

Introduction

The *REACH 2.1: Standards Manual for Accreditation for EE–12 North American and International Schools* is designed for Christian schools in the United States and around the world that are preparing students for direct transition to English language tertiary programs such as those in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and elsewhere. The eight standards in this document are broad declarations of quality performance, procedures, and practices that should exist in all Christian schools and early education programs. (**Note: throughout this manual the word *school(s)* is intended to reflect early education, elementary, middle, and secondary programs.**)

There are three manuals that are part of the accreditation process:

1. *Standards Manual for Accreditation*
2. *Rubrics Manual*
3. *Early Education Evidence Guide*

The *Standards Manual for Accreditation* and the *Rubrics Manual* are applicable to all EE–12 schools and EE stand-alone programs seeking accreditation with ACSI. The *Early Education Evidence Guide* is required in addition for any school with an early education program, attached or stand-alone, that is included in the accreditation process.

The *Standards Manual for Accreditation* includes an overview of the process and extensive appendixes of related materials for schools beginning the initial or renewal accreditation. It lists each of the eight standards and the rationale and justification for the standard as well as presenting the indicators that relate to the standard. The *Rubrics Manual* unpacks each standard with a number of indicators and with a rubric for the school to use in rating itself. These ratings assist the school in determining to what extent it is meeting the standard. The indicators and rubrics also serve the purpose of having the school's stakeholders engage in a healthy and deep dialogue about quality. The *Early Education Evidence Guide (EEEG)* is for attached or stand-alone preschools, and it notes the additional indicators in which the "compliance" level must be met for Standards 3, 5, and 6 for these programs. The *EEEG* also notes the evidences or observations that support meeting or exceeding compliance.

The goal for a school is to reach the "compliance" level for every indicator. A number of indicators are identified as critical. These are indicators that the school must meet or exceed the "compliance" level for an initial or renewal accreditation visit to take place. These are reviewed with the school at the time of granting candidacy and on the annual report submitted by schools continuing accreditation. Visiting teams do not come to a school until these compliance requirements are met. If a school finds a particular critical indicator that is not possible for it to meet, the school may follow the process to request an exception from ACSI. (See appendix L.)

The standards, standard justification statements, indicators, rubrics, and early education evidence are meant to be viewed as an entire entity and not as discrete elements to be addressed in isolation. The school's self-study report, including the school improvement plan, should reflect this holistic approach to its self-evaluation. The report must reflect clear alignment among the standards reports, its summary findings, and its plan for school improvement. The school improvement plan should identify both curricular achievement goals as well as organizational improvements that will enhance the educational experience of students. The various standards subcommittees should represent the school's stakeholders and provide a forum for lively and engaged conversation about the present status of the school and about its preferred future in both the short- and long-term.

Schools in the accreditation process will routinely find areas of needed improvement in some and possibly all standard areas. Authentic dialogue and transparent self-assessment are central to getting the most value out of the self-study process.

Accreditation should be viewed as integral to an ongoing process of institutional assessment, improvement, and development. It is voluntary, invigorating, demanding, and worthwhile. It is for a school that is determined to demonstrate that it has achieved a recognized standard of quality, and it also recognizes opportunities for continuous school improvement.

STANDARDS NOTE: ALL EIGHT STANDARDS APPLY TO EACH LEVEL (EE–12). SOME INDICATORS MAY NOT APPLY TO ALL LEVELS.

Accreditation Process Overview

Before applying for accreditation, the school should carefully review the standards and process. Meeting standards and completing the self-study require a strong commitment by the governing body, faculty, and staff.

The following steps outline the application process:

1. APPLICATION

The accreditation application may be obtained from your ACSI regional office or from the ACSI website. The completed application and applicable attachments should be returned to the regional office, along with the application fee, a copy of the governing body minutes indicating approval for the school to pursue accreditation with ACSI, and a preliminary profile. The preliminary profile includes a brief paragraph narrative of no more than 300 words for each required element, that presents a snapshot on each of the following topics:

1. Founding and purpose of the school
2. Ownership, legal standing, organizational and governance structure
3. Description of the school community/stakeholders
4. Significant trends in the past three years (e.g., enrollment, finances, facilities)
5. Type of instructional program (e.g., traditional, classical, on-line, bilingual, IGCSE)
6. Staff numbers and hiring qualifications
7. School funding sources
8. Vision for the future (three to five years)

International schools apply through the ACSI Global office in Colorado Springs.

Schools that wish to obtain joint accreditation with ACSI and another recognized agency should notify the ACSI regional office or ACSI Global office upon application. ACSI should be identified as the lead agency, and in such cases ACSI will inform the school about its separate application to the other accrediting agency. If a school desires to proceed with a joint accreditation plan, a statement to that effect, which also names the other accrediting agency, should be included in the initial letter of inquiry that the school sends to the ACSI regional office in its area.

