

WHAT IS?

EXCELLENCE BY DESIGN

**A Self-Study and
Accreditation Protocol**

**For Schools Seeking Accreditation
by**

The Commission on Elementary Schools

The Commission on Secondary Schools

The Committee on Institution-Wide

Accreditation

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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 schools can be trusted by the public to be what they claim they are and to do what they claim to do. Whatever an accredited school 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 ongoing improvement in a school. The question is not if we want a better school, but how we will assure continuous school improvement. Accreditation provides a *systematic* process that requires a school 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 improvement, strategic planning, restructuring, and staff development.
- The accreditation process *examines the entire school*—its philosophy and goals, its community, its programs and services, the facilities and financial stability.
- Accreditation provides a way to *manage change* through regular assessment, planning, implementation, and reassessment.
- Accreditation helps schools/districts *establish priorities* for improvement by using thorough needs assessments, rather than faddish approaches to improvement.
- Accreditation requires a school to establish and *implement a 5-year improvement plan* based upon its vision of the future. Desired school-wide results are a part of the perpetual accreditation cycle that includes:
 - School 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 assessment 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 school's direction.
 - Participation in accreditation provides an excellent *growth experience for staff* who participate on visiting teams to evaluate other schools.
 - Because accreditation is a regional activity that encourages broader involvement with educators from other states and independent, public, and church-related constituencies, 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 schools to maintain their focus on continuous school improvement.

Accreditation provides a means for public accountability.....

- The accreditation process validates to the public the *integrity of a school's program and student transcripts*.
- The accreditation process assures a school community that the school'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 school.

Accreditation fosters stakeholder involvement and commitment.....

- Accreditation provides opportunities for *grass roots, broad-based involvement* of stakeholders in charting the direction of the school.
- The accreditation process offers *a mechanism* for constituent groups to play a major role in determining the school's future, helping a school 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 school.

Accreditation builds positive public relations.....

- Accreditation provides opportunities to *emphasize the positive* and show how strong and effective the school is.
- Willingly submitting a school to public scrutiny and evaluation builds commitment and a deeper understanding of the school's efforts. It helps staff to *broaden its view of community expectations* and *fosters closer school and community collaboration*.
- The accreditation process provides *articulation and communication opportunities* between school levels and among stakeholder groups.

WHAT IS *EXCELLENCE BY DESIGN*?

Excellence by Design is a self-study and accreditation protocol that uses strategic planning as a vehicle for growth and improvement in student performance and in the school's capacity to effect that growth. The protocol, developed by the Middle States Commission on Secondary Schools (MSCSS) of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, links various planning and school growth and improvement efforts. *Excellence by Design* leads the school to establish objectives for improving student performance and organizational capacity based on its vision of a preferred future for its students. Therefore, *Excellence by Design* is a future-oriented and visionary process. In addition, the protocol provides for a *continuous* review of programs and services and of the results of student performance. It also allows diverse constituent groups to participate in charting the future of the institution.

The purpose of *Excellence by Design* is to provide a framework and process to guide the school's efforts to achieve excellence in student performance and to achieve accreditation by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools—The Gold Standard.

Excellence by Design also provides the framework for formally aligning all the work of the school to ensure that all of its efforts are coordinated and focused on achieving the school's mission. It is expected that this framework will accomplish the following purposes:

- Development of a sense of community and common purpose among the school's students and staff, and its community of stakeholders.
- A Plan for Growth and Improvement in student performance and the school's capacity to produce the levels of student performance expected by the school and its community of stakeholders.
- Greater cooperation between all of the school's stakeholders in identifying and implementing practices that have been demonstrated to lead to excellence in student performance and the organization's capacity to produce the desired levels of student performance.

Most importantly, this framework intends to develop in the school community of stakeholders an understanding that the school it is part of a larger community of learners and that this community has agreed upon, supports, and accepts responsibility for assisting the school in achieving its Mission, Profile of Graduates, and Plan for

Growth and Improvement in student performance and organizational capacity. This learning community understands that, by working together to articulate and align its efforts, it can achieve higher levels of excellence in student performance.

What Is Excellence?

M. Edward Krenson has stated that excellence is “about more than simply the end result. ...True excellence...has more to do with causes than effects.” Excellence is “a condition produced by the convergence of seven irreplaceable supporting factors. Furthermore, it is a term that could be applied equally to an individual, an idea, or an organization.”

“The first aspect of excellence is authenticity. To be excellent, an individual, idea, or organization must be tinged with genuineness, goodness, truth, and honesty.

“The second aspect of excellence is credibility. The individual, idea, or organization must convey confidence or believability.

“The third aspect of excellence is expectancy. It was once said that, ‘No one ever rose to low expectations.’ Excellence holds the highest level of expectations that the individual, idea, or organization is capable of manifesting for itself at a given point in time. Excellence is, therefore, a relative condition that is concerned primarily with the next step ahead—the next goal.

“The fourth aspect of excellence is competency. The required resources must be present—not simply material resources, such as adequate funding, but also individuals with the necessary knowledge, skills, and talents.

