

The Council on Accreditation and School Improvement of the Southern Association Colleges and Schools (SACS CASI) has developed and initiated a *District Accreditation* protocol. The development of the new protocol is in response to requests from superintendents and other district leaders throughout the nation who wanted to better coordinate accreditation with ongoing system improvement initiatives and state mandates. SACS CASI has led the nation in the development and initiation of the next generation protocol for district accreditation. Specifically, they wanted the district accreditation protocol:

- To support the work of school districts committed to developing and implementing system-wide plans for improving student learning and aligning the district's plans with school plans.
- To provide a research-based and data-driven framework for improving student learning and strengthening the effectiveness of schools and school districts.
- To support the work of school districts in providing the leadership and support required to engage in a system-wide process of continuous improvement.

District Accreditation is a voluntary process that requires a readiness visit to your district and written approval from the Chief Executive Officer of SACS CASI.

School systems seeking district accreditation must tend to the three major responsibilities of accreditation. The school system must meet the Accreditation Standards for Quality Systems; identify and illustrate implementation of a continuous system improvement process; and demonstrate quality assurance. In order to achieve or maintain accreditation the school system must host a successful quality assurance review conducted by professional peers representing SACS CASI. As such, the following guidelines apply:

### **District Accreditation has three major components.**

- **Engaging in Continuous Improvement:** The district articulates and implements a planning framework for district improvement that addresses four elements: a ***Vision*** describing the future direction and purpose for the school system and its schools; a ***Profile*** describing the current conditions of the school system and its schools focusing on student learning, a ***Plan*** describing the pursuit of goals designed specifically to address student learning needs and to build the capacity of the internal systems of the district to address such priorities; and the documentation of ***Results*** stemming from improvement efforts.
- **Meeting Standards:** The district complies with and maintains adherence to the ten *District Accreditation Standards for Quality Systems*. Additionally, each school in the district is expected to meet accreditation standards specifically designed for schools.
- **Demonstrating Quality Assurance:** The school system must demonstrate quality assurance through institutional integrity, peer review, and documentation of the results of its improvement efforts. Through institutional integrity the system strives to deliver on its promise and to be what it claims to be to both the school community and community at large; through peer review the efforts of the system and its schools to improve student learning are strengthened; and through documentation of the results of its efforts to improve, the system and its schools are able to determine its strengths and weaknesses and to plan for further improvement. Under the district accreditation framework the district is responsible for designing and implementing a quality assurance process for its

schools and the district. Every five years the district will be expected to host a SACS CASI Quality Assurance Review Team, composed of professional peers from outside the district that are responsible for validating compliance with accreditation standards; assessing the efforts of the district and its schools in engaging continuous improvement; and evaluating the effectiveness of an established internal quality assurance process. The SACS CASI Quality Assurance Review Team will also make random visits to schools within the district to ensure alignment and coordination throughout the district.

### Benefits of District Accreditation

We believe that all school stakeholders can support District Accreditation activities because of its apparent benefits for improving teaching and student learning. Such benefits include the following.

- It is based on *effective schools' research* derived from the work of the National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE) and the other regional accrediting bodies with whom SACS is allied. This research indicates that school improvement support by central office and system-wide structures can be more effective than improvement efforts without such support.
- It is based on *effective leadership research* findings that note that leaders of high performing school districts develop and maintain *quality systems*, which provide:
  - Direction by setting expectations and guidelines;
  - Feedback and assistance (to monitor achievement of performance/expectations);
  - A culture that builds understanding and commitment;
  - For the use of data and research findings to guide decisions and actions; and
  - Resources including professional learning and training opportunities as well as time, human, and fiscal support.
- Its foundation ensures continuity and collaboration in planning for improvement, anchored in a common vision for education among all its schools, because each school's improvement goals must complement that of the district.
- It supports and enhances a common language of school improvement communication across content areas and grade levels, as well as across individual schools, feeder schools, and district lines of responsibility.
- It ensures an onsite Quality Assurance Review visit every five years by an external team of trained peer professionals.
- It holds the promise of significantly reducing costs associated with hosting separate peer review teams for each school every five years.

Since 2002-2003 several districts have received approval to pursue SACS CASI District Accreditation. To date, these districts have identified District Accreditation as the most significant advancement in accreditation in the past several decades. District Accreditation is a process designed to recognize school systems that embrace improving student learning as a systemic process. As such, District Accreditation provides school systems with a process that supports, enhances, and stimulates growth and improvement throughout the school system.

Contact your local state office or the SACS CASI regional office if you wish to discuss the possibilities and benefits that your system and its schools can realize through SACS CASI District Accreditation.