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## **AN OVERVIEW OF THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS FOR AMERICAN / INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS**

### **Introduction**

The Accreditation Process has long been recognized in the United States and international school circles as a highly effective means of initiating and maintaining school improvement and adherence to publicly stated standards. The information contained in this paper is intended to clarify the Accreditation process, its declared purpose, its procedures, its costs - in terms of time, effort and money, and the benefits it offers to a school.

#### **A. The Accrediting Association**

Founded in 1885, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) is the nation's oldest regional accrediting association. It serves over 1899 public and independent schools, post-secondary institutions (universities and colleges) in the six states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont. It also serves over 220 American and International Schools in 68 countries.

The Association is composed of four Commissions; the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (CIHE), the Commission on Public Schools (CPS), the Commission on Independent Schools (CIS), and the Commission on International Education (CIE).

#### **B. The Purpose of the Accreditation Process**

Leaving aside until later the benefits to the school of being awarded accreditation, the primary goals of this evaluation process are to provide an opportunity to improve the quality of the education offered and to attest to the quality of the evaluated school. This is effected through a process of self-study followed by an objective external appraisal by peers.

#### **C. Criteria for Evaluation**

Each school is evaluated against two basic benchmarks, as follows:

##### **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 well it meets its own stated purposes.

2. The Standards for Accreditation

Each school is required to meet a set of agreed written standards in each area of its operation that have been developed and endorsed by educational peers.

D. An Outline of the Accreditation Process

The process involves five basic steps:

1. The Candidacy/Preliminary Visit

The school receives a brief visit, usually lasting two days to three days and normally involving two visitors. The purpose of the visit is both to clarify 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 difference being that the school remains in Accredited status throughout and that the visit is titled The Preliminary Visit in order to highlight this distinction.

2. The Self-Study

The Self-study is the most important part of the entire evaluation and accreditation process, both in the commitment of time and effort involved and in the values to be derived. The Self-Study begins with Part One, an extended school profile and a collection and analysis of data using opinion surveys (which involves all key constituents in the school community). Then in Part Two the school reviews its philosophy and objectives and subjects each area of its operation to a searching evaluation.

Part two of the Self-Study is divided into the following sections, each focusing on a major area:

- A. School Guiding Statements
- B. Teaching and Learning
- C. Governance and Leadership
- D. Faculty and Support Staff
- E. Access to Teaching and Learning
- F. School Culture and Partnerships for Learning
- G. Operational Systems

For each section listed above the school reviews the survey and profile data, assembles and analyzes certain requested data, considers a set of accepted Indicators, views its current practice in the light of its own philosophy and the standards for accreditation, and then records responds to five questions Part Three requires the school to look at its strengths and weakness identified throughout the Self-Study, and develop strategic plans for the school's future.

The Self-Study requires considerable commitment of time from all members of the school's teaching and administrative staff and also from a number of parents and board members. It is the intention of NEASC that the Self-Study should present an honest,

broad view of the school and that it should represent the views of the majority within the school.

Every staff member should have a meaningful assignment or assignments, preferably including two aspects, one related to his/her own area of duties, and one involving an overview of the school's operation. Secondary staff normally work within their own departments on one of their assignments, Primary staff normally select a curriculum area of particular interest.

### 3. The Team Visit

A team visits the school following the completion of the self-study composed of suitably qualified administrators and teachers drawn from other schools.

The primary function of the Team is to assist the school by providing an objective assessment of the conclusions of the Self-Study. The team visits the school, usually for at least four working days. Team members visit classrooms, meet with students, parents, members of the staff and board and 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.

These standards are designed to ensure that a school is offering a broad general education of a high quality before being awarded accreditation. However, they do not pre-suppose any specific model of excellence nor seek to impose the methods of one school upon another. The guiding principle of the program is that a school will be evaluated in terms of its own philosophy and objectives and that the school's programs are appropriate to its unique demographic.