“The fifth aspect of excellence, synchronicity, concerns being in the right place at the right time with the right person with the right skills, the right idea, and the right organization.

“The sixth aspect of excellence is functionality. The individual must have a strong work ethic; there must be discipline and a capacity for hard work. For an idea to be excellent, there must be the potential for implementation today. Excellence in organizations involves a structure that produces a creative tension between the individuals and the ideas and services they are implementing.

“The seventh aspect of excellence is continuity. This concept is best illustrated by the great philosopher Aristotle who stated, ‘Excellence is not an act. It is a habit.’ For an individual, an idea, or an organization to be excellent, there must be continuous progressive movement into the future.”¹

In his book *Good to Great*², author Jim Collins posits that the transformation from being good to being great is a process of buildup followed by breakthrough. This process consists of three broad stages:

- Getting disciplined people into the organization;
- Getting the disciplined people to use disciplined thought; and
- Getting the disciplined people to take disciplined actions.

Collins goes on to say:

“...[I] believe that it is no harder to build something great than to build something good. It might be statistically more *rare* to reach greatness, but it does not require more suffering than perpetuating mediocrity.”³

Collins states that seeking greatness requires passion—“doing something you care that much about, and you believe in its purpose deeply enough, [that] it is impossible to imagine *not* trying to make it great.”⁴

In summary, the purpose of the *Excellence by Design* protocol is to assist and provide guidance to those educators who believe passionately in the need to create a better future for their students and seek a framework and a process to make that happen.

The Self-Study Guide

The *Excellence by Design* self-study guide was prepared with two audiences in mind: 1) the group of stakeholders (often called the Planning Team) that will oversee and monitor the school’s growth and improvement efforts and 2) the Internal Coordinators that will coordinate the self-study and accreditation process.

¹ Excerpted from “Defining Excellence” by M. Edward Krenson, Ed.D., Senior Vice President, Eastern Region, AdvancED, published in *AdvancED Source*, Winter Spring 2007, published by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement. Used with the permission of the publisher.

² Jim Collins. *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...And Others Don't.* (2001). New York: HarperBusiness.

³ Collins, p. 205

⁴ Collins, p. 208

The *Guide* provides both the philosophical underpinnings of *Excellence by Design* and the practical direction needed for the school to engage in the self-study and planning process and the educational growth and improvement activities required by the protocol. The *Guide* will also assist the school as it prepares for the Validation Team's onsite evaluation visit.

Excellence by Design focuses the school's work on its most important responsibility—producing student performance at the levels expected of it by the school's community of stakeholders. In this era of accountability, student performance is and should be the primary focus of educators and schools and their communities. As such, the *Excellence by Design* protocol seeks to change the traditional culture of many schools from focusing primarily on the building blocks for growth and improvement (facilities, program, services, etc.) to focusing on the results desired in terms of student performance.

In order to change a culture, education leaders must keep the attention of the entire school community focused on answering the five questions below. In the *Excellence by Design* process, the Planning Team will be guided to develop answers to the following questions:

- #1: By the time they have experienced our full educational program and services, what should our students know, and how should they be able to use what they know? What content, skills, and work habits should be the priorities for learning? What attitudes, qualities or characteristics should our students demonstrate?
- #2: How well should students perform the desired outcomes, and what does excellent performance look like?
- #3: How will we measure and evaluate our students' performance in multiple ways?
- #4: How well do our students currently perform? What is the actual quality of their work?
- #5: What must we do to improve student performance?

In setting a course for continuous improvement in student and organizational performance, schools and their communities must study not only what the existing data tell them about their students' present performance, but they must also set clear targets for what they want student performance to be in the future. Maintaining a focus on

these five questions is essential to a successful continuous improvement process and is a “habit of mind” that must be cultivated and nurtured by the school’s leaders and those leading the growth and improvement efforts. Too often schools find themselves working on curriculum and instructional materials and engaging in professional development before they have clearly decided what their students should know, how they should use their content knowledge, process skills, and work habits, and what the quality of their performance should be.

The *Excellence by Design* protocol reflects ongoing changes taking place in the field of accreditation and educational improvement. These changes affect the processes used, the products produced by accredited schools, the materials they prepare for improvement purposes, the style and focus of the peer review visit, and the role of the Planning Teams.

The *Excellence by Design* protocol is designed to be compatible with local, state, and federal school improvement and strategic planning requirements, including those of the No Child Left Behind Act for public schools. There is a high level of compatibility with any improvement requirement that focuses primarily on increasing the level and quality of student performance. By using this protocol, schools will be able to fulfill the improvement and planning requirements of their various governing agencies and, simultaneously, obtain accreditation. In addition, many schools have found that the improvement processes inherent in *Excellence by Design* help them to sharpen the focus of their improvement efforts. The external evaluation of such efforts provided by a team of evaluators from the Middle States Association is another distinct value added by the protocol that is not provided by most improvement models.

