



VISITING TEAM REPORT

George Walton Academy

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A History of SAIS Accreditation

SAIS member schools are part of a remarkable history of quality assurance in education.

SAIS began its organizational life in 1903 as the "Mid-South Association of Independent Schools," providing training for teachers in private schools and some early public schools in the southeastern states. In 1953, another organization began as the Southern Association of Independent Schools, providing a forum for independent school administrators to work with public schools through SACS and to contribute to the larger interest in accreditation in the southeast. MAIS and SAIS merged in 1986 to form the present SAIS, with an emphasis on accreditations through SACS for independent schools and professional development for administrators, trustees, and teachers. Today, SAIS works to help both established and emerging schools approach these issues with creativity and innovation. Working at the state, regional, and national levels, SAIS serves and strengthens member schools through the promotion of the highest quality educational standards and ethical conduct.

The mission of SAIS is to provide leadership, accreditation services, and professional development resources that will strengthen member schools as they fulfill their missions. The focus of SAIS's interest when it began in 1953 was to develop and maintain relationships with the expanding organization of SACS in order to ensure significant input from independent schools into the exploding world of public school accreditation. The post-WWII years of baby booming, facility planning, teacher training, and legislative entitlement funding eclipsed the scope and role of private education in America close to the current level of service. Part of this history of negotiating standards in a predominantly public-school oriented world of education caused SAIS to embark on its own method of accreditation in the late '90s. The efforts resulted in the SAIS method of accreditation available to member schools.

SAIS has designed and implemented a significant program of accreditation to assist member schools as they develop and promote high quality education in this region. This method is based on a school's stated mission and its own unique approach to thorough and vigorous self-examination.

In today's world of accountability in schooling, accreditation serves as a critical component of a school's demonstrated effectiveness and ability to provide successful schooling for children. A school that is able to achieve accreditation demonstrates a commitment to a process that requires the school to meet a set of rigorous standards; to engage in a program of continuous school improvement; and to demonstrate quality assurance to its stakeholders through self-evaluation and peer-review. SAIS accreditation provides schools access to an integrated network of services and technical assistance that supports every school's ability to identify and meet its goals for improving student performance and the teaching and learning process.

SAIS accredited member schools are part of an international network of accredited schools that have demonstrated success in educating children. As such, SAIS accreditation is recognized throughout the world as a symbol of quality in education for students and teachers. To earn accreditation, schools must meet quality standards, be evaluated by an outside group of peer professionals, and implement a school plan focused on strategic improvement and student performance. Accreditation is voluntary and must be renewed each year.

The Review

A team representing SAIS conducted an on-site visit to review this school's self-study and standards compliance. The team was comprised of team members whose diverse independent school backgrounds provided an array of expertise. The visiting team sought the answers to these four critical questions within the framework of the school's self-study. The following pages contain the findings.

In conducting the on-site reviews, the visiting team was responsible for:

1. Assessing the adequacy of the self-study process;
2. Identifying strengths of the school deserving commendation;
3. Developing recommendations that may help to strengthen the programs of the school;
4. Assessing compliance with the standards of SAIS;
5. Developing a written report of the findings.

To fulfill the team's responsibilities, team members:

1. Reviewed documentation provided by the school;
2. Conducted interviews with board members, parents, school personnel, students, and community members;
3. Applied the standards for accreditation;
4. Developed a draft of commendations and recommendations;
5. Contributed to the content and focus of the written report;
6. Provided input as to the determination of accreditation.

The primary focus of the self-study process is to demonstrate the capacity of a school to meet the requirements for accreditation. A typical self-study consists of:

1. Analysis and response to accreditation standards;
2. Identification and demonstration of a continuous process of improvement;
3. Implementation of methods that provide for quality assurance.

