



**The Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools  
Committee on Institution-Wide Accreditation**

**INFORMATION BOOKLET FOR  
PRE-K THROUGH 12 SCHOOLS**

**Middle States Commission on Elementary Schools**

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# WHAT IS THE MIDDLE STATES ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGES AND SCHOOLS?

The Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (MSA) was established in 1887 and is a non-governmental, nonprofit, peer-administered organization. The initial objectives of the Association were to standardize the qualifications required for admission to college, to determine the desired characteristics for college preparatory schools, to recommend courses of study for both colleges and schools, to foster school and college relationships to each other and to the government, and to study and recommend best practices of organization and governance. MSA provides leadership in school improvement for its member schools in the following locations:

## *In the continental US*

**Delaware**  
**District of Columbia**  
**Maryland**  
**New Jersey**  
**New York**  
**Pennsylvania**

## *Outside the US*

**The U.S. Caribbean**  
**Africa**  
**Europe**  
**Middle East**  
**Near East**  
**Other Select Areas**

Of the six regional accrediting associations presently involved in school and college accreditation, the Middle States Association was the second to get underway. MSA quickly became part of the standardization movement that defined and clarified the roles and relationships of schools and colleges of the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century.

# WHAT IS THE STRUCTURE OF THE MIDDLE STATES ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGES AND SCHOOLS?

The Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools has three accrediting commissions. The Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) serves academic, degree-granting institutions and evaluates and accredits post secondary institutions and programs. The Commission on Secondary Schools (MSCSS) evaluates and accredits institutions providing middle and/or secondary education; this includes vocational-technical schools that offer non-degree-granting post-secondary programs. The Commission on Elementary Schools (MSCES) serves institutions that provide middle, elementary, and preschool education.

A joint Committee on Institution-Wide Accreditation (CIWA) acts on behalf of MSCES and MSCSS to evaluate and recommend the granting of accreditation for those institutions providing PK-12 education or any combination of grade levels served by **both** the Commission on Elementary Schools and the Commission on Secondary Schools.

Each Commission is autonomous and has its own governing body that is charged with setting policy and direction, as well as with taking accreditation actions. The Middle States Association also has a Board of Trustees with representation from each of the accrediting commissions. The Trustees have policy-making and fiduciary responsibilities.

## The Commission on Elementary Schools

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The Commission on Elementary Schools (MSCES) was established in 1987 to replace the Assembly of Elementary Schools that had conducted accreditation activities for MSA since 1978. MSCES is governed by a twenty-one member board reflective of and elected by its membership.

The Commission is the governing authority for all commission activities and assures that all accredited schools meet rigorous standards, are committed to continuous improvement and deliver to parents and students all promises made.

### MISSION OF COMMISSION ON ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

- to develop and apply standards and protocols
- to support educational communities
- to guide school improvement
- to encourage innovation
- to grant accreditation

in a manner that improves educational quality and increases public trust.

## Vision Statement

The Middle States Commission on Elementary Schools will be recognized by National and International educational communities as the leader in both improving the quality of education through the accreditation process and affirming to the public the trustworthiness of its accredited members for the Twenty-First Century.

## The Commission on Secondary Schools

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The Commission on Secondary Schools (MSCSS) was established by MSA in November 1920. The duties of the Commission are to promote the welfare and improvement of secondary education, to recommend standards for accreditation, and to promote the articulation among elementary schools, secondary schools, and post-secondary institutions. MSCSS consists of twenty-one Commissioners. Members of the Commission are elected for three-year terms and may be reelected for a second term. Three members are “public” members and do not hold professional positions in education. The remaining members represent the geographic and institutional distribution reflective of MSCSS constituents.



### MISSION OF COMMISSION ON SECONDARY SCHOOLS

The Middle States Commission on Secondary Schools (MSCSS), the premier American regional accreditation agency, is the leader in ensuring that all students in its region receive the highest quality of education and achieve at levels expected by society. Through its accreditation and school improvement services, MSCSS recognizes excellence in educational quality, planning, and growth in student performance and provides the means to meet rigorous standards of educational quality.