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Should the school have any questions about the interpretation or use of the materials, they are encouraged to contact the appropriate Middle States office:

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COMPONENTS OF THE *EXCELLENCE BY DESIGN* PROTOCOL

STANDARDS FOR ACCREDITATION	PLANNING ETHIC	PLAN FOR GROWTH AND IMPROVEMENT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Philosophy/Mission ▪ Governance and Leadership ▪ School Improvement Planning ▪ Finances ▪ Facilities ▪ School Climate and Organization ▪ Health and Safety ▪ Educational Program ▪ Assessment and Evidence of Student Learning ▪ Student Services ▪ Student Life and Student Activities ▪ Information Resources and Technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A Planning Team of the School's Community of Stakeholders ▪ Internal Coordinators ▪ Role of the School's Leadership ▪ Plan for Institutionalizing the Plan for Growth and Improvement ▪ Plan for Communication and Awareness ▪ Plan for Periodic Reviews of the Plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mission ▪ Beliefs ▪ Profile of Graduates ▪ Context of the School ▪ Profile of Student Performance ▪ Profile of Organizational Capacity ▪ External Scan Factors ▪ 3, 4, or 5 Measurable Student Performance/Organizational Capacity Objectives ▪ Action Plans

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

To what does a school commit when it selects the Excellence by Design protocol?

By choosing *Excellence by Design* as its accreditation protocol, the school must make several commitments:

Focusing Primarily on Student Performance and Growth

The school commits itself to focusing its improvement efforts on growth and improvement in student performance and the institution's capacity to affect that growth and improvement. Improvement efforts are aimed at targeted growth and improvement in student learning, student performance, student results, and organizational capacity.

Developing a Culture of Accountability in Student Performance

The school commits itself to being accountable to its students and its community of stakeholders for the results obtained through its educational program and services as expressed in its student performance and organizational capacity objectives.

Developing a Planning Ethic

The school commits itself to developing a planning ethic that provides the school and its community of stakeholders with the capacity, the will, and the systematic structures and processes required to achieve the results its desires as expressed in its Mission and Profile of Graduates.

A planning ethic means that planning for growth and improvement becomes part of what the school and its stakeholders do as much as teaching, and providing programs, resources, services, and activities. A planning ethic requires continuous clarification of the school's unique Mission, Beliefs, Profile of Graduates, and student and organizational performance goals. It requires that all of its processes are vision-driven. And it requires that the school is action-oriented by developing and implementing long-term, strategic action plans that integrate programs, services, facilities, and support to address the school's growth objectives.

Striving for Continuous Improvement

The school commits itself to never being satisfied with the results it achieves in terms of student performance and continuously setting the bar higher when the desired results are achieved.

Involving Its Community of Stakeholders

The school commits itself to involving a broad spectrum of the its stakeholders in identifying the Mission, Beliefs, Profile of Graduates, objectives for growth and improvement in student performance, and action plans to achieve the objectives. Stakeholders are also involved in overseeing implementation of action plans and monitoring achievement of the objectives.

When a school selects the *Excellence by Design* protocol, it must endorse these five commitments. All levels of the organization, including the school's entire community of stakeholders, must commit to working together toward the implementation of the growth and improvement plan developed in the *Accreditation for Growth* process.

What are the components of the Excellence by Design protocol?

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the specific components of the *Excellence by Design* protocol. First, the school must demonstrate that its adherence to the MSA Standards for Accreditation. It is expected that representative stakeholders will be involved in determining how well the school meets these standards.

Second, a team representing the school's community of stakeholders must develop a plan to improve areas of student performance and organizational capacity that have been identified as priorities for growth and improvement. This plan either should be the school's strategic plan or a component of a larger strategic plan. The plan must contain the following components:

- Mission
- Beliefs
- Profile of Graduates that describes the desired attributes and achievements that students are expected to exhibit upon graduation/exiting the final grade of the school
- Three, four, or five measurable performance objectives approved by Middle States. At least two of the objectives must focus on growing and improving areas of student performance. The remaining objective(s) may focus either on student

- Action plans that detail what the school and its community of stakeholders will do to achieve those objectives.

Finally, the institution must put into place a planning ethic and process that will ensure the school has the capacity, the will, and the systems to implement its action plans. The planning process typically includes two or more educators serving as coordinators of the self-study and accreditation process, and a team of stakeholders that is responsible for developing and monitoring the Plan for Growth and Improvement, establishing procedures for communicating planning activities to the community of stakeholders and obtaining the stakeholders' ongoing input into the plan, ensuring that the plan is reviewed periodically, establishing one or more teams responsible for developing the action plans, and teams responsible for implementing, reviewing, and revising the action plans.

How does Excellence by Design differ from other accreditation protocols?

Middle States provides its member schools with a number of options for the protocol they will use for accreditation. Therefore, an important question to ask is, "What are the major differences between other accreditation protocols and *Excellence by Design*?" A chart comparing each of the Middle States protocols is included as Appendix B of this *Guide*.

How will our Plan for Growth and Improvement relate to the strategic plan of our parent organization?

When a school is a part of a larger system, the larger system (e.g., a school district or diocesan/archdiocesan school system or corporation) often has a strategic plan in place. When such a plan exists, it is important that the school's Plan for Growth and Improvement is consistent with and complementary of the larger system's plan.