The study addresses four critical questions relative to each of the school's stated goals for improvement and mission fulfillment:

- **PROFILE:** Where is the school today? The PROFILE should include clear, comprehensive information reflecting current student performance data, stakeholder perspectives, community characteristics, and analysis of strengths and limitations in the areas of student learning and school performance.
- **VISION:** Where does the school want to go? The VISION is a clear, compelling purpose communicated through the school's vision and mission statements, beliefs, and core values.
- **PLAN:** What is the plan to get there? The PLAN should be based on an analysis of pertinent data, research of the best practices, and alignment with generally-accepted expectations for student learning at schools with similar missions.
- **RESULTS:** How will the school know when it has accomplished its plan? The RESULTS are documented evidence demonstrating successful implementation of strategies that resulted in accomplishment of the school's mission and student achievement gains related to the school's mission.

SAIS Accreditation Policies

- **Accreditation Committee**
The SAIS Board of Trustees has established the SAIS Accreditation Committee to oversee the accreditation services offered by SAIS. The Accreditation Committee establishes and maintains review boards whose members review and act upon visiting team recommendations. The Board of Trustees reviews and officially approves the schools recommended for accreditation by the Accreditation Committee.
- **Accreditation Appeal Process**
If the visiting team recommendation to offer accreditation or re-accreditation is rejected, specific reasons will be given and the school may be given a timeframe and assistance to address deficiencies. The decision of a review board may be appealed in writing by the head of school, referencing specific area(s) in which the school was found deficient. A subsequent review board will review the original findings and the appeal materials. If the decision is upheld by the subsequent review board, the decision may be appealed in writing by the head of school to the SAIS Board of Trustees. The school's accreditation status will remain unchanged during an appeals process. The judgment of the SAIS Board of Trustees is final.
- **Interim Report Requirements**
Accredited schools must submit a two-year interim report to SAIS after the team visit. This report ensures continued compliance with standards/indicators and documents efforts made in addressing the visiting team's recommendations and the school's self-study goals.
- **Member in good standing:** Schools must remain a member in good standing, with all annual membership dues paid in full and abiding by policies and procedures.
- **Notification of substantive change / head of school change:** Accredited schools must notify SAIS in a timely manner of a substantive change using the form at www.sais.org/change. Changes may include: head of school change, other leadership changes, adding or contracting grade levels, merger, name change, mission change, major construction, crisis situation, litigation, school closure, other changes. In the event of a substantive change, SAIS may request additional information or conduct a visit to the school.
- **Terms of accreditation and re-accreditation:** Terms of accreditation are generally for five years commencing on July 1 and concluding on June 30. Schools must host a visiting team prior to the expiration of their term of accreditation and during the same semester of their previous accreditation if a re-accreditation visit and within three years of becoming a candidate for accreditation if an initial accreditation. Any variance to an accreditation timeline must be approved by SAIS. A new self-study is required for each five-year period reflecting evidence of continuous improvement.
- **Non-compliance:** Stakeholders may file a non-compliance complaint against a school. Upon receipt and verification of a non-compliance report, the school will be given an opportunity to respond to the inquiry. The inquiry, response, and any subsequent written correspondence on the matter may be made available to the accreditation visiting team chair on the next accreditation visit. However, an immediate investigative visit to the school may be undertaken if the response by the school is unsatisfactory or an accumulation of complaints indicates that a school's response is inconsistent with a preponderance of evidence. As is frequently the case, if a school's practices are bordering on non-compliance, a discussion that is triggered by a non-compliance complaint is often a catalyst to remedy such practices. In the event that a school is not compliant, a series of actions will be undertaken with the school such as but not limited to: a request to remedy the non-compliance issue, placing the school on warned status or probation, and an ultimate action of dropping accreditation.

Roster of Team Members

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School Snapshot

Mission

George Walton Academy provides challenging instruction, engaging experiences, and global perspectives designed to inspire lives of intellectual curiosity, integrity, and purpose.

