

K-12 ACCREDITATION'S NEXT MOVE

A storied guarantee
looks to accountability 2.0

THE CURRENT GENERATION of American public-school students has grown up in the era of centralized, standardized data. Anyone curious about how local schools were doing could look at pass rates on annual exams in math and reading, the foundation of federally mandated, test-based accountability.

New rules are poised to change this system. The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), written to shrink the federal government's reach, enables states to embrace a more holistic approach to quality control. Test scores are still important, but so are attendance, school climate, graduation rates, and other non-academic measures. As states redesign their accountability systems, the challenge is how to best measure, report, and utilize this information to improve student learning.

One industry is offering itself up for the job: accreditation. For more than a century, schools have hired nonprofit accreditors to determine whether their operations and outcomes meet external quality standards, thereby earning an accreditation seal of approval. While accreditation is better known at institutions of higher education, where it is required for schools to participate in federal student-aid programs, it is also practiced, though little-understood, at K-12 public, public charter, and private schools.

How common, consequential, and rigorous is K-12

accreditation? How do accreditation reviews work? And do they offer a more holistic, and potentially more useful, approach to quality control for public and private schools?

For the most part, hardly anyone knows. An *Education Next* review of policies and practices across the United States found broad misunderstanding, uneven public reporting, and unpredictable variation in requirements and consequences.

In states like Georgia and Missouri, accreditation status makes headlines and has dramatically affected students' trajectories and the economic fortunes of their hometowns. In states like Florida, it is neither required nor reported to the public. States such as Colorado and Virginia accredit districts themselves, while Michigan and Wyoming, among others, require districts to earn the status through an approved agency to remain in good standing. The review processes range from self-administered checklists to in-depth, in-person audits. And among schools and districts that seek the status, an estimated 2 percent are denied the credential.

After flying under the policy radar for more than a century, accreditation agencies are at an inflection point. Will they find themselves rendered irrelevant under ESSA—or at the center of the next generation of school accountability?

by JENNIFER OLDHAM



The Mystery of K–12 Accreditation

Defining accreditation and how it fits into the nation’s K–12 schools is a patience-inducing exercise.

“The education of the general public and the education of legislators to understand what we do and how we do it and why we do it is ongoing,” said Mark Elgart, chief executive of AdvancED, the nation’s largest accreditor. “I’ve been in this 22 years, and it’s just as prevalent today—we are constantly trying to meet that challenge.”

Trade associations, unions, and think tanks surveyed for this story don’t track the imprimatur. Even academics who study education reform are unsure what it truly stands for. “I honestly don’t think most people are aware of it,” said Rebecca Jacobsen, an associate professor at Michigan State University who researches how accreditation fits into states’ accountability systems. “It’s been off the radar.”

The credential boasts a storied history. High schools started seeking accreditation through regional nonprofits in the late 1800s to provide colleges with a way to determine if their students were equipped for higher education. These reviews counted the number of library books and degrees held by teachers, among other inputs, rather than outputs like student test scores.

Today, there are four major accrediting agencies: AdvancED, the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Schools, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. Some conduct reviews nationwide, instead of primarily serving schools and districts in states in their geographic region, which was how they operated historically.

The reviews have expanded to encompass detailed documenta-

schools be accredited in order to participate in federal student-aid programs, and course credits from unaccredited institutions are often not transferable to accredited schools. There are no federal accreditation requirements at the K–12 level, where schools must meet state standards for performance.

Education Next surveyed all 50 state departments of education to determine the scope and importance of the practice, including reviewing information published on state web sites and by conducting telephone and email interviews. We obtained information for 40 states; 10 only provided partial responses to our repeated inquiries about the practice, and four of those 10 did not provide us with any information at all.

In most states, accreditation currently stands apart from accountability—the status is not relevant or included in public report cards that detail student achievement, growth, graduation rates, and indicators of postsecondary and career readiness. Accreditation also measures different aspects of a district or school, in addition to student performance, such as parent communication and participation, improvement plans, leadership effectiveness, curriculum and instruction quality, student mentoring, use of technology, and professional development.

