



*The Handbook*  
*for*  
*Visiting Committee Members*  
  
and  
Evaluator Workshop Participants

**Commission on Independent Schools**

New England Association of Schools and Colleges

2017 Edition

## **Commission on Independent Schools**

### **Mission Statement**

CIS engages member schools in a comprehensive peer review accreditation process that provides assurance of quality and serves as a catalyst for innovation, improvement and excellence.

We support the efforts of schools, with their diverse missions, to meet the current and emerging needs of their students and to achieve long term institutional health.

As world leaders in accreditation with our partners at NEASC (founded in 1885), we promote an understanding of the changing educational landscape, and generate relevant discourse and action in the global educational community.

### **Core Principles**

Our schools benefit from our continuous and systematic peer review accreditation process, one that integrates both internal voice and external perspective. We hold our schools responsible for improving and transforming themselves, through self-study and reflection. The ultimate objective is for our schools to design a sustainable future, which is consistent with their respective missions in serving their students, and responsive to a rapidly changing environment.

*Approved by the Commission on Independent Schools, November 2013*

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## Introduction

The New England Association of Schools and Colleges is a voluntary peer accreditation association. It accredits institutions through four Commissions representing various segments of the educational community. As a peer association, the accreditation process is only as strong as its peer participation. The work of a Visiting Committee is one part of the peer process; decision making by the Commission on Independent Schools is another. The Commission on Independent Schools (CIS) is appreciative of the voluntary participation of Visiting Committee Members.

Accreditation has two interrelated purposes, school improvement and quality assurance, which are addressed in a three-phase process.

1. **The Self-Study** — Every ten years a school undertakes a comprehensive self-evaluation, following defined procedures, which is the foundation of the accreditation process and provides the focus for the subsequent visit. Part I of the Self-Study is designed to confirm that the Standards for Accreditation are met, and Part II to reflect on what the school has found in its Self-Study and to generate steps leading to school improvement.
2. **The Visiting Committee** — The Visiting Committee, composed of peers from other member schools, validates the Self-Study and provides the school and the Commission with the observations and recommendations of experienced outside educators. In a collegial rather than adversarial manner, a Visiting Committee is able to comment on a school's self-assessment, highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the school, and assist it in planning for improvement. The committee is also expected to rate the school's compliance with the Standards.
3. **Follow-Up** — The school's process of follow-up, with the Commission's oversight (including the Two-Year and Five-Year Interim Evaluation Reports), assures effective implementation of Part II, incorporating recommendations from the Visiting Committee and the Commission. While adherence to Standards provides some measure of quality, the best long-term assurance of quality is the commitment to ongoing school improvement to which accreditation attests.

This handbook has been prepared for use by Visiting Committee Members. It is hoped that this handbook will assist in the work of the Visiting Committee and that it will lead to better coordination of the evaluation process and to greater consistency of performance from one Visiting Committee to another.

## **An Outline of the Visiting Committee's Role**

1. What is the purpose of and charge to the Visiting Committee?
  - Understand the school on its terms
  - Validate the Self-Study — Part I: Reviewing the Standards and Part II: Reflection, Recommendations, and Issues for Further Discussion
  - Assess and rate the school's compliance with the Standards and make commendations and recommendations
  - Review Part II and its relation to the Self-Study
  - Assess the priorities identified in Part II and the adequacy of resources to accomplish them, and make commendations and recommendations
  - Propose major commendations and recommendations
  
2. How should the Visiting Committee spend its time at the school?
  - Immerse itself in the life of the school with individual and group interviews, observation, and visits to classes and activities
  - Gauge the degree to which the mission guides decisions and defines school life
  - Interview everyone involved in drafting the responses to the Standards
  - Review the Required Self-Study Documents and Materials
  - Reflect on the quality of the school's Self-Study
  
3. How might the Visiting Committee be organized?
  - Two or more people should be assigned to each Standard, with one having primary responsibility for writing
  - Each Visiting Committee Member should be assigned to at least one of the three Program Standards (4, 5, and 6)
  - The full committee should meet, with all members contributing their observations, to reflect on the total program of the school
  - The committee should meet as a whole to review Part II and to draft major commendations and recommendations
  - Members might be given assignments in advance so that they can pre-write descriptive sections of their report based on (and borrowing from) the Self-Study

4. What should the Visiting Committee Report look like?
  - The report should be organized with a response to each Standard and to Part II
  - The Visiting Committee should rate the school on each of the Standards and discuss (justify) any discrepancy from the school's own rating of itself
  - The narrative overview of the school's position with relation to the Standard may be taken directly from the Self-Study Report, if it is accurate
  - The report should comment on notable strengths and aspects warranting attention, and make commendations and recommendations for each Standard and for Part II
  - At the end of the Visiting Committee Report, the Visiting Committee should list major commendations and recommendations
  
5. What types of recommendations are appropriate?
  - Major recommendations should be formulated to relate to Part II and should be included as the final page of the Visiting Committee Report
  - Major recommendations should serve to (1) endorse a recommendation made by the school for itself, (2) strengthen the school with regard to a Standard, or (3) address a discrepancy between the school's mission or policy and practice
  - Major recommendations should reflect the judgment of the entire Visiting Committee

### **Staffing the Committee**

Members of Visiting Committees are selected by CIS staff from a database of nominees submitted annually by Heads of member schools. Typically, committees range in size from five to ten members depending on the size and complexity of the school to be visited and may be as large as 18-20 members. The committee is composed of faculty and administrators representing various academic areas and professional positions, with the majority of members from institutions which are similar to the school being visited. Ideally, committee members have attended a workshop for Visiting Committee Members or have previously served on a committee. When this is not the case, it is the responsibility of the committee Chair to provide orientation and guidance.

## Before the Evaluation Visit

To assist in preparation for the visit, each member will receive a mailing from the CIS office, a mailing from the school to be visited, and other communication from the Visiting Committee Chair.

