

WASC Supplement for Schools with Online Learning as the Primary Delivery System



**Supplement to WASC Self-Study Documents
2008 Pilot Edition**

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Acknowledgements	1
Focus on Learning Accreditation Process for Online Schools	3
Public and Charter Online Schools using WASC/CDE Focus on Learning	3
Private and Independent Online Schools using WASC Focus on Learning.....	5
APPENDIX: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR ONLINE SCHOOLS	
A. Online Schools: Basic Questions, Expectations, and Best Practices	A-1
B. Growing by Degrees: Online Education in the United States	A-2
C. NACOL National Standards of Quality for Online Courses	A-3
D. Southern Regional Education Board's Elements of Quality Assurance for Online Learning.....	A-5

WASC Supplement for Schools with Online Learning as the Primary Delivery System

Introduction

The Accrediting Commission for Schools of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) has created this pilot edition *WASC Supplement for Schools with Online Learning as the Primary Delivery System* to be used by schools that use online learning as the primary delivery system. The *Focus on Learning* protocols will continue to be the primary process for these schools. Online schools participating in the *Focus on Learning* self-study process should respond to the criteria guide questions found in this document and include their responses to these questions in each criteria category section of Chapter IV of their self-study report.

This supplement includes recommendations and suggestions for the effective delivery of quality education through online systems for schools participating in the WASC self-study process. The process is designed to expand and strengthen the work and potential for improvement in schools that are engaged in online delivery of instruction and to provide additional balance and insight for online school teachers and administrators.

Today's students have grown up with the Internet and are both comfortable with, and thrive in, an environment that features a highly communicative environment rich in technology and interactive multimedia. Online learning has increasingly become a natural and effective means for learning and many schools now offer supplemental online delivery, particularly for coursework that would not be available otherwise. This document is intended for the growing number of schools that have taken a full online cyber approach that expects a significant portion, if not all, coursework to be completed utilizing online technology.

Acknowledgements

WASC acknowledges the following organizations for providing material for this document:

- **North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL):** In 2006, a number of online schools and programs* commissioned a report that focused on the practices and challenges of online learning. That report, *The State of Online Learning in California: A Look at Current K-12 Policies and Practices*, provided the foundation for a subsequent national report, *A National Primer on K-12 Online Learning*, published by NACOL.
- **Southern Regional Education Board (SREB):** Standards for online schools and systems were developed by the Southern Regional Education Board in Atlanta, Georgia. Those standards were also adopted by, and have become the NACOL National Standards for Quality for Online Courses. The Southern Regional Education Board has authorized the adaptation of these standards for purposes of this supplement.

* Organizations providing support for *The State of Online Learning in California* report included the University of California College Prep Online program, eScholar Academy, Institute for Computer Technology, Rainbow Advanced Institute for Learning Digital Charter High School and the California Virtual Academies.

- **National Council for Private School Accreditation (NCPSA):** An additional information source for this supplement comes from the National Council for Private School Accreditation's document entitled *Best Practices for Distance Education in K-12 Schools*.

Focus on Learning Accreditation Process for Online Schools

The *Focus on Learning* protocols utilized in the WASC comprehensive school accreditation self-study process are the primary protocols for online schools. For the most part the basic WASC and WASC/CDE criteria, designed to support effective student learning, are applicable to the online school approach.

WASC Criteria Guide Questions for Online Schools

The following criteria guide questions should be responded to in addition to those found in the *WASC Focus on Learning* protocols.

Public and Charter Online Schools using WASC/CDE Focus on Learning

A. Organization: Vision and Purpose, Governance, Leadership and Staff, and Resources

1. How well does the school provide adequate technology to avoid the disparity in the availability of computers and Internet access among students?
2. What are the academic qualifications of those presenting, supporting, and managing the program?
3. How is professional development provided for teachers and is it aligned to identified gaps in student learning?
4. How is the expert use of technology ensured with teachers?
5. What strategies do teachers use to motivate students and to meet individual differences in learning styles?
6. How are the needs of students with identified learning difficulties being met?
7. Does the school provide an induction opportunity for students to learn the basics of online instruction and learning?

B. Standards-based Student Learning: Curriculum

1. Are offline materials, including textbooks and hands-on materials used to complement the content delivered via the Internet?
2. Does online curriculum consistently meet and address State Academic Standards?
3. Does the delivery of curriculum involve a learning management system?
4. How does the school/provider give assurance in the areas of integrity, reliability, and security with outsourced services?
5. How does the online program involve the demonstration of such critical skills as analysis, comprehension, communication, and effective research?

C. Standards-based Student Learning: Instruction

1. What forms of communication ensure sufficient support from teachers for individual students?
2. If the course is asynchronous, are there timelines for completing coursework?
3. In what ways does teacher interaction support students to become more effective in thinking and learning?
4. Is a parent or other “learning coach” utilized to support and monitor student learning?
5. Are science labs provided through a virtual or on-site medium?
6. Is instructor response to student assignments timely?
7. Does the school pay adequate attention to pedagogical changes and subsequent professional development with constantly changing information technologies?

