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# What Is Accreditation?

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Over the last three centuries, New York independent schools have provided a rich tapestry of educational opportunities. Some of these schools are described as traditional or progressive; others promote specialized curriculums designed around a particular pedagogy, such as Montessori or Waldorf. There are single gender schools, religious schools, day schools, boarding schools, and schools that serve the needs of special education students. Each school provides a different path for students to reach their destination; within the panoply of independent schools, parents will likely find several in which their child will be educated in the way that she or he learns best.

## NYSAIS

By their very nature, independent schools are subject to minimal government regulation. Nonetheless, there is need for assessment and accountability. Thus, most of New York's independent schools are accredited, which means that, after a lengthy and rigorous process of self-evaluation and peer review, it has been determined by an accrediting organization that the school complies with the criteria it deems necessary to provide a quality education.

The New York State Association of Independent Schools (NYSAIS), a voluntary organization of 197 independent schools, is New York's statewide accrediting organization. NYSAIS has been accrediting member schools for over 45 years. It is a member of the National Association of Independent Schools' Commission

on Accreditation, which includes all major state and regional accrediting organizations in the United States and Canada. These organizations have agreed to a set of core standards or criteria for accreditation, and to submission of their accreditation process to outside professional peer review on a regular, ongoing basis. Rigorous peer review is an important distinction when assessing the thoroughness of any accrediting organization; all accrediting organizations and processes are not alike.

NYS AIS member schools fall under three categories: Full, Provisional and Associate. Full Members are not-for-profit schools in operation for at least five years, and accredited by the NYS AIS Commission on Accreditation. During the five years before becoming Full Members, these schools were categorized as Provisional Members awaiting accreditation. A third category, Associate Members, is made up of for-profit schools, such as proprietary schools; while not accredited by NYS AIS, they must have received accreditation by an accrediting body acceptable to the NYS AIS Board of Trustees. It is the voluntary embrace of the accreditation process that sets apart a NYS AIS school.

## The NYS AIS Self-Study

The NYS AIS accreditation process is driven by the dual beliefs that each independent school is unique and should be evaluated in terms of fidelity to its own mission, and that it must also abide by well-established principles of best practices.

The first step in this process is an in-depth self-study, which typically takes a school between 12 and 18 months to complete. During the self-study, all members of the school community, including the board of trustees, administration, faculty and staff, parents, alumni and students critique their school, measuring it against more than 90 established criteria. The criteria are organized by topic such as mission, school culture, educational program, staffing, governance, finance,

admissions, financial assistance, students, student services, parents, communication, and the role of the school in the larger community. (These criteria, and the many and thorough questions asked of a school, are set forth in *The Manual for Evaluation and Accreditation*, which can be found on the NYS AIS website.)

## The School's Mission and Culture

During the all-important self-study phase, the school is expected to take a critical look at how it performs in relation to the NYS AIS-established criteria. As mission and culture form the foundation of a school, they are the first subjects for analysis in the accreditation process.

When looking at the mission of the school, one of the first questions that must be considered is whether the current mission is clearly understood and articulated by all members of the community, and also if it is used as a significant guideline for all decisions that are made by the school's board, administration and faculty. Additionally, a school is expected to regularly review its mission to determine whether or not it is truly being fulfilled and, perhaps more importantly, whether or not it continues to serve as a useful guide to the school's educational community.

## Good Governance

We know from decades of experience that a school's success is directly related to good governance, which is the primary responsibility of the school's board of trustees. The school's tone, tenor and character originate in the behavior of the board. NYS AIS accreditation requires the school's board of trustees to analyze and critique its performance in relation to 19 criteria, all of which are essential to the effective governance and operation of the school.

As part of its analysis, the board is required to respond to questions such as these: Has the board of trustees developed a

governance model that is clearly defined, transparent, and understood by all constituencies within the school? How effective is the board of trustees in providing for stability in transitions in both the board and the school's administrative leadership? How has the board of trustees ensured that adequate financial resources are available to the school to fulfill its mission? These and other criteria help each board of trustees strengthen the governance model that it has created to ensure that the school will be successful now and in the future.

## Assessing the Educational Program

Of particular importance to parents is the school's educational program. Again, the NYSAIS accreditation process helps schools thoroughly analyze their educational programs, offerings and pedagogy. Each school is expected to make a comprehensive assessment of all aspects of the learning environment. In doing so, the faculty responds to 12 specific criteria, including the academic program's fidelity to the school's mission. There is also an expectation that the program is regularly evaluated and measured in terms of current research about how students learn.

## Room for Improvement

The most effective and useful self-studies are those which are not only highly analytical, but lead to a clear action plan for continuous improvement in all areas of the school. Schools are encouraged to celebrate their accomplishments, but also to examine themselves with a critical eye. The accreditation process is one that looks at what exists in the present, but also aspires to define a strategic path for the future.

We have yet to see a school where there are no areas for improvement. Through the crafting of the self-study, even schools with long histories and exceptional reputations gain important valuable insight into ways they can improve.

## The Visiting Committee

Once a self-study is completed, a visiting committee of professional educators, led by an experienced head of school, spends several days meeting with all members of the school's community. These teams range in size from four or five to as large as twenty, depending on the size and complexity of the school under evaluation. In order to encourage accurate assessments by all participants, the work of the visiting committee is kept confidential.

The primary purpose of the onsite visit is to verify the thoroughness and veracity of the self-study. Just as the school has rated itself under each of the 90 criteria, so does the visiting committee. It is particularly important that the analysis and conclusions in the self-study are able to stand up to scrutiny from visiting peers with expertise to address its every phase. Alignment between the school and the visiting committee in these ratings provides a measure of confidence for the school and the visiting committee. When a discrepancy between these two assessments emerges, this difference becomes an area of discussion.

The visiting committee members conclude their work with a written report that includes both commendations and recommendations on all aspects of the self-study. Areas of particular note are categorized as "major commendations" and "major recommendations."

## The Commission's Recommendation

After the visiting committee's report is finalized, it is referred to the NYS AIS Commission on Accreditation. This group of twenty highly experienced heads of school reviews each self-study and visiting committee report, carefully critiquing both the work of the school and that of the visiting peers. A small sub-committee of the Commission meets with the chair of the visiting committee to discuss its findings. As with all phases of the NYS AIS accreditation

process, analysis and discussion, as well as a commitment to the school and its students, inform the Commission's work. When completed, a recommendation regarding the school's accreditation status is forwarded to the NYS AIS Board of Trustees.

Once the NYS AIS Board of Trustees makes its determination, the final visiting committee report is sent to the school's board of trustees and administration. These observations, comments and suggestions provide structure, direction, and scope that go far beyond that which a school on its own might uncover. They provide a road map for future growth and improvement; as with any good road map, the destination might be known, but there are always many ways to get there.

## Look for Accreditation

Just as accreditation is integral to membership in NYS AIS, it should be one of the considerations made by parents when choosing a school. Without regular and ongoing self-evaluation, an institution may lose focus and, in a rapidly changing world, its value and relevance for the children and families it serves.

Through its accreditation process, NYS AIS supports the members of a school community as they scrutinize and refine their goals, and reinforces their ability to meet those goals. A school that has undergone the rigors of the accreditation process, at both five-year (interim) and ten-year (decennial) intervals, has shown that it lives up to the high standards expected of a NYS AIS school, and that it is committed to continuing innovation and improvement.

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