We Believe:

- In Judeo-Christian values, while respecting the heritage and beliefs of others.
- In fostering a welcoming and inclusive community where students feel safe to discover and explore their interests and talents.
- Each student is an individual with unique physical, social, emotional, and intellectual gifts and abilities.
- Education should be relevant, engaging, and designed to equip each student to excel in college and beyond.
- In fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills, imagination, and creativity.
- That promoting positive relationships and mutual respect is a responsibility of every individual.
- Students should be accountable, learn to self-advocate, and take personal responsibility for their work, actions, and educational development.

Brief History

On March 19, 1969, a group of concerned citizens met at the Episcopalian Church in Monroe to discuss the prospect of establishing an independent school in the area. The objective? Quality education in a college preparatory environment.

During the course of the meeting, 12 people agreed to serve in initial leadership roles and became founding members of the George Walton Academy Board of Trustees. Dubbed the “Dirty Dozen,” these founders decided to move forward with a list of approximately 80 confirmed students.

George Walton Academy was officially established in Good Hope in the fall of 1969. On the first day of school, 132 students in first through eighth grade walked through the doors. As a first order of business, students met and selected the Bulldogs as the school mascot along with the school colors of red and black. They also chose a school motto of *Vires Acquirit Eundo*, which means “It gains strength by continuing.” In 1974, the first building at the school's present location in Monroe, Georgia, was dedicated.

In 2017-2018, George Walton had 749 students in grades K4 through twelfth. The Academy is divided into lower school, middle school, and upper school. The lower school (grades K4 through fifth) had 278 students, middle school (grades sixth through eighth) had 180 students, and upper school (ninth through twelfth) had 291 students with a graduating class of 74. The projected enrollment for 2018-2019 is 713. George Walton has approximately 130 faculty and staff.

Today we're committed to the same values and objectives solidified by the founding GWA Board of Trustees in 1969: a quality education in a college preparatory environment. From our humble beginnings in Good Hope, George Walton Academy has grown from a few modest buildings on leased property to a beautiful, wooded campus on 60 acres in the heart of Monroe. GWA opened with 132 initial students; we now welcome over 700 students from ten different counties.

But it's not just about the numbers. As we respond to the changing physical needs of our programs, curriculum and student population, GWA remains dedicated to expanding the scope and reach of its mission.

Leadership

George Walton Academy is governed by a self-perpetuating board of trustees consisting of fifteen members. Of these members, five are alumni, fourteen have had children graduate or have children currently enrolled and two have grandchildren as current students. The board remains focused on long-range, visionary, and fiduciary responsibilities of the school. The board has one employee, the head of school. The board is not involved in day-to-day operations of George Walton Academy. The head of school, Dr. Dan Dolan, has the responsibility for accomplishing the general objectives of the school, implementation of board policies, and general oversight of all school operations including the employment, assignment and reappointment of all personnel, the curriculum, course of studies and programs, and the discipline to be observed in the school.

Self Study

Facing unique opportunities and challenges, such as the retirement of the long serving head of school and the purchase of new property, the board agreed a visioning process should be developed to assure we are delivering the best possible GWA experience for our students. What will GWA look like in 3-5 years? How will we get there? How will this impact our teaching and learning? To answer these questions, the SAIS Value Narrative Survey was administered to our stakeholders in January 2016. Over 1500 students, parents, faculty, alumni, and trustees were surveyed and interviewed in the process. With the assistance of Bob Chambers, an independent consultant, the data was thoroughly analyzed. As a result, five themes were identified that became the foundation for our 2016 strategic plan, Expanding our Possibilities. The plan is structured around faculty, programs, community, facilities, and sustainability. In August 2016, several task forces convened to establish and set goals and initiatives for each theme. The plan not only outlines a direction for school programming and future growth, but it also assigns goals to individual categories that can double as measurable benchmarks.

Improvement

As a result of our thorough reflection on our self-study, faculty, programs, community, facilities, and sustainability are our areas of improvement for mission fulfillment.