- **Commission Mailing** — Several weeks before the visit, the CIS office will mail a copy of *The Handbook for Visiting Committee Members*, the *Self-Study Overview*, an expense voucher, a list of the Visiting Committee Members, and other miscellaneous information.
- **School Mailing** — At least one month before the visit, the school will submit the following: the Self-Study Report in electronic form via the portal; a welcome letter from the Head of School to the team; a list of staff; a complete daily program schedule, including teacher assignments to tentatively schedule classroom visits and interviews; and directions to the school and hotel. An *optional* confidential letter with financial or other sensitive information from the Head of School to the Chair should **only** be sent as hard copy.
- **Communication from the Chair** — The Chair will correspond with each Visiting Committee Member to gain information that will help make the best use of the talents and experience of each member. Members should be prompt in responding to any requests.
- **Preparing for the Visit** — There is not sufficient time to read the required materials during the actual visit to the school. Each committee member should be familiar with *The Handbook for Visiting Committee Members* and the Standards for Accreditation. When the Self-Study Report and other materials have been submitted in the portal, members should read them carefully; identify descriptive information that might be included in the Visiting Committee Report; make notes about themes, potential commendations and recommendations; and compile an initial list of questions (including who might be asked). Special attention should be given to the mission and Part II.

If the Chair has assigned responsibility for writing about specific Standards, committee members may wish to prepare preliminary drafts of parts of the report, drawing on the statements in the Self-Study and using the Visiting Committee Report template (located on our website at <http://cis.neasc.org/resources-evaluators/team-members>). Such drafts would, of course, be subject to revision based on observations during the visit. It is important to keep an open mind before the visit. It is equally important to be very familiar with the entire Self-Study prepared by the school.

- **Personal Planning** — All visits begin on Sunday afternoon and end on Wednesday afternoon. It is essential that each committee member be present for the entire visit. The Commission requires that each committee member be provided with a private room and bath. All committee members are expected to stay at the designated hotel. The school is responsible for expenses for travel, lodging, and meals. Expense vouchers which are provided by the Commission must be handed in at the conclusion of the visit to the team Chair, who will submit them to the school for payment. Expenses such as personal phone calls and entertainment should not be billed for reimbursement. Travel other than by personal car must be approved by the Director of the Commission in advance.

Although this is a wonderful professional experience for committee members, it does involve hard work and long hours. Committee members should be prepared to devote the entire stay to the work at hand. This is not a time to catch up with office work, test correction, or lesson planning.

## Sample Schedule for Visiting Committee

<b>Sunday</b>	
2:00 p.m.	Committee members arrive at the hotel
3:00 p.m.	Organizational meeting at the hotel. Please be prompt!
5:00 p.m.	Orientation meeting at school: Presentation / Discussion of Mission / Campus Tour
6:00 p.m.	Reception hosted by the school for the full committee and members of faculty, administrative team, trustees, and some parents and students
7:00 p.m.	Dinner for full committee and members of the school community to be determined by the Head of School and the Visiting Committee Chair
8:30 p.m.	Visiting Committee reconvenes. Follow-up to campus visit. Extended discussion of first draft of the Standards, in particular, Standard 1: Mission
<b>Monday</b>	
7:00 a.m.	Breakfast/observe student arrival routines
8:00 a.m.	All school meeting (optional)
8:15 – 11:30 a.m.	Interviews with faculty, students, and service personnel. Details will be worked out at the organizational meeting Classroom visits
11:30 – 12:15 p.m.	Luncheon in the school dining hall
1:00 – 3:30 p.m.	Continued interviews/meetings/classroom visits
4:00 – 5:30 p.m.	Visiting Committee reconvenes
5:30 – 6:30 p.m.	Dinner
7:00 p.m.	Visiting Committee reconvenes at the hotel. Brief reports on all Standards and suggested ratings. Extended discussion of Program Standards (4-6)
<b>Tuesday</b>	
7:00 a.m.	Breakfast
8:00 – 11:30 a.m.	Continued interviews/meetings/classroom visits
11:30 – 12:15 p.m.	Luncheon with representatives of parents and alumni/ae
1:00 – 3:30 p.m.	Continued interviews/meetings/classroom visits
4:00 – 5:30 p.m.	Visiting Committee reconvenes
5:30 – 6:30 p.m.	Dinner
7:00 p.m.	Visiting Committee reconvenes. Updates on Standards. Extended discussion of Part II and any recommendations for additions/revisions
<b>Wednesday</b>	
7:30 a.m.	Breakfast
8:15 a.m.	Visiting Committee completes drafts of all sections of the report, identifies major commendations and recommendations, and conducts final vote on Standards. Draft report is approved by the committee and submitted to the Chair for final editing.
NOON	Committee members depart
1:00 p.m.	Exit interview by Chair and Assistant Chair with Head of School

## **The Role of the Visiting Committee**

The Visiting Committee has the following major responsibilities during the school visit:

1. Review and validate the school's Self-Study to determine that it is an accurate description of the school and its programs.
2. Measure the school against each of the published Standards for Accreditation, rate the school's compliance with each, and explain any differences from the school's rating of itself.
3. Assess the school's Part II. Is it comprehensive? Does it match the priorities of the school? Does it promise school improvement? Does it respond to the ratings on the Standards? Are the planned steps realistic? Are resources available or within reach? Are there other items the committee wishes to recommend for inclusion in Part II?
4. Write a report following the same sequence as the Self-Study in which the school is described and commendations and recommendations are made. Major commendations and recommendations are listed at the end of the report.
5. Make a recommendation to the Commission on Independent Schools regarding the accreditation status of the school.

The Visiting Committee is not a group of consultants sent to show a school how to do things. Regardless of the expertise of the group, this is not the purpose of the accreditation process. The committee measures the school against its mission statement and the Standards for Accreditation. It does not compare it to other schools or one's thoughts of the "ideal school." Members should avoid introducing their own biases or prejudices about how they feel schools should operate. Recommendations of the committee should advise the school of issues to be addressed and should not be prescriptive by telling them what to do. Where appropriate, the committee should endorse the school's recommendations for itself. Independent schools should be able to maintain their independence as long as they are institutions of quality and integrity and meet the Standards for Accreditation.