About 20 states require all public schools to be accredited; none of the states that responded to our inquiries requires accreditation of all private schools. In states like Arizona and Illinois, schools aren’t required to maintain accreditation, while in others, like Idaho and Kentucky, schools and districts work with outside agencies to conduct in-depth reviews that require lengthy documentation and take at least 18 months to complete. Some states only seek reviews for schools or districts identified as failing by state accountability systems.

Many private and religious schools opt to earn accreditation as a marketing tool for parents, though for the most part, this information is not widely tracked. While some pursue mainstream accreditation through the major agencies, others seek approval from smaller associations focused on a particular educational approach, such as

Christian or Montessori schools. While rare, losing accreditation can be fatal for a private school, said Elgart of AdvancED. Without it, many parents shy away from enrolling their children, fearful that their credits or diplomas may be meaningless after they leave the school.

Public-school parents might want to check their districts’ status as well; Elgart estimated that one in 10 U.S. high schools is not accredited, which can make for an unpleasant surprise once students attempt to enroll in college. In nine states, including South Dakota, Tennessee, Indiana, Michigan, and Idaho, state-awarded scholarships are limited to students from accredited schools. Some colleges and universities, such as both the University of California and California State University systems, require a diploma from

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tion and data analysis, days of onsite visits, in-depth meetings to chart progress and discuss future goals, and a culminating report detailing strengths, weaknesses, and a school’s or district’s final accreditation status. Onsite reviewers volunteer their time, but districts typically cover their room and board, and may pay a reviewing fee as well. Districts also invest hundreds of hours to complete the self-assessments that are part of the process and pay annual dues to remain in good standing. At AdvancED, for example, an accreditation review costs \$1,950 plus expenses for reviewers, and membership fees cost about \$900 per year.

K–12 accreditation differs from that of higher-education institutions in terms of both transparency and consequences. The U.S. Department of Education requires that postsecondary

an accredited high school, as do various state-based scholarship programs and some military-enlistment programs. In a little-known twist, students applying to colleges and universities out of state can also face roadblocks if their high school isn't accredited by one of the four regional accrediting agencies.

"We get dozens of these stories every spring from angry parents," Elgart said.

While there are more than 800 citations in state laws recognizing the nation's accrediting agencies as gatekeepers for scholarships and college admissions, there is no definitive catalogue

accredited. You want the stamp of approval."

Over dinner in a pedestrian conference room, DPS administrators told AdvancED reviewers of their struggles to educate students in a 299-square-mile county with the state's second-highest violent-crime rate. Two-thirds of the district's 33,000 or so students qualify for free or reduced-price meals. Some 47 percent are black, 30 percent are Hispanic, 18 percent are white, and 2 percent are Asian. Equity is a top concern.

District leaders acknowledged that their progress in raising student test scores was incremental, at best, and that they still have



An AdvancED team examines evidence during a school system accreditation review (right), with AdvancED president and CEO Mark Elgart (left) facilitating discussion.



of what individual states require, much less what is required by colleges and universities after students graduate and want to enroll. The nation's university associations and trade groups don't track it. Neither does the federal government.

Accreditors on the Ground

But what does accreditation look like in action? To find out, we went to North Carolina to see what the process entails.

On a rainy April Sunday, AdvancED volunteers met with leaders from North Carolina's Durham Public Schools (DPS) at a suburban hotel. It was a long time coming: Jill Hall-Freeman, the district's executive director of leadership and professional development, had spent a year orchestrating an exhaustive self-assessment required by the reviewing agency before the group arrived. The outline of AdvancED's expectations alone was 38 pages long; the documentation DPS provided in response spanned more than 700 pages.

But the work was crucial. North Carolina parents expect their kids' schools to obtain the guarantee, Hall-Freeman said, even though the state doesn't require it.