Introduction

Introduction and Overview of the Visit

The SAIS visiting team was warmly received by the community. All constituent groups were open and cooperative, providing the team insight into the culture of the school. All documentation was available to the team (primarily) online or in office confidential files. The team met with the board of the school and representative groups of parents, students, and teachers. The Accreditation Steering Committee and key administrators answered questions about the school's self-study process and the strategic goals identified for school improvement. The visiting team also visited classrooms and the cafeteria and observed teachers and students involved in their day to day activities.

The interviews with various stakeholder groups revealed common themes providing insight into the school's very positive and focused culture. All groups mentioned the caring, supportive family atmosphere of the school. Other important reoccurring themes were the emphases on academic opportunities, the large number of expanding co-curricular opportunities, and the willingness of the administration to listen and try new initiatives.

All groups interviewed expressed great respect for the school's leadership, particularly the relatively new head of school. The visiting team was impressed with and commend the board for their desire to improve its understanding of their role in independent school governance. The visiting team was convinced and moved that the school was accelerating in their use of independent school recognized processes to go with their crystal focus on family feeling and expanding opportunities and was about to enter a positive "take-off" two years of moving to the next level.

Area 1

Title

Faculty

Description

The goal for faculty is to attract and retain highly-qualified teachers. Developed in the Strategic Plan, the vision is to attract and retain faculty who are passionate and knowledgeable about teaching, their students, and their discipline and excel in communicating with and inspiring students, parents, and colleagues.

In addition to staff surveys to color initiatives, visits were arranged with other independent schools in seven states and the District of Columbia to study best practices.

Results will be determined by analyzing quality of new hires plus retention ratios.

Commendations

The visiting team commends the school for the following:

- Encouraging faculty towards innovating and risk-taking;
- Administration's offering the faculty a new-found listening ear and a voice in academic decision making;
- Beginning the George Walton Teaching Academy, a formal structure for peer mentoring and non-evaluative professional growth;
- Increasing the funds available for professional growth by a factor of ten;
- Accelerating an already strong feeling of "family" community.

Recommendations

The visiting team recommends that the school consider the following:

- Establishing a more formal and better communicated faculty evaluation program;
- Increasing even further professional development, especially for new teachers and administrators new to current duties;
- Utilizing curriculum mapping for scope and sequence, intentionality, and smoother transitions between departing and entering faculty.

Area 2

Title

Programs

Description

Developed in the Strategic Plan, the goal is to provide extraordinary programming to ensure a balanced, well-rounded student experience in academics, athletics, and the arts that encourages students to discover and pursue their many talents. Constituent surveys and conversations were especially relied upon in this goal pertaining to innovative program additions.

Results will be assessed by quantity and quality of applicants, student retention, and newly-monitored success in college.

Commendations

The visiting team commends the school for the following:

- Encouraging and facilitating new scheduling plus adding to academic offerings and co-curricular opportunities using significant faculty and student inputs;
- Identifying and using staff skills and reaching out to the local community to enhance student opportunities;
- An outstanding band and Fine Arts program;
- Launching of the PARC program (Place for Academic Reinforcement and Coaching) for tutoring learning difference students and others needing extra help;
- The new global perspective emphasis in academics, scheduling, and student travel opportunities.

Recommendations

The visiting team recommends that the school consider:

- Being mindful of prioritizing and regulating the number of programmatic additions, services, and innovations being managed at any given time;
- Scheduling current flex day blocks at the end of a given day to avoid academic lost time for athletic and other co-curricular activities;
- Evaluating on a regular basis the effectiveness and financial efficiency of the PARC program mentioned above.

Area 3

Title

Community

Description

Developed during strategic planning, the goal is to cultivate a cohesive community, one in which stakeholders have opportunities to engage meaningfully in the educational experience. Hopefully the entire school community will feel welcome and personally invited to participate in activities, celebrations, and support.

Assessment will be by surveys, admissions funnel data, and the number and amount of donations. This goal will also be tracked by alumni touch points and giving.

Commendations

The visiting team commends the school for the following:

- Clear, concise, and transparent communication with all constituent groups;
- The head of school for creating a new atmosphere of listening and communicating among all constituencies;
- "DAWGS 360" program, which encourages family involvement as well as donations.