Committee members visit the school as peers and colleagues. Members are there to help the school improve for the benefit of the students. If the school has done its self-evaluation well, the committee will probably not provide it with much new information. The committee can, however, reinforce the critical analysis carried out by the school and encourage change and improvement. It is important to remember the two purposes of accreditation – school improvement and quality assurance.

### Beginning the Visit

The first task of the Visiting Committee in validating the school's Self-Study Report is to gather information, always with an eye to writing the Visiting Committee Report. This information is gathered from reading the Self-Study Report, from holding conversations and discussions with members of the school community, from observing the school in operation, and from reviewing the supplementary materials and other records at the school. Meetings will be with individuals and also with groups. The committee should visit a sample of classes in all areas, since this is an excellent way to see how teachers and students interact and carry out the mission of the school; however, caution should be taken that class visitations do not consume too much time. It is

probably least disruptive to arrive at the beginning of class and remain no more than 15 minutes. It is important that all faculty members have an opportunity to communicate with the Visiting Committee in some way. Many committee Chairs post a checklist of faculty members to assure that this happens and schedule open meeting times for staff who have not been interviewed individually.

Although each committee member has primary responsibility for drafting specific sections, it is expected that the drafts of the various sections will be shared and discussed with the entire committee before they are finalized. All commendations and recommendations should be approved by the entire committee. When there is a lack of consensus, the Chair is the final determiner.

The committee is there to gather information that will be incorporated into a report. Conversations should be designed to reach that goal, which means that questions should be open and enabling. Committee members should avoid being drawn into giving advice to the school. Although members will have specific assignments for writing, notes should be made concerning other issues to pass along to other members of the committee. If at any point a committee member encounters difficulties in interactions with the school, he or she should notify the Chair immediately.

### Gathering Data for the Sections of the Evaluation

In its Self-Study, the school has prepared a report that documents how it meets, or does not meet, each Standard and what recommendations for improvement it makes for itself. The school also rates itself on a four-point scale for each Standard. The Visiting Committee Member responsible for drafting the report on a specific Standard should plan to interview members of that Self-Study Committee, as well as others who might offer insight into the area. The school's discussion of the indicators may help suggest directions for inquiry. There may be documents in with the supplementary materials that will add perspective.

When drafting the report, the Visiting Committee member may take the school's summary statement as an introduction and then add comments based on observations at the school. Are there qualifications or additions to make to their statement? Are there comments on the thoroughness of the self-study process? What is the school's rating of itself on the Standard? Does it differ from the Visiting Committee's rating and, if so, why?

The Visiting Committee Report should include commendations of the school for exemplary practices or achievements. Finally, list the recommendations the school has made for itself and comment on them. Do they address any deficiency in the Standard (a rating of SU1 or SU2)? Do they address overall priorities of the school? Will they further school improvement? Endorse the school's recommendations, if appropriate. Make additional recommendations only if needed.

Members should aim at completing initial research on all Standards and identifying problematic areas on Monday. Monday evening the committee should hear brief reports on each Standard. These initial reports should suggest a rating; explain any difference from the school's self-rating; note if the Self-Study summary can be carried over into the report and what points, if any, need to be added; list the school's recommendations for itself and comment on their adequacy; suggest

any additional recommendations that are indicated; and identify any further inquiry that is necessary for Tuesday. Extended time on Monday evening should be reserved to discuss and reflect upon program Standards (4-6) and any other Standard(s) identified by the Chair. All members of the committee should be prepared to contribute to this discussion.

Tuesday morning is to be devoted to talking with any faculty or staff who were missed on Monday, investigating any issues identified Monday evening, and exploring the recommendations offered by the school for inclusion in Part II. Tuesday evening should be devoted to discussion by the entire committee on Part II. Is it comprehensive? Does it match the priorities of the school? Does it promise school improvement? Are the planned steps realistic? Are resources available or within reach? Are there other items the committee wishes to recommend for inclusion in Part II?

Wednesday morning the full committee should finalize its report. The Chair should set aside time for the committee to discuss possible major commendations and recommendations.

## Self-Study Part I: Reviewing the Standards

**Standard 1 (Mission): There is congruence between the school’s stated mission and core values and its actual program, policies, planning, and decision-making at both the operational and governance levels.**

The school is asked to provide a brief history of the school and its statement of mission. It is critical that the committee understand the mission of the school. The committee should inquire into the procedure by which the statement of mission was developed, the procedures for systematic review, and the understanding of and agreement with the statement among the various constituencies of the school.

It is essential for this section to be discussed by the committee on Sunday evening, prior to actually seeing the school in operation. This is possible because the committee will have met with faculty and other members of the school community at a reception earlier that day and been given an opportunity to ask questions about the section. Questions such as the following might be appropriate:

- Does the statement accurately describe the unique mission of the school?
- How well do parents and students understand the statement?
- Does the statement serve as the basis for the school’s programs?
- Does the statement guide the school in decision making in all areas of the school?

Remember that a school is measured against its statement of mission during the accreditation process. It is not compared with other institutions. The statement, therefore, is a very important part of the self-evaluation document and should be clear to all constituencies and unique to the school.

This section also provides the Visiting Committee an opportunity to sum up its observations of the school in operation and of its distinctive character. The entire Visiting Committee might wish to discuss this section and contribute perspectives before the report is drafted.

**Standard 2 (Governance): The school has an appropriate system of governance that assures that the school remains true to its mission and that it has the necessary resources to support its present and prospective operations.**

The health of a school depends upon having a responsible and effective system of governance that assures that the school remains true to its mission and that it has the necessary resources to support its operations. There is no one governance structure common to all independent schools; therefore, this section of the Self-Study asks the school to describe how the functions of governance are accomplished and to assess the effectiveness of the system for the school.

The Visiting Committee should plan to meet with a representative group of those responsible for governance. Topics of discussion at that meeting might closely follow the indicators for the governance Standard, while ensuring that all functions of governance receive adequate attention.