D. Standards-based Student Learning: Assessment and Accountability

1. How are online assessments utilized and are they graded electronically or by individual teachers?
2. How is final course mastery determined and who decides whether a student is prepared to move on to the next unit, course, or grade level?
3. How are state-mandated assessments and high school exit exams administered?
4. Are any assessments conducted in specific physical locations in a paper format?
5. How do teachers verify the authenticity of student work?
6. When proctoring is used, what are the procedures for selecting proctors, establishing student identity, assuring security of test instruments, administering the assessments, and assuring secure and prompt evaluations?

E. School Culture and Support for Student Personal and Academic Growth

1. How is the school addressing issues of socialization for students?
2. How does the school provide sufficient technical support for student hardware and software?
3. Are teachers actively communicating with students to determine special challenges and interests?
4. Does the institution’s budget plan provide for appropriate updating of the technologies employed?
5. When new software or systems are adopted, what processes are used to train teachers and students to use them effectively?
6. Is adequate help-desk support provided, and if so, for what time periods?
7. What information and/or advice do students receive about the nature of learning and the personal discipline required in an online environment?

Private and Independent Online Schools using WASC Focus on Learning

A. Organization for Student Learning

1. How well does the school provide adequate technology to avoid the disparity in the availability of computers and Internet access among students?
2. What are the academic qualifications of those presenting, supporting, and managing the program?
3. How is professional development provided for teachers and is it aligned to identified gaps in student learning?
4. How is the expert use of technology ensured with teachers?
5. What strategies do teachers use to motivate students and to meet individual differences in learning styles?
6. How are the needs of students with identified learning difficulties being met?
7. Does the school provide an induction opportunity for students to learn the basics of online instruction and learning?

B. Curriculum and Instruction

1. Are offline materials, including textbooks and hands-on materials used to complement the content delivered via the Internet?
2. Does online curriculum consistently meet and address State Academic Standards?
3. Does the delivery of curriculum involve a learning management system?
4. How does the school/provider give assurance in the areas of integrity, reliability, and security with outsourced services?
5. How does the online program involve the demonstration of such critical skills as analysis, comprehension, communication, and effective research?
6. What forms of communication ensure sufficient support from teachers for individual students?
7. If the course is asynchronous, are there timelines for completing coursework?
8. In what ways does teacher interaction support students to become more effective in thinking and learning?
9. Is a parent or other “learning coach” utilized to support and monitor student learning?
10. Are science labs provided through a virtual or on-site medium?
11. Is instructor response to student assignments timely?
12. Does the school pay adequate attention to pedagogical changes and subsequent professional development with constantly changing information technologies?
13. How are online assessments utilized and are they graded electronically or by individual teachers?
14. How is final course mastery determined and who decides whether a student is prepared to move on to the next unit, course, or grade level?
15. How are state-mandated assessments and high school exit exams administered?

16. Are any assessments conducted in specific physical locations in a paper format?
17. How do teachers verify the authenticity of student work?
18. When proctoring is used, what are the procedures for selecting proctors, establishing student identify, assuring security of test instruments, administering the assessments, and assuring secure and prompt evaluations?

C. Support for Student Personal and Academic Growth

1. How is the school addressing the issue of socialization for students?
2. How does the school provide sufficient technical support for student hardware and software?
3. Are teachers actively communicating with students to determine special challenges and interests?
4. When new software or systems are adopted, what processes are used to train teachers and students to use them effectively?
5. Is adequate help-desk support provided, and if so, for what time periods?
6. What information and/or advice do students receive about the nature of learning and the personal discipline required in an online environment?

D. Resource Management and Development

1. Does the institution's budget plan provide for appropriate updating of the technologies employed?
2. Are staff salaries competitive enough to avoid significant issues with teacher/administrator turnover?
3. Can the school's present financial health be easily defined?
4. Are the school's/program's accounts and budgets at least annually audited by an external auditor?
5. Are potential students likely to discover that costs are affordable for requirements associated with technologies they are expected to provide?
6. Does the school's fiscal structure include a long-range study of the relationship to operational costs and fees/tuition and/or state and local support?

**APPENDIX:
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR ONLINE SCHOOLS**

A. Online Schools: Basic Questions, Expectations, and Best Practices

Basic Questions that relate to Accreditation for Online Schools

To what extent:

1. Does the school provide synchronous instruction, asynchronous instruction, or both?
2. Are instructional programs available to all students? How is equity achieved, given the costs of technology?
3. Do students receive consistent academic support online or face-to-face?
4. How does the school compensate for social growth?
5. To what extent is instruction provided in an interactive environment?
6. Does online curriculum meet local, state, and federal standards and academic benchmarks?
7. Are highly qualified teachers involved in instructional delivery?
8. Enhanced levels of data are usually available in online environments, does the school effectively use such additional data?