Why does Middle States think strategic planning is important to school growth and improvement?

Artful and effective planning can engender growth and improvement in educational outcomes in at least four meaningful and significant ways. First, effective planning involves the school and its community of stakeholders in an *inductive* process that allows varied issues, concerns, hopes, and aspirations to be raised. It can open up

boundaries and create new vistas, offering a forum for new, never-dreamed-of ideas to surface.

Second, effective planning begins with the development of a vision for the future and follows with self-evaluation and collection of data to determine how close the school is to achieving its vision. A vision-driven process fosters commitment and ownership, and ownership is a powerful force for educational growth and improvement.

Third, effective planning requires a school to focus on results first. In order to determine how to accomplish an objective, the school must first decide exactly what it wants to achieve. The result of a well-taught class is not that the instruction was completed appropriately, but that following completion of instruction, learning occurred. Instruction is the means, learning is the result, and learning is reflected in student performance.

A fourth characteristic of effective planning is that it is continuous. Change is ubiquitous and likewise planning based on the results obtained should be ongoing.

What is the difference between long range planning, comprehensive planning, and strategic planning?

Long range planning assumes that the future is fixed and already known; planning is not based on a vision of what the future might or could be. The locus of control in long range planning is often external to the organization.

Two assumptions underlie comprehensive planning. The first assumption is that *existing systems* can be perfected. Secondly, it is assumed that these systems deserve to be perfected. In comprehensive planning, incremental changes are made to existing systems.

In strategic planning, the locus of control is inside the organization because planning is based on the organization's vision of a preferred future. Strategic planning assumes that as a human organization, the institution has the ability to exercise control over external factors and can create the future. Strategic planning is grounded in how the organization sees itself and how it sees the world. It is about creating the desired reality and going about building that future.

Does Middle States endorse a particular strategic planning approach?

Middle States does not endorse a particular approach to strategic planning. As long as the key commitments (see above) are met, any well designed strategic planning process may be used.

What happens if the institution is unable to achieve its growth and improvement objectives fully during the seven-year accreditation term?

First and foremost, Middle States is looking for evidence of growth and improvement in student performance. It is critical that the school makes a good faith attempt to address fully its objectives and to implement the action plans upon which the school's accreditation is based. The development of student performance objectives with reachable, yet lofty targets requires a delicate balance. Middle States wants to see schools develop objectives that challenge them and make them stretch to achieve them.

Besides looking for student performance growth, Middle States is also expecting to see growth in the organization's capacity to produce the results it desires in terms of student performance. Therefore, *Excellence by Design* permits the school to develop organizational capacity objectives to address areas in need of growth and improvement when the school is not achieving the results in student performance expressed in its Mission and Profile of Graduates.

All of this is taken into consideration when the Commission makes its accreditation decision. A school's accreditation would be in jeopardy if the school did not achieve its objectives, did not try to determine why and revise its action plans accordingly, and/or had not made a good faith effort to implement its action plans.

May a school that is a candidate for accreditation choose the Excellence by Design protocol?

Yes, a candidate institution may select *Excellence by Design*. It provides an excellent framework for a very detailed self-study and self-assessment of all aspects of the school that must contribute to the school's achieving the levels of student performance it desires.

Are there progress reports to be submitted to Middle States between Validation Team visits?

Because the focus of *Excellence by Design* is on continuous review, the school is expected to conduct its own periodic reviews of its action plans and progress being made toward achieving its objectives. Records of these reviews should be maintained, but they are not provided to Middle States.

Instead, *Excellence by Design* requires the school to submit a comprehensive report to Middle States at the mid-point of the accreditation term. This report is described fully in Chapter 14, Implementing the Plan for Growth and Improvement.

Can Excellence by Design be helpful to a school that is experiencing many changes, has frequent turnovers in staff and/or leadership, or has a transient student body?

Yes. All of these situations might be ideal for using the *Excellence by Design* protocol, because it can help to the school to develop stability in its focus and direction in the midst of change. Many schools find it provides an appropriate process to ensure that the school maintains its focus on its Plan for Growth and Improvement in student performance and organizational capacity even as it experiences rapid changes in staff, students, and/or leadership.

Because the Plan for Growth and Improvement required by the protocol is developed and, thereby, owned by the school's community of stakeholders, the Plan can serve as a stabilizing force, especially when there is a change in the leadership of the school. Instead of selecting a new leader that is expected to act out *his/her* vision of a preferred future for school, schools with a Plan for Growth and Improvement developed through the *Excellence by Design* protocol will look for a new leader who has the best knowledge, skills, and ideas to lead the school community in implementing *its* plan for a preferred future.

Can Excellence by Design be used by Pre K-12 and multi-site organizations?

A Pre K-12 organization can use the *Excellence by Design* protocol to accredit its schools. See Chapter 2: Options for Multi-Site Institutions.

May a charter school or a school with a unique student population use Excellence by Design?

The flexibility of the *Excellence by Design* protocol makes it particularly adaptable for charter schools and schools that serve unique student populations. This accreditation option facilitates planning structures and improvement within the specific context of the school.