**Standard 3 (Enrollment): The admissions process assures that those students who enroll are appropriate, given the school’s mission, and are likely to benefit from their experience at the school.**

The school will provide information about the composition of the student body, admissions, graduates, and student families. The Visiting Committee should explore the material provided to determine the degree to which there is congruence between the mission and the composition and aspirations of the school community. There is the expectation that the programs of the school fit the needs and abilities of the students.

Committee members assigned to this section will spend time reviewing procedures, files, policies, and enrollment contracts. Admissions officers, deans, the registrar, and alumni/ae officials should be interviewed, as well as faculty, students, and parents. This is primarily a data gathering section and so it will be well to review with the responsible persons the information provided in the Self-Study.

### **Standards 4, 5, and 6**

There are three Program Standards. The program section is usually the longest and most significant part of the Self-Study Report prepared by the school. Program, after all, is the heart of the school and faculties are encouraged to spend the greatest amount of time on this section. As a result, most committee Chairs assign all members of the committee to contribute to discussion of these Standards.

**Standard 4 (Program): The school provides a comprehensive program of intellectual, aesthetic, and physical activities that is appropriate to support the school’s mission and core values, and is consistent with the needs of the range of students admitted. Program planning is informed by relevant research regarding how students learn and the knowledge and capacities they will need to lead purposeful and constructive lives.**

**Standard 5 (Experience of the Students): The school actively considers individual students and has developed plans, policies, programs, and pedagogy to nurture, support, and encourage all students to reach their potential and to participate in the life of the school.**

**Standard 6 (Resources to Support the Program): Given the school’s mission, there are adequate resources (space, equipment, technology, materials, and community) to support the school’s program.**

The school is asked to scrutinize its program and assure that it reflects the school’s pedagogical beliefs and that these beliefs are subject to continuing faculty discussion and review. The Self-Study and Visiting Committee Reports focus on the overall program of the school, not on individual departments or programs. The school has examined the component pieces of the program in its preliminary study and this information should be available in the supplementary materials.

Questions to be asked on this section will vary depending on the type of school and level of education. They might include, but should not be limited to, such questions as:

- To what extent does the curriculum meet the full range of student needs and abilities?
- To what extent are instructional techniques varied and appropriate?
- How effectively is assessment data gathered and used to improve the curriculum in a particular area?
- Is the level of financial support adequate to provide sufficient textbooks and other instructional materials?
- What impact has technology had in classroom instruction?
- What is a faculty member's input into curriculum revision?
- Do teachers talk about assumptions and beliefs regarding teaching and learning which are consistent with the mission of the school?

It would be well to frame additional questions that relate to each of the three Standards. The school's response to the indicators may suggest areas for inquiry. The members of the Visiting Committee should have the opportunity to review the student activities program including organizations, clubs, and sports activities. Counseling is a part of the program section. Library and technology are areas of rapid change in many schools.

The persons who prepared these sections of the Self-Study Report should be interviewed. In addition, both students and faculty should be interviewed about their experience with and perception of all aspects of the program.

**Standard 7 (Early Childhood Program\*): The Early Childhood Program enriches the social and intellectual development of its students by providing comprehensive programs and appropriate staffing, resources and facilities.**

\* For NEASC accreditation, Early Childhood is defined as three-year and four-year old children. NEASC does not accredit Early Childhood Programs that serve children under the age of three. However, if schools enroll children younger than three years old, they must provide documentation attesting that those programs meet health and safety regulations/guidelines as required in your state.

The Early Childhood Program is often underrepresented in the self-study process. Its location may be separate from the rest of the school, its hours may be longer, and its faculty may be less accessible. Standard 7 is intended to assure that full attention is given to examining the Early Childhood Program.

**Standard 8 (Residential Program and/or Homestay Program): The Residential Program and/or Homestay Program provide for an intentional curriculum, appropriate facilities, engaging activities, and adequate supervision to meet the needs of each student.**

Schools that have residential/homestay students (including any students on F-1 visas) are expected to provide safe and positive experiences for these students. Curriculums should be intentional and should serve the mission of the school.

The Visiting Committee should take time to visit dormitories when students are present and have an opportunity to see the Residential Program in operation. They should also interview the residential staff and/or coordinator of the Homestay Program, as well as residential/homestay students to determine if the programs function well, meet the needs of students, and are appropriate for the mission of the school.

**Standard 9 (Faculty): There is a sufficient number of appropriately qualified faculty to carry out the mission of the school and the school follows a comprehensive and defined program of professional development that supports continued enhancement of teachers' skills.**

A school worthy of accreditation is concerned about the quality of teaching and assures that the number of qualified faculty is sufficient to carry out the mission of the school. The school should also treat faculty members with respect and actively promote their professional growth.

It is essential for Visiting Committee members to visit classes and meet with teachers. This is not to assess individual professional performance, but rather to evaluate the school's culture of teaching and learning. The committee will observe the professional staff as a total entity and will evaluate its suitability to carry out the school's program. The committee will seek to determine if the professional staff is appropriate for the mission of the school.

Committee members assigned to this section should meet with those persons at the school who were responsible for preparing this section of the Self-Study Report, as well as other staff. Sample questions might include, but should not be limited to:

- Are professional and support staffs adequate in number to support the school's programs?
- How effective is the program for orienting new teachers and staff?
- Are in-service programs appropriate and helpful?
- Is the professional development budget adequate?
- Are professional development activities aligned with the school's mission, teacher assignments, and curriculum priorities?

During the visit, it is certainly appropriate for all committee members to ask similar questions of individual teachers during interviews and conversations.

**Standard 10 (Administration): The administration provides leadership and maintains a structure to facilitate the effective functioning of the school, including the participation of faculty in decision-making.**

Both administrators and faculty carry out decision-making functions. The committee should meet with those who prepared this section of the Self-Study Report and also speak to other individuals to assure that there are a variety of people appropriately involved in the decision-making process. It is well to remember that there is no correct way to make decisions at a school. Certainly, a Quaker school will have a very different decision-making system than a military school. However, it is expected that there are clear and open channels for faculty participation in program planning and review.

