

Accreditation and School Improvement: The Next Generation

By Dr. Mark A. Elgart, Executive Director
Council on Accreditation and School Improvement
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools

Since 1895, the primary purpose of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI) has been to help schools improve. Indeed the process of accreditation has and is designed to give schools the support to improve in the pursuit of its goals and expectations. Throughout the history of SACS, the process of accreditation has been continually improved to enhance and enable the capacity of schools to improve through accreditation. As such, the SACS CASI is now providing schools with the next generation of accreditation and school improvement. The next generation builds on the elements of success of the past while incorporating the most current research and knowledge of best practice in the areas of accreditation and school improvement.

The Meaning of Accreditation and School Improvement

For many member schools and their respective communities there are two common questions that arise when people inquire about accreditation? What does it mean for a school to be accredited? Or, what must a school do to achieve and maintain accreditation?

Accreditation and school improvement involve three major components for a school: *meeting standards, engaging in continuous improvement, and providing for quality assurance.* First, and foremost, the school must commit and adhere to the appropriate standards for accreditation. Accreditation standards are the same across the region for schools that are similar in nature and function (e.g. high schools). However the standards are peculiar to types of schools (i.e. elementary schools, special purpose schools, and non-public schools, distance learning schools, middle schools, and high schools). Nonetheless, every school must demonstrate compliance to the applicable set of standards. A school demonstrates adherence to the standards by self-analysis on an annual basis and through an on-site evaluation visit (peer review) at least once every five years. In order for a school to achieve or maintain accreditation, the standards serve as the guide and benchmark for schools to access, allocate, and use its available resources for the benefit of student learning.

The second major component of accreditation and school improvement expect a school to engage in a continuous process of improvement. Based on research and best practice there are four elements of continuous improvement that a school must provide for as it seeks to improve. The four elements are VISION - "What future are you pursuing?" PROFILE - "What is your current reality?" PLAN - "What actions will you take to improve?"

and RESULTS - “What have you accomplished?” Schools engaging in continuous improvement tend to each these four elements with vigor and persistence.

The third component of accreditation for a school is to provide for quality assurance by delivering on your promise and demonstrating institutional integrity. Accredited schools provide for quality assurance in three significant ways. First, schools through peer review strengthen the work of the school to improve student learning. Second, the process of accreditation including the standards expects the school to demonstrate institutional integrity and trustworthiness within its community and the educational community at large. Third, quality assurance is focused on the results by requiring a school to document what it has accomplished and using the results to inform what happens next to improve the school.

The Next Generation

Accredited schools are schools in motion. An accredited school uses the process of accreditation to stimulate and drive improvement. As such, the standards for accreditation express the expectation that an accredited school is an improving school. In education today all schools, whether they are accredited or not, are expected to engage in a continuous process of improvement. The difference for an accredited school is that an accredited school seeks feedback from an external group of professionals through peer review and is expected to demonstrate quality assurance to its stakeholders.

Today, SACS CASI is implementing the next generation of accreditation and school improvement. What is emerging will continue to support the work of accredited schools and provide every school with the opportunity to continue the common quest to improve student learning. The focus on the next generation will be to recognize and acknowledge the current effort of accredited schools to improve student learning while providing schools with the technical assistance and support to use the process of accreditation to achieve such purpose.