School Accreditation

Preamble

All religious and independent schools have a responsibility to provide their students with the knowledge, skills, and values they need to succeed in life and to contribute to the common good. Schools employ a variety of means to demonstrate, both to the families and communities that support them and to the public at large, that they live up to that responsibility. Many schools use accreditation to review and evaluate all aspects of their institutions, to identify successes as well as areas for improvement, and to remain accountable to parents and the public.

There exists in the private school world a wide variety of accrediting bodies that evaluate according to rigorous standards and methods. Accrediting bodies review every relevant aspect of a school's operation, ensure that the school community undergoes a process of intensive self-study and self-evaluation, and assigns experts to assess performance against prescribed standards. Accreditation is an authoritative, rigorous, and comprehensive process that respects a school's mission and nature, measuring the institution's success and progress (or lack thereof) in actually achieving its stated goals.

Significant changes have taken place that could have consequences for the accreditation of many private schools. Almost all states, strongly encouraged by the U.S. Department of Education, are moving toward common curriculum standards along with aligned assessments. The movement in the direction of unified national standards, national tests, and national accreditation has raised concerns within the private school community, alarmed about the movement's potential impact on diminishing the distinctive nature and autonomy of religious and independent schools.

In a pluralistic society with many answers to the question, What are the proper goals of education? a single system of schooling cannot possibly meet everyone's needs. Our country is blessed by a rich diversity of schools—some rooted in a particular religious perspective and some reflecting a particular pedagogy, philosophy, or approach to child development. There are all sorts of schools in America that do not neatly fit into a single mold. A one-size-fits-all approach to education is as antithetical to American principles as it is to the unique development of each human being.

In the United States, educational pluralism is cherished, and the right of parents to choose the kind of education their children receive is protected. Private schools contribute to the diversity that is one of the most distinctive and prized aspects of American culture. For example, religious schools look to develop moral, theological, and spiritual characteristics that may elude assessment tools and accreditation procedures designed primarily for public schools. Other private schools may adopt instructional content, delivery methods, and assessment approaches that support each school's particular mission and educational goals, and may be very different from those found in public schools.

The right of parents to choose an education for their children consistent with their beliefs and values should never be compromised through an attempt to standardize schooling. Nationalized standards, testing, and accreditation must not be allowed to erode the role of private education as a healthy alternative to government schools. The rich and diverse landscape of educational variety in the United States was a key element in the original establishment of this democratic republic; it continues to be a key contributor to the leadership in the free world that the United States enjoys.

Voice of America's Private Schools

Principles

With a goal of preserving pluralism in accreditation and diversity in education, CAPE embraces the following principles:

1. Varied philosophies, theologies, and pedagogies distinguish private schools. Therefore, it is essential that when a school seeks validation and improvement through accreditation, it be able to select from a range of accrediting bodies that reflect a variety of rigorous standards and procedures for accreditation. The school community is best suited to make a determination about which accreditation process best reflects its mission and culture.

2. Accreditation for a system of schools or an individual school should respect and incorporate the unique identity and purpose of a school by including standards and indicators that reflect the school's particular mission and culture.

3. Mandatory government institutional assessments and procedures present a serious threat to the independence and diversity of private education. States should recognize multiple accrediting bodies, providing schools with a choice in accreditation philosophies and protocols.

4. The focus for any accrediting agency should be ensuring school improvement and student growth. An effective accreditation process must include peer-review, self-study, and a comprehensive and thorough examination of all the indicators of a quality school, including a rich pedagogical/cultural life and sound business practices.

5. Accreditation should examine, affirm, and improve a school's culture, including the extent to which the school fosters a caring and supportive environment, promotes parental involvement, and develops values, ethical motives, basic beliefs, respect, integrity, enthusiasm for learning, and authenticity among its students.

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