**Standard 11 (Evaluation and Assessment): The school engages in forms of programmatic assessment consistent with fulfilling its mission and core values. This data is used to inform decision-making and planning.**

This Standard refers to a school-wide culture of evaluation and assessment. The indicators suggest the broad range of areas warranting inquiry, such as:

- Does the Board engage in self-evaluation?
- Does the school gather and use data on the performance of graduates?
- Are procedures used for the evaluation of administration, faculty, and staff helpful, effective, and ethical?
- Are policies and practices evaluated in terms of their success in meeting goals?

In interviewing members of the school community, the Visiting Committee should look for a commitment to using evaluation and assessment in guiding school policy and practice.

**Standard 12 (Health and Safety): The school is a safe place that supports the physical, emotional and cognitive health and development of all students, faculty and staff.**

Assessing the safety of the school requires the committee to make judgments. The indicators will help identify areas for inquiry, such as supervision policies, arrival and dismissal procedures, emergency response plans, etc. The committee should reach consensus in rating the school on this Standard.

Every school has the responsibility to provide health services for its student body. This differs greatly between residential and day schools. Health services appropriate to meet the emotional and physical needs of the students should be appropriately staffed and adequately housed.

**Standard 13 (Communication): The school maintains effective systems of external and internal communication and record keeping that inform all constituents and facilitate participation where appropriate.**

This Standard refers to the entire network of communication among members of the school community. The committee should talk with administrators, faculty, parents, support staff, students, board members, and alumni/ae.

- What forms of communication are used?
- How effective is formal communication throughout the school?
- Are written records complete and are they kept confidential?

Schools will typically arrange for members of the committee to meet with a group of selected parents. It might also be wise to speak with other parents and that may be possible with a bit of imagination. This may take place after school in the parking lot, etc. It is important to determine if parents are appropriately engaged in their children's education and that communication with the school is satisfactory. While the committee will be interviewing all members of faculty and administration, it is important also to interview members of maintenance, food service, and support staff concerning communication in the school.

In some cases, the relationship of the school to its geographical community is extremely important, and in other cases it is less so. The committee members involved in this section should use their judgment about that importance and make appropriate inquiries both within the school and the local community.

**Standard 14 (Infrastructure): There are adequate resources (personnel, finances, facilities, equipment, and materials) to provide for the overall institutional needs of the school.**

This section covers a wide range of administrative and service functions. The Visiting Committee should meet with those responsible for each of these areas. There is the expectation that administrative staff are sufficient in number and have appropriate training and experience to be effective in their roles. It is also expected that administrative activities are appropriate for the mission of the school.

An assessment of the financial management is extremely important in the accreditation process since effective resource management is necessary to sustain the mission of a school. Some Visiting Committees include business managers or others with financial backgrounds, but often the Chair and Assistant Chair must draw on their own experience to review this section. The committee Chair will receive confidential financial information that is not available to the rest of the committee. This includes an audit conducted by an independent certified public accountant (or an approved alternative), budgets, salary and benefit information, and operating statements. Because of the confidentiality of much of this information, it is usually not shared with the entire committee unless there are issues of concern.

It is expected that there is effective financial management, and it is further expected that there is thoughtful financial planning to assure the future of the institution. Those committee members involved in this area should ask to see financial plans, to be assured that the financial future of

the school is secure. The committee might wish to consider financial management, multi-year planning, and development together.

The school's facilities must be effective in housing and supporting the school's program. Conversations may be conducted with the committee that prepared the section, administrators, teachers, board members, or students. Questions might include some of the following:

- Are the facilities and equipment adequate for your programs? If not, what is the problem?
- Is there multi-year planning to address current and future facility needs?
- Is there adequate staffing to maintain an appropriate level of cleanliness?
- If something is broken, how long does it take to get repaired?
- Is the facilities budget adequate?
- Is there deferred maintenance? Is there a plan to resolve this?
- Are there programs that should be offered but are not because of facility limitations?

Committees should avoid recommending overly prescriptive solutions and/or major capital expenditures to facility shortcomings, unless already addressed by the school in its Self-Study. On the other hand, facility problems should be clearly identified.

A Visiting Committee may be at a school that provides three meals a day, seven days a week or it may be at a school where all students carry their lunches and the school simply provides space for students to eat. In either case the committee should note the appropriateness of the arrangements. In some situations, it will be necessary to check for health inspections and in other cases the committee should just assure itself that there is cleanliness.

The committee should satisfy itself that service and office personnel are sufficient in number and appropriately skilled to assist in carrying out the mission of the school.

**Standard 15 (The Accreditation Process): The school is fully committed to institutional improvement and to the process of accreditation. The school completed an inclusive Self-Study, conducted in a spirit of full disclosure and following Association guidelines; responds to Commission recommendations and the requirement to meet all Standards; and participates fully in the peer review process, hosting a Visiting Committee and sending personnel to serve on Visiting Committees to other institutions.**

The quality of the Self-Study, the inclusiveness of its preparation, and the plans in place for follow-up are important factors in assessing compliance with this Standard. A comprehensive and reflective response to Part II of the Self-Study will also be considered when determining whether a school meets this Standard. The committee should also ask which members of the staff have served on Visiting Committees to other schools and what plans are in place to encourage this activity in the future.

## Writing the Report

Visiting Committee members must remind themselves that data gathering has the single purpose of providing information to write a report. The greatest challenge to the committee is the clock. The draft of the Visiting Committee Report must be written by the end of the visit on Wednesday. Every Chair tries to have committee members begin writing on Monday. For many, the hardest part of the visit is the actual writing and the easiest part is meeting with people and gathering data.

Each committee member is responsible for writing one or more sections of the report in the portal (see Appendix C for sample template pages). The Chair is responsible for completing Standard 1 and often presents this to the committee as a model. Additionally, the Chair of the committee is responsible for combining the drafts from all the members of the committee into one document that speaks with one voice. The Chair, who is the final editor, will do this after the committee leaves the school.