It should be noted that a joint accreditation may require an alteration of some of the processes described in this document.

2. CANDIDATE STATUS VISIT

Once the accreditation application has been received by the regional or Global office, the school will be contacted to establish a date for a candidate status visit. The purpose of this brief visit is to determine whether the school can meet the standards, complete the self-study, and host the visiting team within a three-year period. It is also an appropriate time to discuss specific questions related to the accreditation process and/or to further familiarize parent groups, governing body members, or faculty with the meaning and the process of accreditation.

Once candidate status has been granted, the school will receive official notification from the ACSI regional office. A consultant will be assigned to work with the school.

The purpose of the candidacy visit is threefold:

1. To gain sufficient knowledge of the school and assess its suitability and readiness for entry into the ACSI accreditation process
2. To assist the school leadership in organizing the self-study process and set a tentative timeline for the candidacy period through the team visit
3. To orient, answer questions, and consult with the leadership, faculty, staff, and other stakeholders about the accreditation standards and their role in the various aspects of the process

In order to accomplish the first objective, the consultant will determine the extent to which the following are in place:

- a. The school has a clearly formulated Christian educational philosophy and a set of objectives, both of which are set forth in a written statement that takes into account the distinctive location, nature, and goals of the school.
- b. There is evidence that the school will be able to meet each of the accreditation standards by the time of the visit.
If the school is renewing, all required recommendations or improvements must be made before the team visit since the school cannot be accredited until these are corrected.
- c. The governing body is committed to the accreditation and school improvement process, including their participation in the self-study.
- d. Staff (executive leadership, instructional, and support) are sufficient in number, qualified, and appropriately assigned, such that they provide for effective operation of the school.
- e. Instructional elements and pedagogical practices, including overall curricular content and design and organizational arrangement, support an educational culture that meets the needs of the students, and they are consistent with the mission and schoolwide expected student outcomes of the school.
- f. Day-to-day organizational policies and procedures are clearly established and communicated.
- g. The school ensures that the services it provides—transportation, food, residence, and/or others—meet acceptable standards of health, safety, and comfort, fulfilling all applicable legal requirements.
- h. Instructional materials and equipment are appropriate, and the school has a sufficient quantity to fulfill the basic needs of the instructional program.
- i. Grounds, buildings, technical installations, basic furnishings, and supporting equipment are adequate for effective support of the total school program.
- j. Financial resources, including budgeting and fiscal management, are capable of sustaining a sound educational program that is consistent with the stated philosophy and objectives of the school.

- k. The school complies with all national, state, provincial, and local legal guidelines.

In order to achieve the second objective of the candidate status visit, the consultant will wish to do the following:

- a. Review the entire self-study process with the executive leadership team of the school, faculty, governing body members, and others as appropriate.
- b. Review the ACSI self-study instrument and all standard practices with the leadership of the school to ensure that everyone concerned is fully cognizant of what is expected.
- c. Establish a proposed schedule of dates for accomplishing the steps in the process, including dates for the evaluation by the visiting team.
- d. Agree on the general composition of the visiting team.
- e. Inform the school of any areas of operation and/or facilities that, in the opinion of the consultant, are seriously deficient and suggest improvements that might be made before the visit of the team.

The school can help the consultant and save time by providing the consultant with as much documentation as possible to assist with his or her inquiry in advance of arrival or at least upon arrival.

The candidacy visit, if well organized, should normally take no more than one or two full days at the school. The consultant will want to look over the entire school plant but will not have time to sit in individual classes. He or she will need to meet at some length with the executive leadership of the school and/or the early education director.

3. CONSULTANT

The consultant assigned to the school has been trained in the many components of the ACSI accreditation program. The consultant serves as a resource person throughout the entire self-study process. All the expenses incurred by the consultant are paid by the school. ACSI team members are reimbursed for their expenses but are not paid a stipend for their service.

For international schools, the consultant is required to make an on-site visit six to nine months before the arrival of the visiting team to ensure the school's readiness for the visit.

4. SELF-STUDY

The school is required to complete a self-study. It must organize the school staff and other stakeholders into standard study groups to complete the process. Each of the eight standards is carefully reviewed, using the indicators and rubrics to guide the preparation of an accurate, complete, well-written report. It must rate itself on each of the indicators, write a concluding narrative in regard to the standard, and compile a list of evidence which the school used to rate the indicator.

In addition to the accreditation and rubric manuals, the early education programs will use the *EE Evidence Guide for REACH Indicators* for standards 3, 5, and 6. This guide will assist programs in determining if they are reaching or exceeding the compliance level in regard to each indicator. It will also note particular strengths and areas where needed improvements are indicated.