## The Committee on Institution-Wide Accreditation

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The Committee on Institution-Wide Accreditation (CIWA) provides accreditation services for schools, schools in districts or systems, and educational service agencies. Institutions recommended for accreditation by CIWA are actually accredited by the Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Schools. CIWA consists of representation from the Elementary and Secondary Commissions, with three Commissioners from each Commission forming the CIWA Committee, while the Chairs of the two Commissions serve as *ex officio* members of CIWA. Meetings, held twice each year prior to the Fall and Spring MSCES and MSCSS Meetings, are also attended by the Associate Director and the Assistant Director of CIWA and the Executive Directors of the two Commissions. During those sessions, discussions and issues pertinent to CIWA institutions are addressed. CIWA recommends accreditation actions for member institutions, with formal decisions being made by the two accrediting Commissions.

# W WHY IS ACCREDITATION IMPORTANT?

The activity now known as accreditation is traceable to the guild orientation of the medieval academic communities. The word “accreditation” is derived from Middle French, Old Italian usage. The first meaning of its root term is “trustworthiness.” Since the early 1900s, accreditation has had a major impact on the field of American education. Accreditation responds to the public’s demands for improved quality and greater accountability for institutions serving society’s needs. Accreditation agencies enjoy a unique “public trust” role in the United States. Accredited institutions can be trusted by the public to be what they claim they are and to do what they claim to do. Whatever an accredited institution says about itself has both the sanction and the confidence of the profession.

## *Accreditation*

### encourages and facilitates school improvement

Involvement in an ongoing accreditation protocol fosters excellence and improvement in a school, district, or educational service agency. The question is not if we want a better institution, but how we will assure continuous improvement. Accreditation provides a *systematic* process that requires an institution to ask why it exists, to establish a vision of its future, and to determine specific objectives for reaching that vision.

The *information* gathered through the accreditation protocol serves as a sound basis for school/district/service agency improvement, strategic planning, restructuring, and staff development.

The accreditation process *examines the entire institution*—its philosophy and goals, its community, its programs and services, its facilities, and its financial stability.

Accreditation provides a way to *manage change* through regular assessment, planning, implementation, and reassessment.

Accreditation helps schools/districts/service agencies *establish priorities* for long-range improvement by using thorough needs assessments.

Accreditation requires an organization to establish and *implement a multi-year improvement plan* based upon its vision of the future. Desired institution-wide results are a part of the perpetual accreditation cycle that includes:

- Self-assessment that identifies areas of strength and areas for improvement in the current educational program for students.
- Insight and perspective from the evaluation team.

- Regular review of progress during the intervening years between full self-studies.

The accreditation process helps to ensure *greater continuity* of student experiences through continuous clarification of the institution's direction.

Participation in accreditation provides an excellent *growth experience for staff* who participate on visiting teams to evaluate other institutions.

Because accreditation is a regional activity that encourages broader involvement with educators from other states and independent, public, and religiously-affiliated institutions, participants learn from the differences and benefit from the resulting *professional networks*.

The *support of MSA staff* and encouragement of the Committee on Institution-Wide Accreditation motivates institutions to maintain their focus on continuous improvement.

## ***Accreditation***

### **provides a means for public accountability**

The accreditation process validates to the public the *integrity of an institution's program and student transcripts*.

The accreditation process assures the organization's community of stakeholders that the institution's *purposes are appropriate* and are being accomplished through a viable educational program.

The accreditation process *justifies the faith and resources* others place in the institution.

Accreditation fosters stakeholder involvement and commitment.

Accreditation provides opportunities for *grass roots, broad-based involvement* of stakeholders in charting the direction of the institution.

The accreditation process offers *a mechanism* for constituent groups to play a major role in determining the institution's future, helping the school/district/service agency to be all it can be.

Accreditation involves key people in *creating a vision* of the future, rather than letting the future happen to the institution.

## ***Accreditation***

### **builds positive public relations**

Accreditation provides opportunities to *emphasize the positive* and show how strong and effective the institution is.

Willingly submitting an educational organization to public scrutiny and evaluation builds commitment and a deeper understanding of the institution's efforts. It helps staff *to broaden its view of community expectations* and *fosters closer collaboration between the institution and its community*.

The accreditation process provides *articulation and communication opportunities* between and among levels of the institution and among stakeholder groups.

# WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF INSTITUTION-WIDE ACCREDITATION?

Middle States has seen a steady increase in the number of PK-12 schools, districts, and educational service agencies (including intermediate units and boards of cooperative educational services) seeking institution-wide accreditation. The development of a variety of protocols for self-study has made PK-12 accreditation an even more desirable and manageable option.