Remember that there are two primary audiences for the Visiting Committee Report. The most important audience is the school community for whom the report is a validation of months of self-study. Also, the committee represents the Commission on Independent Schools and is writing the report to assist the Commission in making decisions regarding the accreditation of the institution. It is important to be aware of these audiences since it will affect the style of writing. For the Commission, the report must be comprehensive and self-contained since it is likely the only source of information available to the members. For the school, the report provides support and assistance to their efforts at improvement. To be effective in this latter function, the report must communicate clear understanding and appreciation of the school, be sensitive to issues the school is grappling with, and offer recommendations designed to help guide the school in the years ahead. The report should be written in a fashion which recognizes that it will receive wide distribution within the school community and may even come into the possession of the press.

### Visiting Committee Report Format

Every report has the same format. There is a data sheet, a table of contents, an introduction, a chapter for each Standard, a section on Part II, and major commendations and recommendations. There should be up to, but no more than, five major commendations and recommendations.

Each Standards chapter in the Visiting Committee Report contains the following sections:

- **Narrative Summary** — A brief narrative summary of the school's position with regard to the Standard should be provided. It may be copied, abridged, or adapted from the narrative description in the corresponding section of the school's Self-Study Report. Any information copied from the school's report should be pasted in italics in the Visiting Committee Report.
- **Observations** — This part of the report comments on the Visiting Committee's findings based on observations and interviews. It may highlight aspects of the school's narrative and/or present additional information.
- **Conclusions and Explanation of Rating** — In this section, the Visiting Committee offers conclusions, based on the factual information in the preceding two sections, that provide background for the commendations and recommendations which follow. There should be a specific explanation for any Unmet Standard, or for any Standard where the rating of the school differs from the rating of the Visiting Committee.

- **Commendations** — This is an opportunity to commend the school for exemplary activities or accomplishments. This is a place for the committee to demonstrate that it has observed and appreciated distinctive strengths. Commendations are typically numbered and listed. There need not be a priority listing, but care should be taken to assure that commendations are significant. Insignificant or frivolous commendations reduce the credibility of the report.
- **Recommendations** — The school has included recommendations for itself in each section of the Self-Study Report. The Visiting Committee may endorse the school’s recommendations and/or make additional recommendations in areas where the Visiting Committee feels that change or improvement is needed. All recommendations must flow from the narrative and should refer to carrying out the school’s mission or fully meeting the Standards for Accreditation. At times members of a committee might wish to make a recommendation that refers to a commonly accepted educational practice, but care must be taken to not impose any specific framework or educational philosophy on the school. All recommendations should identify issues that warrant attention and should not be prescriptive. Recommendations are listed and numbered and come from one of three sources:
  1. A recommendation which the school has made for itself in its Self-Study Report.
  2. A Standard which is not fully met, for which the school has not made a recommendation.
  3. A discrepancy between the school’s mission and/or stated policy and its practice.

The Visiting Committee’s Reflection, Recommendations and Issues for Further Discussion in Part II is a stand-alone section in the report following Standard 15. It contains the following:

- **Overview** — The Visiting Committee should summarize the school’s most significant concerns, hopes, and dreams for the future as explained in its Self-Study Report. Descriptive paragraphs may be taken directly from the Self-Study Report and pasted in italics in the Visiting Committee Report if they accurately describe the school’s findings.
- **Observations** — This section includes general observations and comments on the areas included in Part II, the correspondence to priorities perceived by the Visiting Committee, the sufficiency of resources to accomplish plans and intentions, and the process in place to monitor progress.
- **Conclusions** — The Visiting Committee should present overarching conclusions and validate Part II presented in the Self-Study. (Note: Failure to complete an acceptable Part II as determined by the Visiting Committee may lead to an Unmet assessment of Standard 15.)
- **Commendations** — as explained above
- **Recommendations** — as explained above

Major commendations and recommendations for the school follow Part II in the Visiting Committee Report. The major recommendations are selected from the recommendations in the body of the report and should support the school’s own plans for improvement.

### Style of the Report

The Visiting Committee Report is structured in the same fashion as the school’s Self-Study Report with sections on each Standard and Part II. It is well to keep in mind that the report must be an independent, freestanding document and a reader should not have to refer to other documents to understand it.

All major recommendations, Unmet Standards, or changed ratings in either direction must be clearly explained in the narrative. This clarification prevents the need for a phone call from the school, after the visit, in which the school does not understand a recommendation or why the recommendation has been made. The Commission on Independent Schools cannot interpret a recommendation made by a Visiting Committee that has not been explained in the narrative. Remember that conclusions flow from observations and recommendations flow from the conclusions.

The school must address each Unmet Standard within one year. The condition to be addressed, necessary to bring the school into full compliance with the Standard, should be clearly spelled out in a recommendation and the school should have no difficulty understanding the reason for the decision of the committee. The body of the Visiting Committee Report should support the votes on Standards, particularly giving the reasons for any difference between the school's and the Visiting Committee's rating. The Commission has been hard-pressed on occasion to support a Visiting Committee recommendation or a vote on the Standards because documentation was missing in the written report. A school is mystified by a Visiting Committee Report that glosses over or does not explain a negative vote on a Standard.

Typically, a Visiting Committee Report becomes a permanent document available to a large number of people. This means that it should be clear, grammatically correct, and accurate.

### Completing the Job

The completed draft of all sections of the report must be entered into the portal before Committee members depart on the Wednesday of the visit. The Chair of the committee should not allow committee members to depart with a promise to complete their sections at home. This is an unacceptable practice since members of the committee must have the opportunity to discuss and agree on the report. There is also a risk that a committee member may become too busy to complete the work in a timely fashion once he or she has returned home.

After departing on Wednesday, the Chair must then compile and edit the report so that it speaks with one voice and remove overly prescriptive comments and recommendations or inappropriate language. Once the report is in complete draft form, each committee member will be asked to go back into the portal for review. Committee members will be requested to send their corrections or suggestions back to the Chair in a timely fashion, usually within a week of the Chair's request. Note that the finished Visiting Committee Report should be submitted in the portal for access by the Commission on Independent Schools no later than four weeks after the visit.