The preparation "was really hard and really scary," she said. "As a district, it's the standard in North Carolina to be

far to go. In 2015–16, third-grade reading proficiency fell to 45.7 percent from 48.8 percent two years earlier, while eighth-grade reading proficiency was flat at 39.7 percent compared to 39.9 percent two years earlier. There were pockets of progress, they said, with some schools posting marked gains.

They also noted persistent achievement gaps between children of engineers and university professors and students from working-class families. Gaps by students' race remain significant: district-wide, in 2015–16 about 78.6 percent of white students passed end-of-course exams in math, reading, and science, compared to 34.8 percent of black students and 37.1 percent of Hispanic students.

Still, there were improvements to share. The four-year graduation rate climbed to 82.1 percent and the number of suspensions decreased. DPS adopted a new student code of conduct in 2016 in response to racial disparities in suspensions. "We've accomplished a lot in the last five years," Hall-Freeman told the group. After the administrators left, AdvancED reviewers settled in for the first of several lengthy discussions about whether Hall-Freeman's statement was backed up by parent and student surveys, the district improvement plan, mental health program reports, grading policies, professional development plans, teacher turnover summaries, state test results, and scores of

other documents in a voluminous database. Lead evaluator Tom Jones, a retired middle-school principal and former state director for AdvancED's Kentucky operation, summed up the team's challenge: "We're doing our best to understand DPS and it's not easy; it's very complex."

In the two days that followed, reviewers visited elementary, middle, and high schools chosen by Jones. The annual teacher turnover rate at DPS is 20 percent, and about half of the teachers in the schools they visited were in the first four years of their career.

From school to school, students' performance on state tests varied widely. One elementary school principal said that students at the C-rated school were "far smarter than the numbers show—they know how to do things, but little things mess them up, like reading over a word, or a comprehension error in math."

At a district high school, the principal noted that the proficiency rate had risen to 25 percent from as low as 17 percent in the

half of Durham students met North Carolina performance standards in reading, math, and science in 2015–16. But AdvancED reviewers found some positives in those school visits and more than 700 pages of documentation.

Ultimately, DPS retained its accreditation. Reviewers applauded administrators for embracing diversity, improving graduation rates, providing choice, charting Advanced Placement test results slightly above other North Carolina systems, and maintaining strong mental health partnerships, leadership development practices, and community support. They also called out district challenges, including teacher turnover, support for minority and refugee students, and communication with families. The team recommended the district improve its collection and analysis of interim student performance data, establish and enforce expectations for student learning and classroom assessment, and ask principals to consistently monitor curriculum delivery and



Team members speak with a teacher during school visits conducted as part of an accreditation review for AdvancED (left). Evaluators use the organization's Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool, eleot®, during their classroom visits (right).

previous year. "You may ask—with their scores low and graduation rates high—are they earning their education? I would say, yes they are." However, the challenge of capturing the attention of high schoolers who perform years below their grade level quickly become evident in the classrooms that Jones visited. In a ninth-grade math class, about half of the 17 students were asleep with their heads resting on their desks as a teacher flashed slides on a white screen that detailed how to use the distributive property to simplify and evaluate expressions. Only four took notes.

"The kids are not the problem in DPS," Jones said. "We saw some ineffective classrooms. We also saw some strong teaching—but it wasn't consistent."

The Verdict

Had DPS earned the right to remain accredited? Does a district with wide achievement gaps and napping high-school students meet minimum quality standards? Overall, less than

differentiation. All schools should also ensure students are "well known" by at least one school employee.

"One of the things that AdvancED highlighted—and this is very important—was that our self-assessment aligned with their findings," said Superintendent Bert L'Homme, who is planning to retire after three years at DPS. "We're on the right path, and we have the people and the tools that we need to succeed."

But is that the right measure of quality? Why accredit a district where proficiency rates are so low? Is "getting better" the right standard?

Elgart of AdvancED responded that he "always gets that question—accreditation is not a benchmark of just student performance, it's a lot more complicated than that."