It is important to note that during the course of the visit, no assessment should be made of individual staff performance, nor should critical reference be made to any staff member in the report of the visiting team. The team reviews the quality of education offered, not the qualities of individual teachers.

The team writes a detailed report for the school and the accrediting association which addresses each of the sections in the Self-Study. For each section the team offers a description, its perceptions and a set of commendations and recommendations. The Report, however, does not contain the team's recommendations with regard to accreditation, which is made directly to the NEASC Commission on International Education (CIE).

4. Decision on Accreditation

The CIE Committee of NEASC review carefully the Visiting Team Report and considers the recommendations of the visiting team relative to accreditation. The Commission then makes a recommendation upon which the governing body of the Association acts.

Any adverse recommendation is subject to appeal by the school.

The decision may be to:

- (a) award accreditation (initial or continued)
- (b) continue accreditation, place on warning and / or request a special report
- (c) defer accreditation for some specified reason or reasons (only for schools seeking initial accreditation) and request further information
- (d) not award accreditation

5. Subsequent Procedures

A number of review procedures have been established, including:

- (a) the First Report, prepared by the school following the award of accreditation, in response to recommendations contained in the Visiting Team Report
- (b) a Five-Year Report that requires a two person on-site visit
- (c) Special reports and/or Special Visits if considered necessary

E. The Benefits of the Accreditation Process

1. The Award of Accreditation Itself

A 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 possession of accredited status can be very reassuring to parents and is an indication to the school community and to other individuals and establishments that the school offers an education of quality.

2. The Opportunity for Self-Assessment

To some extent this is already a feature of many schools, but not at a level to which self-evaluation is taken during the writing of the Self-Study. Schools receiving accreditation tend to agree that this introspection proves to be the most valuable aspect of the entire process. Also of significant benefit is the opportunity for school staff to meet collaboratively to discuss issues, to identify concerns, and to propose improvements.

3. 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 element in a school.

4. An Evaluation by Peers

The opportunity to receive a detailed, objective evaluation conducted by fellow professionals who have been trained in the evaluation process and who are familiar with evaluation standards and the nature and concerns of American / International schools.

5. A Plan for the Future

The self-study document, the Visiting Team Report, the Two and Five-Year Reports serve as planning (short and long range) guides for the school as it maps out its direction for the years ahead.

6. Confirmation of the School's Needs

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

F. The Cost of the Accreditation

A school interested in obtaining accreditation through NEASC begins the process by completing candidacy application forms and submitting them together with the candidacy application fee to NEASC. Application forms are reviewed by Association staff and, if found to be in good order, the school is expected to host a candidacy visitor. It is the school's responsibility to cover the cost of the visitor's round-trip coach airfare to the school and to provide for the visitor's food and lodging expenses during the time of the visit.

If, as a result of the candidacy report, the school is granted candidacy status with NEASC, the school begins to undertake the self-study process. During the candidacy period, the school is assessed an annual candidacy fee. Upon completion of the self-study, the school is required to host a visiting team. It is the school's responsibility to cover the cost of the team's round-trip coach airfare to the school and to provide for the team's food and lodging during the period of the team visit. An additional fee (the member fee) is imposed at the time of the visit and again once every ten years when a new accreditation cycle occurs. The size of the team will vary with the size and the complexity of the school. An effort is made to keep costs as low as possible for the school by assigning individuals to the team from accredited institutions within a reasonable geographic distance. Enclosed is a copy of the CIE Fee Schedule.

If the school is granted accreditation as a result of the NEASC review of the Visiting Team Report, the school would next begin its work on the First Report. Once accredited, the school is assessed annual membership dues. Assuming all is progressing well at the school and no special visits are required, the only other costs would be incurred at the time of the submission of the Five Year Report when the school is required to host a two day, one person Five Year Visit. As with other visits, the school is responsible for the round-trip coach airfare to the school as well as the food and lodging expenses of the visitor during the period of the visit.

Given that the accreditation process is cyclical and that the various components are repeated every ten years, the annual cost of the process is minimal compared to the benefits derived by the institution through the awarding of accreditation.

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