Institution-wide accreditation is seen as a viable way to help unify the improvement activities of the component units in a district or system. As the public continues to look for greater accountability in areas of student performance and organizational

improvement, schools and school systems have recognized that the consistent, institution-wide vision and focus provided by institution-wide accreditation is necessary to produce the kinds of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that the Information Age demands.

Increasingly, educators and community members recognize that all levels of schooling are essential and contribute to the success of students. The much used phrase “it takes a whole village to educate a child” applies to PK-12 education and today as much emphasis is placed on early childhood education as is placed on college preparatory programs.

Besides these benefits, there are many other reasons for a school, a school district, or a service agency to consider conducting its accreditation processes system-wide.

## *PK-12 accreditation results in...*

**...improved vertical and horizontal articulation and communication.** Because activities are structured across the entire institution, internal communication is improved. Institution-wide accreditation activities focus on a smooth transition from preschool to elementary to middle/junior high to high school levels and the continuity of student experiences from early childhood through secondary levels.

**...improved student performance and organizational improvement in the areas identified as district priorities.** Schools, districts, and service agencies engaged in institution-wide accreditation activities are *required* to focus objectives on improved student performance and organizational improvement. Concentrating on student performance objectives

across the entire institution ensures a consistent and concerted improvement effort on behalf of students served.

**...the ability to align the accreditation process with district-wide strategic planning and school improvement efforts.** Most strategic activities are structured school-wide or system-wide. Institution-wide accreditation, therefore, can enable educational organizations to combine strategic planning, continuous improvement, and accreditation into a single focused activity.

**...the ability to align the accreditation process with state-mandated strategic planning and improvement processes.** Increasingly, state education departments are requiring public schools to develop improvement/strategic plans. Often these plans must be submitted on a district-wide basis. Because of the flexibility inherent in the Middle States accreditation protocols, state-mandated planning models can generally be used to meet accreditation requirements.

**...significantly improved communications and awareness activities regarding the school improvement process.** A critical aspect of any educational improvement process is informing the community of plans for the future and celebrations of success. An institution-wide focus on these types of public relations activities ensures that the school, district, or service agency speaks with “one voice” and presents a coherent and equitable view of the total educational experience. When communications activities are orchestrated at a system-wide/school-wide level, there is often a staff member available who has the knowledge and experience necessary to make the most of public relations efforts.

**...greater understanding of and support for school improvement activities by the Board of Trustees, Board of Education or other governing body** because the accreditation effort applies to all students in the entire organization.

**...more cost effective school improvement efforts** because priorities are clearly identified, units of the institution are working together on shared initiatives, and the size of the evaluation team is smaller. Also, trained volunteers conduct the visits to the school.

**...more effective alignment of budgeting procedures with school improvement initiatives.** In institution-wide efforts, the improvement plan becomes more of a driving force for change than if only a segment of the organization is involved. Thus, the plan can be more effectively budgeted for.

**...a more thorough evaluation of improvement activities by the Middle States visiting team.** Because the entire school, district, or service agency is involved in the accreditation process, the Visiting Team can conduct an evaluation of both system-level/whole school activities as well as site-specific planning processes. Thus, the accreditation process should be more valuable to everyone involved.



# WHAT ARE THE STEPS IN THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS? WHAT IS THE TYPICAL TIMELINE OF EVENTS?

## **STEP #1: *Contact Middle States***

All contacts from schools/districts/educational service agencies seeking information on PK-12 accreditation are referred to the Committee on Institution-Wide Accreditation (CIWA) office. The CIWA staff will make contact to discuss the options available for fulfilling accreditation requirements and will send appropriate information about accreditation. The institution will also be informed of the costs (annual dues, fees, and related expenses) attendant to membership in the Middle States Association. Much of this information is found on the CIWA website: [www.ciwa-msa.org](http://www.ciwa-msa.org).

If the organization continues to be interested after review of the material, a CIWA Registration Form is completed and submitted to MSA. This establishes the institution as a Correspondent.