### Confidentiality

The Visiting Committee Report will become the property of the school. Committee members will not receive a copy of the completed report from the Commission or the Chair. If a member wishes to receive a copy of the report, he or she should request it from the school. Remember that accreditation work is confidential. Notes and draft copies of the report should be destroyed and committee members should not discuss the committee findings or information about the school with others.

## **Voting on Standards & Accreditation Status**

One purpose of the Visiting Committee is to assure that the school meets the Standards for Accreditation. The committee often conducts straw votes on Standards as early as Monday evening to identify areas requiring focus; however, the formal vote on Standards usually does not take place until after the sections of the report are substantially complete. A form for rating the school's compliance with the Standards is provided to each member of the committee (see Sample Ratings Table for Assessment of Standards, on the last page of the Visiting Committee Report template - Appendix C). The Chair will use this form to record the committee's decisions on the rating for each Standard.

Standards should be assessed through the lens of student experience. The fundamental test is whether or not students are supported. When a Standard is "Met," student experience is reasonably whole, positive and creative. When it is "Unmet," students are – or may be – adversely affected. While some Standards have more direct or immediate student effects, every Standard ultimately makes itself felt in the lives of a school's students.

The Visiting Committee will also vote on the accreditation status to be recommended to the Commission on Independent Schools. The following types of recommendations are possible for a school seeking Initial Accreditation:

- Accreditation (if all Standards are met)
- Accreditation and some specific stipulation (if all Standards are met)
- Tabling of action pending completion of a specific response from the school (action will be tabled if a school has a rating of SU1 or SU2 on any Standard)
- Denial of accreditation (this is an adverse recommendation subject to the appeal process of the Association)

For a school seeking Continued Accreditation, recommend:

- Continued Accreditation (if all Standards are met)
- Continued Accreditation and some specific stipulation (if all Standards are met)
- Continued Accreditation with Unmet Standard(s) rating of SU1 or SU2 (the school will have no more than one year to correct)
- Continued Accreditation on Warning (this is a non-public action which entails a Special Progress Report and Focused Visit) Note: This is a decision made by the Commission.
- Continued Accreditation on Probation (this is a public action which is usually taken only after a period on Warning, and is an adverse recommendation subject to the appeal process of the Association) Note: This decision is a prerogative of the Commission.

Continued Accreditation with stipulations suggests to the Commission that some follow-up activity beyond the regular interim reports is warranted. Most frequently a stipulation is the strongest action recommended by a Visiting Committee. It gives the school an opportunity to address a deficiency. Warning status is used if a school does not respond adequately to requirements set by the Commission. It indicates that there are serious concerns and there is need for close monitoring by the Commission. This is a private matter between the Commission and the school. Probation status is more serious and it means that there will be a public announcement that the accreditation of the school is probationary. Normally, a school is not put

on Probation unless it is already on Warning. In the case of Probation, the school is also closely monitored. There is an appeals system available to the school in the case of a recommendation for Probation. Note that the Visiting Committee makes recommendations to the Commission, but the Commission makes the final decision on accreditation status and follow-up requirements for the school.

### **Expense Vouchers**

Each member will have been emailed, in their Visiting Committee kit, an expense voucher and explanation memo. Members should calculate and complete their expense voucher and hand it to the Chair before departure on Wednesday. The Chair will submit the vouchers to the school for processing and payment. The IRS mileage rate will be noted on individual vouchers.

### **After the Committee Departs**

After the Chair has dismissed members of the committee, he or she conducts an exit interview with the Head of the School. Often the Assistant Chair or another member of the committee will accompany the Chair to the exit interview. This is usually a courtesy visit to thank the Head for the school's hospitality and to review major areas of focus in the Visiting Committee Report. It is not a time for a detailed report of the work of the Visiting Committee, since the report has not been completed. Also, it is not a time to address the entire faculty since the report has not been completed and misunderstandings might occur.

### **The Commission - Following the Visit**

The work of the Visiting Committee, including the Visiting Committee Report, the school's Self-Study Report and supporting documents, and the school's response to the Visiting Committee Report (if applicable) are presented to the Commission by a member of the Commission who has become familiar with the school and its evaluation. The presenter makes a recommendation for accreditation status and the Commission votes on that recommendation.

The school, when it is informed of the decision of the Commission, is also informed that it must submit an interim report, usually in two years. In some cases, action such as a Special Progress Report or a Focused Visit may be specified. Members of the Visiting Committee will receive a copy of the notification letter. Interim reports filed by a school after an evaluation will require the school to report on the status of Part II and respond to the major recommendations of the Visiting Committee.

# Appendix

## **Policy and Procedure for Standards for Accreditation**

Accreditation has as its purpose quality assurance and school improvement. As a tool to assure quality, the Commission on Independent Schools maintains Standards for Accreditation against which a school is measured. These Standards are reviewed and updated on a regular basis through a participatory process with accredited schools and adopted by the Commission.

The voluntary accreditation process provides the opportunity for a school, through its Self-Study, to demonstrate that it meets the accreditation Standards of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges and also demonstrate that it carries out its mission in an appropriate fashion.

The Commission on Independent Schools in its decisions regarding accreditation has the expectation that each accredited school will meet all Standards for Accreditation. If a school seeking Continued Accreditation does not meet all Standards at the time of the accreditation visit, it is expected that all Standards will be met within one year. If a school seeking Initial Accreditation does not meet all Standards at the time of the evaluation visit, action by the Commission will be tabled and the school will be asked to report on the status of compliance with all Standards within one year.

A school that has a Standard Unmet with a rating of SU1 or SU2 should notify the Commission office within one year when it believes it has taken necessary action to warrant a Standard Met rating of SM1 or SM2. At that time:

1. A Staff Visit to the school will be made to assess whether the Standard(s) is met with a SM1 or SM2. If the staff member finds that the school is clearly in compliance, the staff member will recommend to the Commission that the Standard is met and propose any further recommendations related to the Standard to which the school should be asked to respond, along with a date for the response. The Commission may accept the recommendation of the staff member or may direct a Focused Visit by a Visiting Team of two or three, possibly including a Commission member.
2. If the staff member finds that the school is still not in compliance, the school will be notified of the outstanding issues and asked to submit a further report when ready. The Commission will also be notified. If the school disagrees with the finding of the staff member it may request that a Visiting Team of two or three conduct a Focused Visit to assess compliance with the Standard(s).

