

# INDEPENDENT SCHOOL ACCREDITATION: A GUIDE TO SCHOOL CHOICE

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*Accreditation testifies that a school's program is what it purports to be and that the school is living up to high standards, including a commitment to its own pursuit of improvement. It may also help families identify questions and establish parameters concerning the appropriateness of a school for their child.*

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Choosing a school for a young person is a complex and often puzzling task. It can be especially confusing to move from the world of public schools into that of independent schools. Parents inquiring into independent schools for the first time are often surprised to discover a very different school culture from what they were accustomed to in the public schools. Public schools typically provide a broad range of programs suitable for all young people. They are subject to state regulations intended to standardize the educational program and assure a basic level of quality, such as the number of days in the school year, the requirement that all teachers be certified, and a state determined common course of study. In many states, students take proficiency tests, the results of which are published in tables that compare and rank the performance of the schools. In short, there appear to be common expectations in place and convenient measures to assess the relative quality of the public schools. In contrast, independent schools are largely free of state regulation, practice selective admission of students, develop their own curriculum, and often deliberately eschew publication of comparative test data. Simple comparisons are difficult to make either between public and private schools or among private schools themselves. How then can one choose the best school for a child?

In weighing independent school options, parents understandably would like the type of information, such as comparative scores, that they are accustomed to receiving in the public sector. They may be disappointed to be told that in choosing an independent school there is a different set of questions to be asked and that they need to begin by assessing the needs of their child, identifying his/her special interests, estimating the comfort level with academic competition, etc. and then matching these characteristics of their child with the philosophy, programs, and student body of a school. The ability of independent schools to excel is in part a function of the fact that they do not aspire to be all things to all people, but do focus their energies quite deliberately. There is great

diversity among independent schools and the selection process is appropriately one of matching child and school, rather than identifying one school as generic "best."

While independent schools customarily do not provide the data needed for simple comparisons and rankings, they do recognize the need for some public measure of quality assurance. In this context accreditation emerges as a useful overall indicator of quality. Further, the way independent school accreditation is organized may also suggest other factors to be considered in choosing a school.

### **Independent School Accreditation**

Independent schools differ from one another and develop in distinctive ways in response to their missions. Their strength arises in part from their exemption from stultifying regulation, but this freedom from governmental oversight provides its own challenge to find alternative ways to assess and demonstrate quality. For independent schools, accreditation is both a suitable vehicle for school accountability and an effective catalyst for school improvement. By nature, independent schools are self-governing, self-supporting financially, and may be accountable only to themselves. Independent schools have recognized, however, that the strength they draw from autonomy may also be a source of weakness. The danger is that they will be self-satisfied; that they will operate in isolation; and that they will lack the will and the necessary perspective to assess themselves and make the necessary changes to improve. In response to this recognition, associations of independent schools have emerged in every corner of the United States. These associations set standards for membership and many associations have established procedures to accredit their member schools and hold them accountable.

As noted, the strength of independent schools flows from the freedom to innovate, to fashion a consistent program based upon a clear philosophy and sense of mission, and to assemble a school community of young people and adults with a common purpose. Given the resulting diversity of institutions, one might well ask what measure of quality could possibly be applicable to all? Independent school accreditation provides a model that respects independence while acknowledging the need for accountability. Accreditation is voluntary. It begins when a school agrees to join an association of peer institutions, to participate in the setting of standards of educational quality, and to commit to meeting those standards.

### **Two Aspects of Accreditation**

There are two distinct aspects to the accreditation process: the first focus of independent school accreditation is upon the uniqueness of the school, recognizing its clear commitment to a distinctive mission and the unfolding of that mission in all areas of school life; complementary to that is the application of standards of quality to which all member schools are held accountable. In this way, independent school accreditation proceeds on a dual track.

Independent school accreditation respects the differences among schools. Unlike many other systems of evaluation, the independent school accreditation process individualizes the assessment. The accreditation process begins with a self-study, following an established protocol to examine every aspect of the school, assess compliance with standards, identify strengths and weakness, set priorities, and determine plans for improvement. The self-study requires clear articulation of a school's mission and proceeds to examine how that mission is embodied in the many facets of school life. Each school approaches accreditation by writing its own self-study, following the format set by the accrediting association.

Independent school accreditation holds schools to rigorous standards common to all member schools. The accrediting association enlists peers, experienced professionals from other independent schools, to participate in the evaluation process. A visiting committee comprised of faculty and administrators from other schools is recruited, trained, and sent by the accrediting association to observe and evaluate the school over a period of three to four days. The self-study, which the committee is charged to validate, serves as the text for the visit. The committee assesses how accurately the school has evaluated itself, how well the school follows its own mission, and suggests what actions for improvement should be given priority. The committee also applies the standards for accreditation, voting on each one individually and recording the results. Schools are required to meet all standards and are given a deadline to bring themselves into compliance with any standards that are not met at the time of the visit. The visiting committee prepares a report to the school and to the accrediting association detailing its findings and making recommendations to the school.

From this point until the next full self-study in seven to ten years, the accreditation process consists of a dialogue between the accrediting association and the school through which the association monitors efforts by the school to meet all standards, to respond to recommendations, and to take appropriate steps toward improvement. Typically, the school is held accountable through brief annual reports, longer interim reports, and focused visits when warranted.