"Where there is the highest concentration of poverty you will find the lowest-performing districts," he added. "We are going to keep pushing Durham. They've made improvements. They are not going backward. We pull accreditation when districts go backward or get worse."

Whether improvements come quickly enough for students is another question.

“Current accreditation systems are set up to be honest brokers about school quality and set a low bar for what that looks like,” said Chad Aldeman, a principal at Bellwether Education Partners. “There might be long processes schools have to go through, but at the end of the day almost every school gets approved.”

Losing the Credential

Despite the relatively long odds, districts can lose their accreditation. It happened in 2008 in Clayton County, Georgia, and “it was devastating,” said former school board member Charlton Bivins.

“Just let me tell you how powerful the words ‘Clayton County has lost accreditation’ were in terms of the image of the county,” he said. “The recession coupled with the loss of accreditation caused some of our cities to almost go bankrupt. Businesses still don’t come. We have a mall that’s basically empty.”

But the loss also had unexpected effects, he said. The district regained its accreditation in 2009 in part by addressing the bureaucratic dysfunction that cost it the status. As part of that process, the district rewrote its mission statement and re-oriented staff toward that vision. It also sought out new supporters in the form of local legislators and business leaders, held hundreds of hours of public meetings, took out ads in local media, and communicated directly with parents about efforts to articulate and grow a more productive culture. After several years, administrators charted increases in both enrollment and graduation rates.

“As the school district goes, so does the community,” Bivins said. Previously, “the mayors and city councilmen were just worried about stuff in their individual districts—now it’s just the opposite: everybody is in everybody else’s business.”

In Missouri, accreditation losses have also caused surprising outcomes. State regulators pulled accreditation from several St. Louis–area districts in the last decade after years of poor performance.

Under a little-known state law, students in the Normandy and Riverview school districts were then eligible to apply for a transfer to an accredited district—a contentious practice that was upheld by the state supreme court in 2013.

“Speaking for me and my son, it transcended our lives,” said Paul Davis, a taxi driver whose teenage son, Robert, transferred from the Normandy School District to the Francis Howell School District, commuting 50 miles round trip each day. He graduated high school on time and now attends Washington University on a science scholarship. “It was the best thing that happened to us in nine years.”

Robert was one of more than 2,000 students who fled the

unaccredited Normandy and Riverview Gardens systems in 2013 and 2014 to attend suburban schools. The transfer was contentious on both sides: while many of these students’ academic prospects improved, \$23 million in per-pupil state funding followed them, leaving their former classmates with fewer resources, according to James Shuls, an assistant professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. In addition, the plan to accept transfer students from low-income, predominantly black communities at mostly white suburban schools was, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported, “met with acrimony.” Normandy High School was soon in the national headlines for another reason: the fatal police shooting in nearby Ferguson of Michael Brown, who had graduated from the school days before.

In 2014, after policy adjustments by the state school board, the Francis Howell School District announced it would no longer take transfer students, raising questions about the fate of students who had already transferred out of Normandy. After a series of court challenges, the transfer program survived and continues today.

Still, Davis wasn’t taking any chances. He was so worried Robert would be turned away at Francis Howell, he rented an apartment in St. George County so his son could remain at his new school through the end of senior year.

“I didn’t want him to miss a day of that education out there, not one hour—I saw the change after that first year,” said Davis. “I was hoping and praying we would get all four years, and when they said they would take it back, I said, ‘Heck, no. If we have to remortgage our house, or sell our car, whatever, we’ve got to stay in that school.’”

Transferring to a better school is one way to get a better education. But did the pressure to regain accreditation actually improve teaching and learning in Normandy and the other districts that lost their status? The Normandy School District,

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which was taken over by the Missouri Department of Education in 2014 and renamed the Normandy Schools Collaborative, remains unaccredited.

However, in the past year, the state has reaccredited St. Louis Public Schools. That was mostly celebrated as a good-news story, but some researchers say the accreditation formula includes so many factors that it does not place enough weight on student performance. A majority of St. Louis Public Schools students scored below proficient in math and English, but higher scores in the attendance and graduation-rate categories made up for poor results in academic achievement, Emily Stahly, a research assistant at the Show-Me Institute, found in an analysis earlier this year.