## **STEP #2: *Apply for Candidacy***

If the institution meets the preliminary criteria to be eligible for accreditation through CIWA (such as being in operation for at least one year, having grade levels that extend beyond the range of either the Commission on Elementary Schools or Commission on Secondary Schools, and providing documentation of other characteristics if the institution is located outside the United States), the institution completes and submits an Application for Candidacy. This application requires information about the institution, its governance, staffing, programs and students, and includes examples of the organization's publications and documents. These documents might include a faculty handbook, student handbook, admissions materials, the institution's strategic plan, or other public relations materials.

The Application for Candidacy is reviewed by CIWA staff and a recommendation for a candidacy visit is made if it appears that the institution is likely to be able to achieve accreditation within a period of two-to-three years.

## **STEP #3: *Establish Candidacy for Membership***

Before accepting an institution into membership as a Candidate for Accreditation, there is generally a one-day, onsite candidacy visit. Experienced Middle States evaluators or staff are

appointed to carry out the candidacy visit because this stage in the accreditation process is of extreme importance to setting the stage for future accreditation and evaluation activities. There are five purposes for the candidacy visit.

1. To determine whether the institution currently is eligible and ready to begin the accreditation process.
2. To inform the institution of its obligations once candidacy is established and to initiate preparations for the institution to begin subsequent self-study, planning, and team visit activities.
3. To assist the institution in choosing an appropriate accreditation protocol and developing a timeline of future events
4. To provide assurances to the Commissions that the likelihood is positive that the institution will achieve accreditation, and that the school has the capacity to succeed.
5. To inform the institution of any major areas of facilities, operations, or program that are deficient and suggest improvements that should be undertaken prior to the team visit.

There is a fee (please refer to the current schedule of CIWA dues and fees) for the candidacy visit, whether or not an offer of candidacy is extended. The institution is also responsible for the travel expenses of the visitor.

The candidacy visit can usually be set up within a month or two of submission of the Application for Candidacy. Once the visit has been made, the candidacy visitor will submit a written report to Middle States staff; a copy of the report will be sent to the institution after staff review.

## ***STEP #4: Candidacy Decision and Offer of Candidacy***

The report of the candidacy visitor will be reviewed and a decision will be made by MSA on whether to offer candidacy. The candidacy decision is typically made within a month of receipt of the report of the onsite visit.

If the institution is offered candidacy, an official letter will be sent to the head of the organization. S/he will be asked to sign and return the “Acceptance of Candidacy” form. Signing and returning the form signals the institution’s entry into membership. At that point, the institution will be listed in all paper and electronic registries of MSA membership as a “Candidate for Accreditation.” That status carries with it certain obligations, such as payments of annual membership dues and fees and providing volunteers to serve on visits to other schools or service agencies. Once candidacy has been accepted, an MSA staff member is assigned as the “Agent of Responsibility” to guide the institution through the self-study/planning process and to provide continuing support.

In some cases, where serious deficiencies are noted, candidacy may be denied. In such cases, the institution may reapply when substantial improvement has been made in those areas identified in the candidacy visitor report.

## **STEP #5: *Selection of Accreditation Protocol***

Middle States understands that organizations differ in their levels of development, their plans for the future, and their desired outcomes for the accreditation process. Therefore, institutions seeking accreditation have a choice of protocols to use. The institution's assigned Agent of Responsibility will guide the organization in its decision-making process.

## **STEP #6: *Working with the Accreditation Protocol***

Once the accreditation protocol has been chosen, the institution will begin its self-study and planning activities. Typically, this is the most valuable and the most time-consuming aspect of the accreditation process. Most organizations will need a minimum of one year to fulfill the protocol requirements.

## **STEP #7: *Team Visit***

As the institution nears completion of work on its self-study and planning processes, a team visit date will be established and the configuration of the visiting team will be determined. Normally, the date will be set at least six months before the actual visit.

The visiting team is composed of volunteer peer evaluators who are familiar with the type, size, and philosophy of the institution to be evaluated. Team visits typically last for 3½ days. The host institution is responsible for travel, lodging, and meal expenses of the evaluators. In addition, there is a team preparation fee assessed by Middle States. Please refer to the schedule of CIWA dues and fees for specifics.

The institution will receive both a brief oral report on the final day of the visit and a longer, more comprehensive written report about two months after the visit. The report will outline areas of strength and areas for improvement. It will often highlight whether all accreditation standards are met and indicate the team's recommendation to MSA for accreditation action.