Completion of a quality self-study normally takes 18 to 24 months for a school that is going through its initial accreditation. The self-study is a high-value aspect of the accreditation process, and it must be approached with deliberation and high levels of involvement to attain the quality report that is needed. (See appendixes C, D and E.)

5. TEAM VISIT

Upon completion of the self-study, a team of peer Christian school teachers and administrators is scheduled to visit the school. The number

of members on the team depends on the size of the school, the number of grades and ages served, and the number of campuses involved. The length of the visit is at least two and a half days; it can be up to four days. The school is responsible for all the travel and hosting expenses of the visiting team members.

The primary purpose of the team's visit is to verify the integrity of the self-study and observe that the standards are being met. In other words, does the self-study accurately reflect the programs and overall ministry of the school? The team's final report will address every section of the self-study. The team members will prepare a list of commendations and recommendations for each section of the self-study. Other report formats may be necessary in the case of joint accreditation and/or as directed by state approval agreements for early education programs.

What to Expect During the Team Visit

The visiting team will conduct scheduled visits and interviews, as well as randomly talk to students, parents, faculty, board members, and support staff. The purpose of these visits is to get a sense of the school and how it is functioning. Scheduled interviews will take place with student leaders, the board, and the leadership of the parent organization. The various groups that compiled the sections of the self-study will have meetings with visiting team members assigned to each of the standards. Classroom observations take place to overview the academic rigor, classroom management, student engagement, teacher-student relationships, and pedagogy in the school. The tone of the interviews and classroom visits is collegial and not inspective.

The visiting team will write a report that follows an established template. There is a narrative section for each standard that summarizes the "what is" assessment of the school by the visiting team. The team will identify commendable practices and make recommendations to the school for improvements. In the concluding section of the report, the visiting team will identify significant areas that are commendable and also major recommendations that the school must address.

Members of the visiting team will keep the following points clearly in mind: In view of the public responsibility assumed by ACSI in undertaking the accreditation of schools, an important trust has been placed in the visiting team to conduct and report its investigations thoroughly. Thus, ACSI will ensure that every team member does the following:

1. Becomes familiar with the self-study report, in particular those parts for which he or she has been assigned specific responsibility, in order to be able to use the observation time efficiently.
2. Contributes to a report that will be sufficiently detailed and comprehensive to be both a reliable basis for the decision of the accreditation commission and a useful working document for the future development of the school.
3. Holds all information of the school in confidence.

Though the school's standards must warrant ACSI approval if accreditation is to be granted, team members will be aware that the school is being evaluated first and foremost in terms of its own philosophy and objectives. It must also be clearly understood that when classrooms are being observed, teams should look for compliance with health and safety standards and age-appropriate instructional strategies.

The team members, when in private with one another and when in contact with representatives of the school, will have an open-minded and constructive attitude and will endeavor to be of service, with an emphasis on assisting the school rather than sitting in judgment on it.

The visiting team may conclude its visit with a faculty meeting at which it reviews major commendations and recommendations. A recommendation may be shared with the school about whether the school will be accredited however, no information about the school and the visit should be released or communicated to any outside parties by the visiting team.

6. ACCREDITATION COMMISSION

At the conclusion of the team visit, the team's report will be forwarded to the appropriate ACSI USA or ACSI Global office. The team's report will be reviewed at the appropriate meeting of the ACSI regional accreditation commission, and action will be taken regarding the school's status and term of accreditation. A final report will be mailed to the school after the decision on accreditation has been made.

7. MAINTAINING ACCREDITATION: A COMMITMENT TO A SYSTEMATIC PLAN FOR IMPROVEMENT

Improvement plans: The continuous school improvement plan (CSIP) that the school has developed for its self-study before the team visit lists prioritized improvements that school leaders feel are necessary for the school to grow. After the team visit, the major recommendations from the team must be incorporated into the school's CSIP.

When the school submits its first annual report to its regional office, it should include procedures for addressing the major recommendations from the visiting team report and any substantive changes within the school.

Annual reports: Annual reports should be sent to the appropriate ACSI USA or ACSI Global office. The annual report seeks information on the demographics of the school each year, financial status (reviews, practices, or audits) when applicable, and requires the school to identify how it has progressed on its major recommendations. Administrators will also be responsible for submitting the name(s) of faculty members who they deem would be effective accreditation team members. This is an important part of the accreditation process and is a way for faculty members to participate in professional development through the accreditation process.

Midterm visit and interim report: For international schools, a midterm accreditation visit is usually made to the accredited school two or three years after the initial granting of accreditation status. In the United States, a midterm visit may or may not be required, depending on the term granted by the regional commission. In joint accreditation, the timing of the visit is coordinated with the other accrediting agency. The school interim/midterm report gives an account of the school's progress regarding all recommendations of the visiting team.