“Half the schools in St. Louis are failing, yet they are still receiving a stamp of approval from the state,” she said. The accreditation process “obfuscates what’s really happening with student performance—the kids are not actually learning.”

State officials disagree. The improvement process prescribed by the state has led “to a level of quality here that’s the best we’ve ever had,” said Chris Neale, assistant commissioner for the state Office of Quality Schools. In 2016, he noted, *Education Week’s* annual “Quality Counts” report found Missouri “did better than most at ensuring students from poverty are making better progress.” The report ranked Missouri’s overall state grade as 31st out of 50.

A Tool for Improvement?

Even as a debate rages over their effectiveness, accreditors are angling to be visible players in the next iteration of school accountability—as a matter of both relevance and survival. States are required to develop accountability plans under ESSA

Unlike state-mandated report cards, final reports from regional accreditors can be difficult to find. Sunshine laws in some states require districts and schools to make them publicly available. The agencies themselves leave it up to school administrators to determine if they should be released.

That’s not the case elsewhere, said Craig Jerald, a Washington, D.C.-based education consultant who has studied how accreditation in the U.S. compares to England’s K–12 inspection program. “The first principle for accreditation is transparency,” he said. “In England’s system, not only can you go to a web site and pull up any report over time, they are very precise and very frank and to the point about what is good and what can be improved at any particular school.”

Experts also point to concerns about objectivity and conflict of interest in the current U.S. accreditation process. England’s national inspections agency employs a staff of full-time professionals who are trained to apply a comprehensive rubric of detailed questions. By contrast, in the United States, the volunteer teams of educators sent by regional agencies to review schools

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might go easy on them because they know their own school could receive a similar appraisal in the future, said Michigan State’s Jacobsen. “That fundamentally changes the way you operate—when you are thinking ‘this is going to be me next,’ you are less likely to be too harsh or too critical,” she said.

to receive their share of federal Title I funding. AdvancED is working with 10 states to incorporate its metrics into their review systems. The Middle States Association is also reaching out to states to propose similar ideas.

“I tell schools the reason you want to go through an accreditation process is it gives you a focused and organized way to develop an improvement process,” said Henry Cram, president of Middle States, who estimated that about 2 percent of reviewed schools do not earn the credential. “A lot of people in leadership don’t know how to do that.” A recent survey by the Western Association found 97.9 percent of the 710 California high-school principals who responded agreed the accreditation process had positive effects on student learning. “Every school is a work in progress—even if they get the highest rating,” said the organization’s president, Fred Van Leuven.

How those ratings are reported to the public is a matter of debate, however. States are choosing whether to design accountability systems that encompass details, such as dashboards, versus those that aim for clarity, such as letter grades (“How Should States Design Their Accountability Systems?” *forum*, Winter 2017). And critics say the accreditation process lacks the transparency that current accountability systems provide.

Regional accreditors also fund themselves through annual dues paid by schools and districts they accredit. These agencies’ chief administrators said the amounts are too small to sway the opinions of evaluators who, as volunteers, have no financial stake in the outcome.

“We are doing this with volunteers who are joining our organization and paying dues—it’s an in-and-out for us—we raise \$2.5 million a year and we spend \$2.5 million a year,” said Middle States’ Cram. “There are literally thousands of people involved in the decisionmaking process—it minimizes the conflict of interest as people making the decisions are not deriving financial benefit.”

But if accreditation becomes more central to states’ accountability plans, could the reviews continue to rely on the good will and donated time of volunteers? The complexity of the process and the attendant demands on volunteers may ultimately provide the biggest challenge to substantive, holistic, and consequential school-quality reviews.

“It’s going to be costly—the bottom line might drive this,” said Jacobsen of Michigan State. “It’s a lot easier to administer a test and collect data than it is to hire a team of experts and go out and do accreditation work.”

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