What are the costs associated with accreditation using the Excellence by Design protocol?

The Middle States Association has made a concerted effort to minimize the costs associated with obtaining and maintaining accreditation by the Association.

The costs associated with the visit of a Middle States Validation Team have been reduced, because team membership is now typically five to seven members. Costs for the Team are expenses for travel to and from the school (typically by car involving mileage and tolls), a single room in a hotel/motel for three nights for each Team member, and breakfast and dinner for three days.

A chart the institution can use to determine the costs of obtaining and maintaining its accreditation may be obtained from the Commission.

The Structure and Organization of the Self-Study

The framework and criteria for this self-examination and self-assessment are provided by:

- The 12 Middle States Standards for Accreditation, which are qualitative statements that reflect research-based best practices for schools. The Middle States Standards are recognized and accepted by educators and educational communities throughout the world as descriptors of what a quality school looks like and achieves.
- Indicators of Quality for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment reflecting the quality of these functions in components of the school's educational program—the disciplines or subject areas.
- Criteria for effective planning for growing and improving student performance and the organization's capacity to produce the performance it desires.

This *Self-Study Guide* sets forth the requirements and processes for conducting the self-study that leads to accreditation. The *Guide* is structured and organized in a logical and purposeful manner. An outline of the self-study and accreditation process follows:

PHASE I: OVERVIEW OF THE SELF-STUDY AND ACCREDITATION PROCESS

How should the Community organize itself and its stakeholders to conduct the self-study? Who should be responsible for leading and coordinating the self-study process? What should be the timeline for completing the self-study?

Phase I is completed in the following six steps:

- Step 1: The Head of School appoints two or more members of the school's staff to serve as the Internal Coordinators of the Planning Team for the self-study and accreditation process (Chapter 1, p. 1-14).
- Step 2: The Head of School and the Internal Coordinators determine the composition of the Planning Team so that it reflects the school's community of stakeholders and appoint the Planning Team, the first task of which is to organize the self-study and the processes that will lead to the Plan for Growth and Improvement in student performance and organizational capacity (Chapter 1, p. 1-18).

The Head of School determines the role of the school's leadership in the self-study and accreditation process (Chapter 1, p. 1-22).

The Planning Team conducts steps 3 through 6.

- Step 3: Develop an understanding of the importance of and a plan for institutionalizing a planning ethic (Chapter 1, p. 1-24).
- Step 4: Develop a plan for institutionalizing the Plan for Growth and Improvement, including
 - A system for providing the resources needed to implement the action plans;

- A system for monitoring implementation of the action plans; and
- A system for ensuring that the assessments designated for measuring the performance objectives are administered and that the results are collected, analyzed, and used to determine the efficacy of the action plans (Chapter 1, p. 1-27).
- Step 5: Develop a plan for communication and awareness, including:
 - A process for keeping the school’s stakeholders involved in and informed about implementation of the action plans and achievement of the objectives.
 - A plan for celebrating the school’s successes in moving toward achievement of its objectives (Chapter 1, p. 1-31).
- Step 6: Develop a plan for periodic reviews of the Plan for Growth and Improvement (Chapter 1, p. 1-35).

Note for Multi-Site Schools:

The instructions in Chapter 1 address single-site schools specifically. *Excellence by Design* may also be used for self-study and accreditation by multi-site schools. Multi-site schools include independent schools with lower, middle, and upper schools. They also include school districts that include more than one school.

Basically, the organization and conduct of the self-study and accreditation process for multi-site schools is the same as for a single-site school. However, there are several options for the multi-site schools/districts to consider so that the process aligns well with the unique structure and needs of such schools. These options are addressed in Chapter 2, Options for PreK-12 Schools and School Systems.

PHASE II: LAYING THE FOUNDATION

What is our vision for a better future for the children of our school? What beliefs or will guide our journey? What will our students have to know, be able to do, and to demonstrate for us to achieve our mission?

The Planning Team conducts Steps 1 through 3.

- Step 1: Develop or review/revise the school’s Mission to describe the preferred vision for the school and its students (Chapter 4).
- Step 2: Develop or review/revise the Beliefs to describe the core values that will guide strategic and day-to-day decision-making within the school (Chapter 4).
- Step 3: Develop or review/revise a Profile of Graduates to specify what students of the school are expected to know and be able to do with what they know, and what qualities and characteristics they are expected to demonstrate upon completion of the school’s educational program (Chapter 4).

PHASE III: DEVELOPING A PROFILE OF THE SCHOOL AND ITS COMMUNITY

Where are we in terms of student performance and organizational capacity now in relation to where we want to be?

- Step 1: The Planning Team appoints committees of the stakeholders to develop the Profile of the School and Its Community.

The committees appointed to develop the Profile of the School and Its Community conducts Steps 2 through 3.

- Step 2: Develop the Profile of the School and Its Community, which includes the following elements:
 - The Context of the School. A description of the context in which the school exists, including information about the community(ies) it serves; the history and traditions of the community and its schools; events and trends in the school that are having an effect on the school’s ability to achieve its mission; descriptions of the current student population and the school’s staff (Chapter 5).
 - Profile of Student Performance. A description of the school’s current student performance using data from multiple assessments of student performance for use by the Planning Team to compare current student performance to the preferred

student performance expressed in the school's Mission and Profile of Graduates (Chapter 6).