Recommendations

The visiting team recommends the school consider the following:

- Increasing the use on a more structured and routine basis of RenWeb website for communicating specific class news and assignments by faculty;
- Increasing the visibility of school's mission statement around the school.

Area 4

Title

Facilities

Description

Developed in the strategic planning process and especially constituent surveys, facilities should accommodate a dynamic range of academic, artistic, athletic, elective, and co-curricular offerings. Renovations should also enhance visual attractiveness and safety aspects. The goal is to continue to build the foundation for a campus master plan with timelines and to provide an ongoing maintenance program so that repairs do not fall in arrears.

Assessment will be by attaining more predictable maintenance costs, less downtime of resources, and healthier admissions funnels.

Commendations

The visiting team commends the school for the following:

- Additions to and renovations of many facilities in the past year and a half with a clear improvement in appearance (curb appeal), rationality and functionality, and improved campus safety.

Recommendations

The visiting team recommends that the school consider the following:

- Increasing information technology support staff for classrooms and students.

Area 5

Title

Sustainability

Description

Developed during the strategic process, the school will continue building the foundation for long-term financial sustainability by garnering support and resources necessary to fulfill the mission. A financial plan based on NAIS best practices will be developed, and financial reporting and modeling will be improved and increased.

Assessment will be by measuring debt ratios, monitoring buildup to 6 months cash reserves, and accountability on tighter fiscal year budget controls.

Commendations

The visiting team commends the school for the following:

- Great improvement in business office, and budgeting procedures;
- Courageously and necessarily raising tuition increases above the C.P.I.;
- Educating and improving the advancement team towards independent school best practices.

Recommendations

The visiting team recommends that the school consider the following:

- Turning the school's financial attention to such matters as multiyear forecasting/pro formas, different enrollment scenarios when budgeting, and analyzing the net long range financial impact of any new initiatives.

Additional Commendations and Recommendations

Additional Commendations

The team commends the school for the following:

- Progress by the board of trustees on board education and best practices;
- A cohesive and improving counseling center;
- Delegating new responsibilities and innovative purview to dynamic staff members;
- Hiring of and supporting innovations and independent school best practices acceleration by experienced head of school, Dr. Dan Dolan.

Additional Recommendations

The team recommends the school consider the following:

- Continuing the board on its journey towards independent school best practices and further board education;
- Having the head of school continue to train and delegate administrators under his supervision to avoid spreading himself too thinly or inefficiently;
- Emphasizing foreign languages in the lower and middle school;
- Researching classroom academic practices beyond traditional lecture/recite such as fuller integration of technology as a means of instruction, differentiated instruction, summative assessments, and critical thinking skills (e.g. Bloom's Taxonomy).

Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendation

Summary

The SAIS visiting team would like to thank the school for their coordination efforts, support, and cooperation. The staff members were impressive with their collegiality and high level of engagement in the school improvement process. The community made the team's work encouraging, enjoyable, and intellectually stimulating. The team greatly appreciates the generous hospitality that was extended. We especially want to thank George Walton's accreditation coordinators, Kimberly Dolvin and Jennifer Houck, who worked so hard to fill our every need and to make us feel like one of the GWA "family."

George Walton Academy is entering an exciting period in its institutional history, one which the visiting team termed a "takeoff phase." A school with so many natural assets over the years is now entering a new and exhilarating phase fueled by a growing knowledge of best practices, a new savvy head of school, and a future full of potential. It was a moving experience for the visiting team to be a part of this feeling, even for just three days.

Standards Compliance

The school is in compliance with all standards of the SAIS accreditation process as verified by documentation, observations, and interviews.

Self-Study Quality

The self-study conducted by the school meets the standard of quality and thoroughness required by the SAIS accreditation process and answers the four critical questions as outlined in the Guidebook.

Recommendation

The school is unanimously recommended for accreditation.