### **Standards for Accreditation**

An independent school seeking accreditation voluntarily commits to meeting a set of standards that have been established by the accrediting association as indicators of educational quality and institutional integrity. Accreditation entails accountability to an association of peer institutions that set the standards and oversee a school's compliance. The genius of independent school accreditation is that it applies and adapts to the vast range of institutions. The process is individualized in every aspect and yet still maintains a rigorous standard of quality.

Specific standards for accreditation differ somewhat among accrediting associations, but there are significant points of agreement. Taken together, the standards describe the qualities of a good independent school and holds members to them. Operating in

accordance with a well-articulated mission is the mark of an independent school and evidence of this is required by the standards.

Standards require that schools admit only those students for whom they can provide suitable programs and services. Faculty and staff must be qualified by education and/or experience for responsibilities to which they are assigned. The program of the school must be defined, must be consistent with the declared mission of the school, and must satisfy the needs of the students enrolled. There must be procedures in place to assess student achievement and report on it to parents. Independent schools have particular institutional characteristics that are addressed by standards on governance, financial management, development, long-range planning, etc. All accrediting associations require schools to be honest in their public representations.

The standards are couched in a form that accommodates and respects the diversity of independent schools. For example, a standard on admissions does not tell the school whom to admit, but states that the school will admit only those students whom the school can appropriately serve. In its self-study the school will describe the admissions process and explain how the standard is met. The visiting committee will interview faculty, students, and parents and will review files and documents to confirm the school's report; if warranted, the committee will make recommendations to correct deficiencies or to improve policies and practices.

Accreditation is more than a checklist of compliance with standards, however. It is a process that engages the entire school community, bringing it together to affirm its mission, identify areas of strength and weakness, and articulate plans for improvement. The self-study is the heart of the accreditation process for a school. If done well, it raises self-awareness and provides a planning document to guide the school in its development. Accreditation is not just an assurance of quality at the moment, but it is also a powerful vehicle for ongoing school improvement.

### **The Role of the Accrediting Association**

Independent school accrediting associations structure and organize the accreditation process. Schools are offered guidance in conducting a self-study. Faculty who are invited to participate on visiting committees are selected by the association and trained for the task. Following a visit, the association reviews reports from both the school and the visiting committee and sets forth recommendations to which the school must respond. The association maintains regular communication with the school and is prepared to take extraordinary action to correct the situation if it finds that a school is not in compliance with standards.

One might ask, "if independent school personnel evaluate one another, how does one ensure candor about problematic issues?" Today independent school accreditation associations recognize that it is both their responsibility and in their self-interest to maintain a process with manifest credibility and integrity. Even the most prestigious schools would acknowledge that they do improve when held closely to standards and

associations have learned that all member schools stand to suffer collectively in reputation when abuses are tolerated and the integrity of the accreditation process is compromised.

### **Oversight of the Accreditation Process**

A school's decision to seek accreditation is itself significant, as is the association with which a school identifies itself. Since accreditation is voluntary and is a peer process, one can tell something about a school by the accrediting association that it chooses. In the past twenty years, independent schools have turned more and more frequently for accreditation to member associations of the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS).

Today, many other agencies also offer accreditation to schools through procedures that vary greatly in effectiveness. Families may wish to ask who accredits a school and what other schools are accredited by that agency. NAIS requires all of its member schools to be accredited and maintains a list of state and regional accrediting associations that it approves. Recently the NAIS Board of Directors has joined with its state and regional member accrediting associations to form a Commission on Independent School Accreditation. The Commission's first task is to formulate a set of NAIS Principles of Good Practice for Accreditation. Through the Commission, independent school accreditation practices will be further strengthened as an assurance of quality to the public and as a vehicle for the improvement of member schools.

### **Accreditation as a Guide in Choosing a School**

Accreditation may appear at first as a yes/no proposition that provides the public with some general assurance, but with little specific information about a school. Accreditation means that the school has been found to meet standards and achieve a level of quality, but these are qualitative judgments that are not readily used as the basis for comparison. If a school has recently completed the accreditation process, a family may want to inquire about what issues emerged, but even then the focus of accreditation provides little, if any, specific information about the appropriateness of a given school for a particular child.

If accreditation does not offer direct assistance or easy answers for those trying to choose a school, nevertheless, the accreditation model of evaluation may itself provide helpful guidance by focusing attention on important attributes of independent schools that families may wish to consider in their search. What is the school's mission and how does it manifest itself in school life? What distinctive programs are offered? What counseling and support systems are available? How does the school define its student body? How is discipline handled? What means are employed to assess student achievement? How do the answers to these questions correspond to the list of the young person's interests and needs that the family compiled at the start of their search?

Accreditation cannot guarantee the experience of a specific student in a particular school, but it does testify to the professional judgment of others in the field that a school's

program is what the school purports it to be and that the school is living up to high standards in every area of its operation, including a commitment to its own ongoing pursuit of improvement. Accreditation requires full disclosure of school policies, including financial obligations of families. It may also help by identifying questions and establishing the parameters for a family's own direct communication with a school concerning the opportunities it can offer and its appropriateness for a specific young person.

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