that exist at the school. Each "vertical" report will cover a single subject area or discipline through the full grade range of the school. In each of the many reports required for Section B, the school will use the same steps as those listed above for Sections A and C-G.

A truly comprehensive self-study requires a considerable time commitment from all members of the school's teaching and management staff and also from a representation of parents, Governing Body members and students. It is the intention of NEASC and CIS that the self-study should present an honest, broad view of the school and that it should not represent the views of any minority group within the school.

Every staff member should participate in the self-study process through completion of a meaningful assignment or assignments, preferably reflecting both the individual's direct area of teaching or other responsibility and his/her interest in a more general aspect of the school's operation. In forming the subject area committees under Section B, it will be important to have representation from each of the divisions in which the subject is taught.

3. The Team Visit

Following the completion of the self-study, the school is visited by a team of suitably qualified administrators and teachers drawn from other schools that represent the accrediting association(s).

The primary function of the Visiting Team is to assist the school by providing an objective assessment of the conclusions of the self-study. The Team visits the school for approximately one week to see it in action. Team members visit classrooms and other work places, and they talk with students, parents, members of the staff and Governing Body. They examine all aspects of the school in the light of the self-study, the school's own Philosophy and Objectives, and the Standards for Accreditation.

It is worth emphasizing here that during the course of the visit, no assessment should be made of individual staff member's performance, nor will critical reference be made to any specific individual in the report of the Visiting Team. The job of the Team is to review the quality of the educational experiences offered at the school, not to assess the qualities of individual teachers.

The Team will write a detailed report which will address every part of the self-study. For each of the Part Two Sections A and C-G, and the many Sections under B, the Team will offer a narrative of its findings and a set of commendations and recommendations. The Visiting Team Report will be sent to the accrediting agencies who will forward it to the school as soon as initial analysis has been carried out.

The Visiting Team will also make an overall recommendation with regard to possible accreditation of the school directly to the NEASC Committee on International Education (CIE) and to the CIS Accreditation Committee. The Team will not inform the school of its overall recommendation which strictly has the status of advice to the agencies.

4. Decision on Accreditation

The respective committees of NEASC and CIS will review carefully the Visiting Team Report and consider the recommendations of the Visiting Team relative to possible accreditation of the school. Each Committee will then make a recommendation upon which its appropriate governing body will act:

In the case of CIS, the Board decision may be to:

- a) award Accreditation or Re-Accreditation.
- b) award Accreditation or Re-Accreditation with specific qualifications.
- c) postpone Accreditation or Re-Accreditation for some specified reason(s).
- d) not award Accreditation or Re-Accreditation.

In the case of NEASC, the Board decision may be to:

- a) award Accreditation (initial or continued)
- b) continue Accreditation and place on warning (which could lead to probation) and/or request a Special Report
- c) defer Accreditation for some specified reason or reasons (only for schools seeking initial accreditation)
- d) not award Accreditation

Any adverse decision is subject to appeal by the school. Adverse accreditation decisions are defined as denial of accreditation, placement on probation, postponement of accreditation, or termination of accreditation.

5. Subsequent Procedures

A number of follow-up procedures have been established, including:

- a) The First Progress Report, prepared by the school at a date to be specified by the agencies (no later than 24 months from the Team Visit). This shall contain a summary of the recommendation responses already completed by the school and Action Plans for addressing the other recommendations of the Visiting Team. An on-site visit may be required at the option of the respective agencies.
- b) A Five Year Report that shows how the school has addressed the Visiting Team's recommendations following its own Action Plans. The accrediting associations will also expect to see Action Plans for the coming period included in this report. Receipt of the school's report will be followed by an on-site visit by at least two persons, typically one visitor from each association, and they will themselves write a comprehensive report.
- c) Special Reports and/or Special Visits at any stage of the accreditation cycle if considered necessary

E. Benefits of the Accreditation Process

The award of accreditation itself.

The school's own claim to excellence, however well justified, will always be open to question in the absence of an objective verification of quality. The school's earning of accredited status from respected agencies can be very reassuring to parents and faculty. It is an indication to the school community and to other individuals and establishments (including universities) that the school offers a quality education.

The opportunity for self-assessment.

To some extent continuous improvement is already a goal of schools, but not at the level to which self-evaluation is taken during the writing of the self-study when the school is working to meet clearly stated external standards and demanding deadlines. Schools earning accreditation status tend to agree that introspection has been the most valuable aspect of the entire process. Also of significant benefit is the opportunity for school staff to meet collaboratively, often across disciplines and divisions of the school, to discuss issues, to identify concerns, and to propose improvements.

The opportunity for improved intra-school contact and understanding.

In some schools it is quite possible to go from year to year feeling that staff members in other areas are vague acquaintances at best and that the concerns of other sections are of little interest to them. It is the common experience of schools undergoing evaluation that the accreditation process is a unifying force in a school.

The opportunity to receive an external assessment.

The Team Visit involves a detailed, objective evaluation which reflects the perspectives of fellow professionals who have been trained in the evaluation process and who are familiar with both the Standards for Accreditation and the unique nature and concerns of American/International schools.

A plan for the future.

The Self-Study document, the Visiting Team Report, the First Progress Report and the Five Year Reports serve as a guide to planning for the school as it maps out its direction for the years ahead.

Affirmation of the school's needs.

It may be that Governing Body members, staff, management, students or parents have felt the existence of certain needs for some time. The Visiting Team Report will serve to validate concerns and to guide staff, Governing Body and administration in establishing priorities and developing action plans.