Expectations and Best Practices in Online Schools

Effective online schools and program:

- Meet or exceed accountability expectations of private and public comprehensive schools.
- Online schools should ensure programs have clearly defined policies, standards and procedures for curriculum, assessment, teaching, attendance, funding, and other issues.
- Success is based on competency in meeting local and state academic standards.
- Apply all standards equally to full online schools and traditional public or private schools that offer some online programs.
- Effective online programs demonstrate value for students at all levels of achievement.

B. Growing by Degrees: Online Education in the United States

In a NACOL document, *Growing by Degrees: Online Education in the United States*, several important observations were made about the utilization of online delivery in higher education institutions in the United States. Although focused on post-secondary programs, much of this information applies to the current status of many K-12 schools and programs as well. Some of those observations include the following:

- The overall percent of schools identifying online education as a critical long-term strategy grew from 49% in 2003 to 56% in 2005.
- Sixty-five percent of colleges and universities that are offering graduate face-to-face courses also offer graduate courses online.
- Overall online enrollments (post-secondary) increased from 1.98 million in 2003 to 2.35 million in 2004.
- Sixty-four percent of Chief Academic Officers believe that it is no more difficult to evaluate the quality of an online course than one delivered face-to-face.

C. NACOL National Standards of Quality for Online Courses

The North American Council for Online Learning's (NACOL) standards of quality for online schools and programs are categorized below. The specific items under each category listed here represent considerations that are not included elsewhere in this document or are items worthy of repetition. NACOL's complete listing of standards is available online at www.nacol.org.

Content

- The course goals and objectives are measurable and clearly state what the participants will know or be able to do at the end of the course.
- Information literacy and communication skills are incorporated and taught as an integral part of the curriculum.
- Issues associated with the use of copyrighted materials are addressed.
- Academic integrity and “netiquette” expectations regarding learning activities, discussions, e-mail communications and plagiarism are clearly stated.

Instructional Design

- The course unit overview describes the objectives, activities and resources that frame the unit. It includes a description of the activities and assignments that are central to the unit.
- The course instruction includes activities that engage students in active learning.
- Instruction provides students with multiple learning paths to master the content, based on student needs.
- The teacher engages student in learning activities that address a variety of learning styles and preferences.
- The course provides opportunities for students to engage in higher-order thinking, critical-reasoning activities and thinking in increasingly complex ways.
- The course provides opportunities for appropriate instructor-student and student-student interaction to foster mastery and application of the material and a plan for monitoring that interaction.
- Students have access to resources that enrich the course content.

Student Assessment

- The course structure includes adequate and appropriate methods and procedures to assess students' mastery of content.
- Assessment strategies and tools make the student continuously aware of his/her progress in class and mastery of the content beyond letter grades.
- Grading rubrics and models of partially to fully completed assignments are provided to the teacher
- Grading policy and practices are easy to understand.

Technology

- The course architecture permits the online teacher to add content, activities, and assessments to extend learning opportunities.

- The course makes maximum use of the capabilities of the online medium and makes resources available by alternative means; e.g., video, CDs and podcasts.
- Hardware, web browser, and software requirements are specified.
- Prerequisite skills in the use of technology are identified.
- Online textbooks used in a course meet nationally endorsed standards (NIMAS) for publishers to ensure distribution of accessible, alternative versions of textbooks and other instructional materials.
- The course provider offers the course teacher, school coordinator assistance with technical support and course management.
- The course provider offers orientation training.

Course Evaluation and Management

- The results of peer review and student evaluations of courses are available.
- Course provider uses multiple ways of assessing course effectiveness.
- The course provider is authorized to operate in the state in which the course is offered.
- Student information remains confidential, as required by the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

21st Century Skills

- The course intentionally emphasizes 21st century skills in the course, including using 21st century skills in the core subjects, 21st century content, learning and thinking skills, ICT literacy, self-directed learning, global awareness, and includes 21st century assessments, as identified by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills.

D. Southern Regional Education Board's Elements of Quality Assurance for Online Learning

The Southern Regional Education Board's (SREB) list of standards for quality programs includes the following guidelines for online schools.

1. Course content and assessments must be aligned with state learning standards.
2. Courses should engage students in learning activities that address various learning styles.
3. Courses should provide students with opportunities to engage in abstract thinking and critical reasoning.
4. Courses should provide "appropriate teach-to-student interaction, including timely, frequent feedback about student progress."
5. Courses should provide for and monitor appropriate student-to-student interaction, and students should be monitored to ensure academic honesty.
6. Courses must accommodate students with disabilities.
7. Online providers are responsible for the assessment and assurance of their quality, giving particular emphasis to student learning.
8. Copyright issues should be addressed.
9. Online teachers should be evaluated at least once a year.