- Profile of Organizational Capacity: A description of the school's capacity to produce the levels of student performance expressed in school's Mission and Profile of Graduates by conducting a self-assessment of the school's adherence to the expectations of quality expressed in the Middle States Standards for Accreditation and their Indicators of Quality. The school may choose to conduct the self-assessment using the Standards Survey provided by MSA or by self-assessment committees depending on which process best meets the needs of the school (Chapter 7).
 - External Factors. Identify the current and future factors external to the school that will likely have an impact on the school's ability to achieve its Mission and produce the outcomes expressed in the Profile of Graduates (Chapter 8).
- Step 3: Present the Profile of the School and Its Community to the Planning Team.

PHASE IV: IDENTIFYING PRIORITIES

What are the gaps between what we want our students to be able to demonstrate and where we are now? What are the root causes of these gaps? What do we have to do to eliminate the gaps?

The Planning Team conducts Steps 1 through 6.

- Step 1: Based on the current student performance data in the Context of the School (Chapter 5) and the Profile of Student Performance (Chapter 6), determine the areas of the student performance most in need of growth and improvement for the students to meet the expectations for performance expressed in the school's Mission and Profile of Graduates (Chapter 4).
- Step 2: Based on the results of the self-assessment of adherence to the Middle States Standards for Accreditation as shown in the Profile of Organizational Capacity (Chapter 7) and the

results of the External Scan (Chapter 8), determine the areas of the school's capacity most in need of growth and improvement for the school to produce the student performance expressed in its Mission and Profile of Graduates (Chapter 4).

- Step 3: Develop three, four, or five measurable objectives to address the areas of student performance and/or organizational capacity most in need of growth and improvement. At least two objectives must focus on growing and improving areas of student performance (Chapter 9).
- Step 4: For each objective, identify multiple assessments to measure achievement of the objective. Whenever appropriate, use disaggregated data (Chapter 9).
- Step 5: Set challenging, seven-year performance targets for growth and improvement for each objective either in the form of pre-determined levels of performance or for growth in performance over time (Chapter 9).
- Step 6: Obtain consensus from the school's stakeholders and build a critical mass of support for the objectives identified as representing the most important priorities for growth and improvement (Chapter 9).

PHASE V: DEVELOPING A PLAN

What do we have to do better and/or differently to achieve the objectives we have set for ourselves? How can we best commit our finite time, energy, and resources in reasonable and implementable action plans? How can we ensure that we are using all of the creativity, intelligence, knowledge, and experience of our stakeholders to create plans that will lead to the likelihood we will achieve our objectives?

The Planning Team conducts steps 1 and 2.

- Step 1: Appoint committees to conduct a self-assessment of how well components of the educational program related to the student performance objective determine how the curriculum, instructional practices, and assessment practices

- Step 2: Appoint an Action Plan Team for each student performance and organizational capacity objective to develop comprehensive seven-year action plans to achieve the objectives (Chapter 11).

The Action Plan Teams conduct steps 3 through 5.

- Step 3: Determine the root causes or reasons why the gaps between desired and actual student performance and organizational capacity exist (Chapter 11).
- Step 4: Develop seven-year action plans to achieve the performance and capacity objectives based on:
 - The root causes identified
 - Current best practices within the school
 - Best practices identified in the research and literature
 - Areas in need of improvement identified in the self-assessment of adherence to the Standards for Accreditation
 - Areas in need of improvement identified in the self-assessment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices (Chapter 11).
- Step 5: Present the action plans to the Planning Team for approval.

The Planning Team conducts Step 6:

- Step 6: Appoint Implementation Teams to oversee and monitor implementation of the action plans.

PHASE VI: HOSTING THE ACCREDITATION VISIT

Can we provide evidence to external reviewers through documentation, interviews, and observation that validates the findings of our self-study? Do our stakeholders understand the findings of our self-study so they can communicate them to the Validation Team?

The Planning Team and the Internal Coordinators conduct Step 1.

- Step 1: In cooperation with the Middle States Association, plan for and host a visit by a Middle States Validation Team that will make a recommendation to the Commission whether the school meets the Middle States Standards for Accreditation and the requirements of the *Excellence by Design* protocol for planning for growth and improvement in student performance and organizational capacity (Chapter 12).

PHASE VII: THE ACCREDITATION ACTION

Has the school conducted a thorough and complete self-study that has involved the school's community stakeholders and that has led it to identify priorities for growth and improvement in student performance and organizational capacity? Do the stakeholders know about, understand, and support those priorities? Does the school meet the Middle States Standards for Accreditation? Does the school's Plan for Growth and Improvement in student performance and organizational capacity meet the requirements of the Middle States Association? Has the school positioned itself well to do what it says it wants to do and achieve?

Phase VII is accomplished in the following six steps:

The school conducts Step 1.