## **STEP #8: *Accreditation Action***

Once Middle States receives the visiting team's written report, the process of reviewing standards continues. The visiting team report and self-study/planning documents will be analyzed by staff and compliance with standards and the specific requirements of the protocol used will be assessed. Next, these documents will be evaluated by either a Reader or an appropriate Advisory Committee. Finally, the Committee on Institution-Wide Accreditation will review team, staff, and reader/advisory committee documentation in order to make the final recommendation to the Commissions on accreditation action.

This process generally takes from 4-6 months. MSA believes that the multiple levels of review by the team, staff, reader/advisory committee and CIWA are essential to ensure that fair and thorough attention is given to the accreditation decision. An institution visited in the Spring will generally be acted on at the following Fall Commission meetings; one visited in the Fall will generally be acted on at the following Spring Commission meetings.

When accreditation is granted, it is for a specific period of time, often five or seven years, depending upon the accreditation protocol used.

## **STEP #9: *Accreditation Maintenance***

An essential feature of the accreditation process is the requirement to maintain accreditation. Again, these requirements vary according to the accreditation protocol chosen. Typically, some type of maintenance activity will be required every 2-3 years and may be a written progress report, an onsite visit, a web-based report, or some combination of these three. In addition, schools are required to pay membership dues and to provide updated information to MSA on an annual basis.

From start to finish, from submission of the Application for Candidacy to final accreditation, an institution should expect the accreditation process to take approximately two to three years.

### **WHAT ACCREDITATION PROTOCOL OPTIONS ARE AVAILABLE?**

Middle States offers and supports a variety of accreditation protocols to meet the needs of its membership. Much of the information concerning the specific instruments and procedures is available online via the websites of the Commission on Elementary Schools ([www.ces-msa.org](http://www.ces-msa.org)), the Commission on Secondary Schools ([www.css-msa.org](http://www.css-msa.org)), and the Committee on Institution-Wide Accreditation ([www.ciwa-msa.org](http://www.ciwa-msa.org)). Additionally, participation at workshops offered throughout the year is encouraged; overview sessions are offered free-of-charge to member schools. Information on those workshops is available on the websites or from the MSA office.

### ***Additional options offered with other organizations***

A school/district/service agency may find it beneficial to be a member of and/or accredited by more than one agency. Although Middle States accreditation is the recognized regional process, schools with religious, specific geographical, or other affiliations sometimes wish to pursue accreditation with a second organization. Middle States collaborates with a number of these groups to offer dual accreditation to those schools. The benefit of such dual accreditation is that the institution conducts a single process (it is in one cycle of accreditation) that meets the standards and other criteria of both organizations. One self-study is conducted, one team is sent in usually with representatives from both organizations, and one final report is generated. Based on that activity and information each agency independently takes action on the accreditation, though consultation between the accreditors often occurs.

In other instances, institutions belong to a group that offers a school improvement process that may not lead to a second accreditation, but may offer other benefits. Middle States also collaborates with these groups to ensure that the process meets the needs of accreditation, including documenting compliance with all MSA standards.

Currently, Middle States is working with the organizations listed below. In some cases, a formal written agreement has been developed and stipulates the conditions under which joint activities occur with some cooperative agreements, an institution has freedom to choose a protocol, while with others, the choice of protocols is more limited.

**American Montessori Society (AMS)**

**Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI)**

**Association of Independent Maryland Schools (AIMS)**

**Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA)**

**Center for Leadership in School Reform (CLSR)**

**Central Organization for Jewish Education**

**Christian Schools International (CSI)**

**Comision Acreditadora de Instituciones Educativas (CADIE)**

**Conference of Education Administrators of Schools and Programs for the Deaf (CEASD)**

**Commission on Accreditation of the Accrediting Association of the Seventh-Day Adventist Schools, Colleges, & Universities**

**District of Columbia Public Charter School Board**

**Council of International Schools (CIS)**

**Mennonite Education Agency (MEA)**

**National Accreditation Council for Agencies Serving the Blind and Visually Impaired (NAC)**

**National Independent Private Schools Association (NIPSA)**

**National Lutheran Schools Association (NLSA)**

**New Jersey Association of Independent Schools (NJ AIS)**

**New York State Association of Independent Schools (NYS AIS)**

**Pennsylvania Association of Independent Schools (PAIS)**

**Quality New Jersey (QNJ)**

**School Alliance for Continuous Improvement (SACI)**

**Tri-State Consortium**

