

WORKING TOWARD ACCREDITATION

July 2009

Goals

The goal of this project was to begin the accreditation process for North Hills Classical Academy through Christian Schools International. The school was founded in 1994, and I felt that accreditation would be a good exercise to help our school move forward and improve our processes, policies, and systems. I wanted to make sure that we were doing all that we could to provide an excellent education, and I felt that going through the process of accreditation would help us to find the areas in which we needed to improve and reinforce our strengths. The accreditation process has four phases; the goal in this first year was to complete the first phase and to complete documentation for two out of four categories in the second phase.

Results

The first phase of the process is to achieve accreditation candidacy status from CSI. This involves filling out a detailed application and sending in a fee. North Hills was granted candidacy status in December of 2008.

The second phase of the process is a school self-evaluation. The self-evaluation covers four areas which must be documented: (1) Community, (2) Staff, (3) Students, and (4) Curriculum. Each of these categories is broken into sub-categories which require documentation. Much of the documentation that is needed already exists and has to be collected into a notebook for the site visit team. Some of the documents have to be created in accordance with the directives for the notebook. We have learned that, on the whole, our policies, documentation, and processes need to be more detailed and systematic.

NORTH HILLS CLASSICAL ACADEMY

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Focus

The focus of this project is to prepare North Hills Classical Academy for a site visit by an accreditation team from Christian Schools International. The accreditation process is one that requires much self-evaluation and a significant amount of documentation.

This self-evaluation includes an examination of the school as a community. This portion looks at the philosophy, mission, and goals of the school. It requires that the school has the proper structures in place for governance. There must also be compliance in regard to rules and guidelines for financial management. It makes sure that the school is giving a consistent message to the community in public relations and that there is proper communication with parents.

The second point of self-evaluation has to do with the staff. The school must have proper job descriptions for all employees. Staff handbooks and staff development procedures must be in order. You must have a master schedule for the school. Compensation and benefits must be fair, and hiring practices need to be codified.

The third area involves students. Schools must have non-discriminatory policies for admissions, a policy handbook for parents and students that cover a number of required topics, and charts of standardized test scores. The school must also list activities that are offered to students and how students are given the opportunity to participate in them. The school must track its graduates and report on what the graduates have done since high school. There must also be proper crisis management plans and long range strategic plans.

The final area of self-evaluation has to do with curriculum. This piece of the process looks at the holdings of the school's media center, the internet acceptable use policy, graduation requirements, assessment tools, and examples of the written curriculum used in the school for instruction.

Once the proper documentation for these areas of self-evaluation is completed, the school is ready for the site visit. The focus of my project was to begin the self-examination process and to begin to produce the documentation needed for this visit.

Method/Process

The process for my project was somewhat prescribed by the accreditation process itself. The process for accreditation takes place in four phases.

Phase 1 – School Applies for CSI Accreditation Candidacy

- ❖ *Vision to Action* binder sent to the school
- ❖ CSI visits the school to verify readiness
- ❖ CSI Accreditation assigns a mentor
- ❖ Candidacy status granted for up to 3 years

Phase 2 – School Conducts a Self-Evaluation

- ❖ Led by school steering committee
- ❖ Committees gather documentation and write reports
- ❖ Complete self-study sent to CSI Accreditation and site visitors

Phase 3 – Site Team Visits the School (by end of the third year of candidacy)

- ❖ Team of visiting educators validates self-evaluation
- ❖ Site visitors write a report that is submitted to CSI and school
- ❖ Team recommends approval of accreditation

CSI Accreditation Commission Grants Accreditation Status

Phase 4 – School Improvement Plan (SIP) Written by School

- ❖ Based on concerns noted by the site visit team and in the school’s own self study
- ❖ Written by the school improvement team
- ❖ Submitted to CSI Accreditation

CSI Accreditation Commission Approves the SIP

Annual Reports Submitted to CSI Accreditation for the Duration of the Accreditation Term (Maximum of 5 years)

As it is laid out here, the process can take up to eight years to complete. Our internal process to accomplish the documentation required in the second phase was to form an accreditation committee and to analyze what we needed to do to begin the self-evaluation process to produce the required documentation. The work was divided among committee members, and the work of documentation commenced. Our goal is to be able to complete the documentation of the four standard categories by the end of the summer of 2010 so that we can host a site visit in the Fall of 2010.

Results

The result of this project so far has been a large three-ring binder containing many of the documents that are required for the site visit. Many of these documents already existed and merely had to be placed in the binder. Some of these documents required some alteration to match the directives given by CSI. Some of these documents had to be created.

Through this process we have begun to see some ways in which we need to change our policies and practices to be a better school. For instance, we did not have specific job descriptions for every position in the school, but now we do. Our non-discrimination policy was incomplete. We created an acceptable use policy for internet use at the school, and we still have some other policies and plans to produce. We also need to compile data related to graduates and alumni that has not been kept in any single database. We also have discovered that, on the whole, our policies, documentation, and processes need to be more detailed and systematic.

Overall, it was gratifying to see that we do have many of the essential documents in place already and that we are generally on the right track as a school. Our governmental structure is sound and our curriculum is in good shape. We have most of the policies that we need in place and have compiled handbooks for parents and staff members that are instructive and useful.

The best news that I received during the project was that CSI is no longer going to require certification of teachers and administrators in order to be accredited. The accrediting body has realized that certification does not ensure whether a teacher will be a good teacher or a poor teacher. I can honestly attest that in my experience, the teachers that I have who are certified are not more knowledgeable about teaching nor are they necessarily better teachers than the teachers that I have hired who do not have any certification. This should significantly shorten the time we need to complete all the necessary requirements for accreditation.

Analysis and Commentary

The self-evaluation required in the accreditation process is helpful and instructive for a school to go through. A school will ultimately become better and more organized as a result of this exercise. It forces a school to look at all of the different aspects of its operation and to realize how well it is taking care of its employees and how well it is serving its students and families. It also helps the school to look at its role in the greater community.

Instead of trying to complete two categories in their entirety as I set out to do at the beginning of the project, I took a “shotgun” approach. I worked on documenting different portions of each category as I was able to complete each part. In this way, I was still able to complete about half of the required documentation, but I did not finish any of the four standard categories. Portions of each of the four categories are documented. I

found this to be a more efficient way of working on the project because I was able to compile everything that we already had together and the documents that were produced along the way. There were some aspects of each category that would have taken involvement from a broader range of people or that would have required more expense. Instead of being stalled by these portions of the categories, I went on to work on the things that I could do to finish other documents.

The work of accreditation is not terribly difficult, but there is much that needs to be done. It is time consuming, and there is also a financial commitment that has to be made which ranges between \$2500 and \$6000 depending on the cost of your site visit.

Ultimately, I would advocate that any school that has not undertaken the process of accreditation would profit from it if they did work toward this goal. There is nothing like having an objective set of standards or an outside group of people to look at your school to help you improve its function and operation.