*Adopted by the Commission on Independent Schools, November 2011*

## Assessment of Standards

Standards should be assessed through the lens of student experience. The fundamental test is whether or not students are supported. When a Standard is “Met,” student experience is reasonably whole, positive and creative. When it is “Unmet,” students are – or may be – adversely affected. While some Standards have more direct or immediate student effects, every Standard ultimately makes itself felt in the lives of a school’s students.

SM1: Standard Met: evidences clear understanding, effective implementation and thorough planning for further improvement.

SM2: Standard Met: evidences understanding, evolving implementation and planning for improvement.

SU1: Standard Unmet: evidences inadequate understanding, implementation and planning for remediation that may foreseeably compromise student experience.

SU2: Standard Unmet: lacks understanding, implementation and planning for remediation, thereby compromising student experience.

During the Self-Study, schools rate themselves on every Standard.

During its visit, the Visiting Committee also rates the school on every Standard. When the Committee’s ratings differ from the school’s rating, the Committee will explain its conclusions.

<b>Assessment of Standard</b>	
<b>Met</b> <i>(The students’ experience is supported.)</i>	<b>Unmet</b> <i>(The students’ experience is compromised.)</i>
SM1. Standard Met: evidences clear understanding, effective implementation and thorough planning for further improvement.,	SU1. Standard Unmet: evidences inadequate understanding, implementation and planning for remediation that may foreseeably compromise student experience.
SM2. Standard Met: evidences understanding, evolving implementation and planning for improvement.	SU2. Standard Unmet: lacks understanding, implementation and planning for remediation, thereby compromising student experience.

**Visiting Committee Report Template**  
**Sample Standard Page**

**Standard 1 (Mission):** There is congruence between the school’s stated mission and core values and its actual program, policies, planning, and decision-making at both the operational and governance levels.

<b>Assessment of Standard</b>	
<b>Met</b> <i>(The students’ experience is supported.)</i>	<b>Unmet</b> <i>(The students’ experience is compromised.)</i>
SM1. Standard Met: evidences clear understanding, effective implementation and thorough planning for further improvement.	SU1. Standard Unmet: evidences inadequate understanding, implementation and planning for remediation that may foreseeably compromise student experience.
SM2. Standard Met: evidences understanding, evolving implementation and planning for improvement.	SU2. Standard Unmet: lacks understanding, implementation and planning for remediation thereby compromising student experience.

School’s Self-Assessment \_\_\_\_\_

Visiting Team’s Assessment \_\_\_\_\_

Brief narrative summary of the school’s position with regard to this Standard  
 (This summary was copied/abridged/adapted from the school’s Self-Study Report.)

Observations

Conclusions and Explanation of Rating

Commendations

- 1.

Recommendations

1. To endorse a recommendation of the school
2. To more fully meet the Standard
3. To resolve discrepancy between policy and practice

**Visiting Committee Report Template**  
**Sample Self-Study Part II:**  
**Reflection, Recommendations, and Issues for Further Discussion**

Overview (Part II asks the school to draw together what it has learned from its Self-Study and prioritize these ideas into a thoughtful, reflective, creative summary of the school’s most significant concerns, hopes, and dreams for the future. This may include both action items and discussion items. You may take descriptive paragraphs directly from the Self-Study Report if they accurately describe the school’s findings.)

Observations (Include comments on the areas included in Part II, the correspondence to priorities perceived by the Visiting Committee, the sufficiency of resources to accomplish plans and intentions, and the process in place to monitor progress.)

Conclusions

Commendations

1.

Recommendations

1.

### Visiting Committee Report Template Sample Ratings Table for Assessment of Standards

The Visiting Committee must rate the school by placing an X in the appropriate rating box for all applicable Standards. For unmet ratings (SU1 or SU2), please also note page references from your report in the *Unmet Ratings* column. For any Visiting Committee’s ratings that differ from the school’s self-rating, please use the *Differing Ratings* column to note page references.

Standard	Rating				Unmet Ratings (List page number)	Differing Ratings (List page number)
	SM1	SM2	SU1	SU2		
1 – Mission						
2 – Governance						
3 – Enrollment						
4 – Program						
5 – Experience of the Students						
6 – Resources to Support the Program						
7 – Early Childhood Program						
8 – Residential Program and/or Homestay Program						
9 – Faculty						
10 – Administration						
11 – Evaluation and Assessment						
12 – Health and Safety						
13 – Communication						
14 – Infrastructure						
15 – The Accreditation Process						

# NEASC Accreditation

## What It Is, What It Can and Cannot Guarantee



**NEASC Accreditation** is a system of accountability that is ongoing, voluntary, and comprehensive in scope. It respects differences in institutional populations, missions, and cultures, and fosters institutional change grounded in the judgment of practicing educators. It is based on Standards which are developed and regularly reviewed by the members and which define the characteristics of good schools and colleges.

**NEASC Accreditation** is structured in a ten-year cycle of:

**Self-Study** which engages the entire educational community in structured analysis, self-reflection, and planning in response to the Standards.

**Peer review** which brings discipline and perspective to the process through the observations and conclusions of a Visiting Committee of peers from other schools and colleges, informed by the Self-Study and based on the Standards.

**Follow-up** which is monitored by a commission of elected peers and overseen by a professional staff to ensure that planned and prescribed institutional change is accomplished and which provides for intervention, as necessary, to respond to information gathered in regular reports from the institution or through complaints from the public concerning a failure to comply with the Standards.

### **NEASC Accreditation Attests To**

- ◆ Substantial compliance with established qualitative Standards
- ◆ Integrity in statements to the public describing the institution's program
- ◆ Institutional commitment to improvement
- ◆ Sufficiency of institutional resources

### **NEASC Accreditation Does Not**

- ◆ Guarantee the experience of individual students
- ◆ Guarantee the quality of specific programs
- ◆ Compare or rank institutions

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