- Step 1: Under the direction of the Head of School, the school reviews a draft of the Validation Team's report for correction of errors of fact (Chapter 13).

The Chair of the Validation Team conducts Step 2.

- Step 2: After the school reviews the draft report for correction of errors of fact, it returns report with any corrections to the Chair of the Validation Team. The Chair makes any necessary corrections and forwards the report to the Middle States Association (Chapter 13).

The Middle States Association conducts Steps 3 through 5.

- Step 3: After the Middle States Association receives the Validation Team’s report, it submits the report and the Team’s accreditation recommendation to the four-step review process (Chapter 13).
- Step 4: After the report and accreditation recommendation have gone through the review process, they are submitted to the Middle States Association for an accreditation action (Chapter 13).
- Step 5: The Middle States Association notifies the school of its accreditation action (Chapter 13).

The Planning Team conducts Step 6.

- Step 6: The Planning Team shares the report of the Validation Team and the Association’s accreditation action with its community of stakeholders.

PHASE VIII: IMPLEMENTING THE PLAN FOR GROWTH AND IMPROVEMENT

Can we demonstrate that we can do what we say we want to do to improve performance? Have we put the organizational elements and systems in place to implement our action plans faithfully? Can we monitor implementation of our plans and make adjustments based on the results we achieve? Are we becoming a learning organization? Do we have the will to proceed toward achieving our goals?

The Planning Team together with the Head of School and the Internal Coordinators conduct steps 1 through 9.

- Step 1: Under the direction of the Head of School, take the necessary actions to respond to the findings and recommendations of the Validation Team and/or any stipulations to the accreditation awarded by the Middle States Association.
- Step 2: Ensure that the action plans for achieving the student and organizational capacity objectives are implemented.
- Step 3: Implement the system for monitoring implementation of the action plans and progress toward achieving the school’s objectives.

- Step 4: Conduct periodic formal and systematic reviews of progress being made in implementing the action plans. Based on the reviews, the Planning Team directs that adjustments be made to the plans to respond to the results of the assessments being used to measure the performance and capacity objectives.
- Step 5: Maintain communication and awareness activities, keeping the school's stakeholders informed about the implementation of the action plans and progress being made toward achieving the goals. Maintain the critical mass of support for the goals and the plans to achieve them.
- Step 6: Lead celebrations of all successes publicly.
- Step 7: Two and one-half years after the award of accreditation, submit a Mid-Point Report to the Middle States Association documenting :
 - Progress made in implementing the Plan for Growth and Improvement and in achieving the performance goals.
 - Continued adherence to the Middle States Standards for Accreditation.

Three years after the award of accreditation and based on the contents of the school's Mid-Point Report, if the Commission determines it is necessary host a visitor who will seek to confirm that the school is living up to the commitments that are the basis of the school's accreditation. Respond to any recommendations made by the visitor.
- Step 8: Meet all of the requirements to maintain the school's accreditation included in the school's Official Notification of Accreditation letter.
- Step 9: At the beginning of the sixth year of the accreditation term, conduct a new self-study in preparation for reaccreditation.

SPECIAL NOTE FOR SCHOOLS THAT DELIVER ALL OR PART OF THEIR EDUCATION PROGRAM BY A DISTANCE MODALITY

Schools that deliver all or part of their educational program by a distance modality and that seek accreditation by the Middle States Commission on Secondary Schools must meet the same accreditation requirements as all other schools:

- Comply with the Standards for Accreditation, and
- Meet the requirements of the *Excellence by Design* protocol.

Therefore, the self-study and evaluation process outlined in this *Guide* is the same for distance education schools as for all other schools. However, there may be some differences in how distance education schools conduct the self-study, especially in how such schools involve their stakeholders in the self-study when those stakeholders are not present in a physical location. While this may present a challenge, it has been found that such schools may employ many of the same means that are used to deliver the education program—chat rooms, web meetings, listservs, e-mail, phone conferences, etc.

There also may be some differences in the types of evidence distance education schools present to demonstrate that they are in adherence with the Standards for Accreditation. The Standards are written in such a way that there are options for the ways in which schools can demonstrate that they are in adherence. This may be especially appropriate for distance education schools.

Finally, there are some differences in the manner in which the evaluation visit is conducted. These differences are described in Chapter 12: Undergoing an External Evaluation by an MSA Team of Educator Peers.

Options in Conducting the Self-Study

A significant feature of the *Excellence by Design* self-study and accreditation protocol by which it differs from other Middle States protocols is that it provides the school with the ability to tailor the self-study process to meet the specific organizational structure of the school and to ensure that the self-study process provides real value by meeting the

specific needs of the school in planning for growth and improvement of student performance and organizational capacity.

Throughout the self-study process, the school and the Planning Team are called upon to decide how to fit the self-study process to the specific organization and the needs of the individual school. For example, in Phase I, the school has the following decisions to make:

- If our school is a preK-12 school or part of a PreK-12 school district or system, will we seek accreditation as part of the system or as an individual school?
- How many Internal Coordinators should there be? Who should serve as Internal Coordinators?
- How large will the Planning Team be?
- What stakeholder groups should be represented on the Planning Team if it is to be truly reflective of our school's community of stakeholders?
- What role will the head of the school/principal play?

Excellence by Design also provides a number of options for the actual element of the self-study so that, once again, it can ensure that the self-study process provides real value by meeting the specific needs of the school in planning for growth and improvement of student performance and organizational capacity.

For example, in Phase III, the school may conduct the self-assessment of how well it meets the 12 Middle States Standards for Accreditation by committees, by surveys, or a combination of both. In Phase IV, the school may decide that it will conduct a self-assessment of the Indicators of Quality for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment for only those components of the educational program most directly connected to its student performance objectives or for all components of the educational program.

COMPARISON OF ELEMENTS OF MSA SELF-STUDY AND ACCREDITATION PROTOCOLS

	<i>Accreditation for Growth</i>	<i>Excellence by Design</i>	<i>Reflections on Standards of Quality</i>
FOCUS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Setting measurable objectives and developing action plans to grow and improve areas of student performance ▪ Meeting the 12 Middle States Standards for Accreditation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Establishing an ethic of planning for growth and improvement in student performance ▪ Setting measurable objectives and developing action plans to 1) grow and improve areas of student performance and 2) improve the organization's capacity to achieve the levels of student performance it desires ▪ Developing an understanding of the antecedents for the current levels of performance and capacity ▪ Meeting the 12 Middle States Standards for Accreditation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Meeting the 12 Middle States Standards for Accreditation ▪ Meeting the Middle States Indicators of Quality for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment for each curricular area ▪ Planning for improvement in student performance and organizational capacity
STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT IN SELF-STUDY AND PLANNING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Broad stakeholder involvement including the staff, administration, students, parents, the board, community members, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Broad stakeholder involvement including the staff, administration, students, parents, the board, community members, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Primarily staff driven with some involvement of the governance ▪ Other stakeholder such as parents and students may be included.

	<i>Accreditation for Growth</i>	<i>Excellence by Design</i>	<i>Reflections on Standards of Quality</i>
STRUCTURE OF SELF-STUDY AND PLANNING PROCESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Stakeholder Planning Team ▪ Action Plan Teams (optional) ▪ Implementation Teams (optional) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Stakeholder Planning Team ▪ Action Plan Teams (optional) ▪ Implementation Teams (optional) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Steering Committee ▪ Subcommittee for each MSA Standard ▪ Subcommittee for each curricular area ▪ Subcommittee to develop improvement plan
COMPONENTS OF THE PROTOCOL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Planning Process ▪ Plan for Growth and Improvement, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Mission ○ Beliefs ○ Profile of Graduates ○ Measurable objectives ○ Action Plans ▪ Self-Assessment of Adherence to MSA Standards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Planning Process ▪ Context of the School ▪ Profile of the Community ▪ Profile of Student Performance ▪ Profile of Organizational Capacity (results of Self-Assessment of Adherence to MSA Standards) ▪ Plan for Growth and Improvement, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Mission ○ Beliefs ○ Profile of Graduates ○ Measurable objectives ○ Self-Assessment of Adherence to Indicators of Quality for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment ○ Gap Analysis/Analysis of Root Causes ○ Action Plans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Three, four, or five measurable objectives ▪ Action plans ▪ Self-Assessment of Adherence to MSA Standards

	<i>Accreditation for Growth</i>	<i>Excellence by Design</i>	<i>Reflections on Standards of Quality</i>
MEASURABLE OBJECTIVES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Two, three, or four measurable objectives for areas of student performance identified as priorities for growth and improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Three, four, or five measurable objectives for areas identified as priorities for growth and improvement in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Student performance (minimum of two) ○ Organizational capacity (optional) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Three, four, or five measurable objectives for areas identified as priorities for growth and improvement in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Student performance (minimum of two) ▪ Organizational capacity (optional)
MEASURABILITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ All objectives must be measurable using multiple assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ All objectives must be measurable using multiple assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ All objectives must be measurable and should use multiple assessments
TECHNICAL REVIEW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ All objectives must be reviewed by MSA staff and determined to meet the MSA technical criteria 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ All objectives must be reviewed by MSA staff and determined to meet the MSA technical criteria 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ All objectives must be reviewed by MSA staff and determined to meet the MSA technical criteria
EXTERNAL PEER EVALUATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Validation Team onsite visit (typically five members). ▪ Visit of three and one-half days 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Validation Team onsite visit (typically five members). ▪ Visit of three and one-half days 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Visiting Team onsite visit (typically 10-15 members). ▪ Visit of three and one-half days
TERM OF ACCREDITATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Seven years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Seven years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Seven years (effective with schools entering self-study on or after September 1, 2008).
ACCREDITATION MAINTENANCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mid-Term Report in third year of accreditation ▪ Mid-Term Visit as determined by MSA staff or requested by school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mid-Term Report in third year of accreditation ▪ Mid-Term Visit as determined by MSA staff or requested by school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mid-Term Report in third year of accreditation ▪ Mid-Term Visit as determined by MSA staff or requested by school