It’s not easy to get away from the job in the middle of a school year, especially given that both my wife and I work in education related fields, and we are raising four children who attend three different schools. Getting away means a whole lot of juggling: schedules, plans, and responsibilities. So why would I choose to take a “get-away” to another school community to work long hours and relax little? Why do I ACS WASC? I ACS WASC for many reasons: A visit to another school brings fresh ideas and new information to my department and school and brings me a sense of purpose and service to the greater education community of which I am proud to be a part.

ACS WASC visitations bring fresh new perspectives to my day-to-day job as an athletic director at Righetti High School. Spending four days guiding and exploring the way another school has set up their programs helps me to focus on the systems and protocols that we have in place at my home site. It’s not unusual for an ACS WASC visiting team member to jot down notes about how the school he is visiting has approached a problem. A visitation often brings into focus not just the approach we may have missed, but the problems we may have missed as well. It’s refreshing and edifying to bring home a new idea or approach to a problem that has stymied my department for some time.

ACS WASC visitations also help bring in to focus the much larger picture of a school community. Leading a department, grade level, or program inherently requires a bit of self-indulgent tunnel vision. What works well for my coaches may not be the very best thing for the whole school, but I hear from them daily, and I’m going to keep them happy. ACS WASC visitations remind me that I am also part of a much larger entity; one that requires an understanding of the big picture and a willingness to prioritize school goals over easy solutions and standard procedures. The ACS WASC visitation brings home to me the goals we all strive for: student achievement and stakeholder satisfaction. Those priorities come to the forefront when I ACS WASC and stay there when I return home, allowing me to evaluate my practices and priorities in the larger light of whole-school community.

An ACS WASC visit definitely finds me returning with a broader focus and better attention to my own school goals. But, it also returns me a better member of my school and home communities. ACS WASC visits are taxing on the visiting team: long hours, focused attention, steep learning curves, but they can also be relaxing, refreshing time-outs from the daily pressures of our “real” jobs. The chance to engage in higher level inquiry with other like-minded professionals can be an energizing and rejuvenating experience. Taking a break from the day-to-day decision making allows me time to really think about how and why those decisions are being made. I return with a sense of excitement and purpose that is palpable. It’s not easy, or even always “fun” to complete an ACS WASC visitation, but it is a worthwhile endeavor!

Joseph Graack, Athletic Director
Ernest Righetti High School
The Mountain View-Los Altos High School District (MVLA) has used the Accrediting Commission for Schools, Western Association of Schools and Colleges (ACS WASC) tools and processes to guide its schools over the past eight years. During that time, MVLA students have improved every year on statewide assessments, with significant annual gains in closing the Latino achievement gap. Our comprehensive high schools, alternative high school, and adult school utilize their ACS WASC goals and targets to guide their continuous improvement efforts.

Listed below are ten tenants that MVLA has instituted to support our ACS WASC documents in our quest to provide the best possible education to our students.

1. Alignment of site ACS WASC goals and our ACS WASC action plans with district priorities. The MVLA board approved district priorities which serve as a guide to our site ACS WASC efforts. Our board treats our ACS WASC plans as living changing documents that best meet the needs of our students.

2. Align resources to support our ACS WASC action plans. Both the district and sites use ACS WASC plans to guide resource allocation for staffing, professional development, programs and materials.

3. Employ a site ACS WASC coordinator with a release period annually to help guide school improvement efforts and implement the ACS WASC action plan. This position works with the site leadership team for future planning and decision making.

4. Ensure that the school board, community, staff, and students are aware of the ACS WASC document that is an evolving process set to meet district priorities.

5. Align employee evaluations with the ACS WASC goals and foci. Our evaluations support national standards for the teaching profession. In lieu of traditional evaluations, we allow tenured staff to pursue individual projects that support our WASC efforts.

6. Create leadership structures that support ACS WASC such as site leadership teams, course and department teams, and department coordinators.

7. Use appropriate metrics to assess progress. Our board has adopted twelve metrics to use in assessing district success that are also aligned with ACS WASC goals.

8. Create continuous improvement processes. Each site surveys stakeholders to determine constituencies’ needs and views. The district and sites are encouraged to monitor and adjust their plans to meet the changing needs of students.

9. Hire new employees to further goal attainment. Ensure that all employees are hired and retained who meet the profile required to help meet our objectives. In MVLA, we seek content area experts who ensure that every student is successful working in a collaborative environment where continuous professional development is the expectation.

10. Ensure that professional development is aligned with our ACS WASC goals. For the past several years, our professional development has focused on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS).

The Mountain View-Los Altos Union High School District uses its ACS WASC documents to guide its future and is willing to change course as needed. Examples of stakeholder support include 78 percent voter approval for a recent general obligation bond and academic success with our high schools ranked in the top one percent in national publications. ACS WASC is the process we use to ensure that we provide our kids and community with the very best high school education possible.

Barry Groves, Ed.D., Superintendent
Mountain View-Los Altos High School District
The Orange Unified School District is pleased to announce that the Accrediting Commission for Schools, Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) has granted Cerro Villa Middle School initial ACS WASC accreditation (grades 7th through 8th) through June 30, 2017. Cerro Villa is the first comprehensive public middle school in Orange County to earn the ACS WASC Accreditation, and it will serve as a model for other middle schools in the Orange Unified School District to become ACS WASC accredited to reinforce the District’s goals for student learning in the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP).

In commencing the process for initial ACS WASC accreditation for a middle school, the District leadership worked closely with ACS WASC Executive leadership and the school principal to discuss the vision, focus, priorities, and progress monitoring for student learning in early 2014. During the same time in spring 2014, the Orange Unified School District was completing the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) that included a focus on increasing rigorous course access for all secondary students in addition to developing interventions and counseling supports for 21st Century College and Career readiness. The District intent was to leverage the ACS WASC process in the middle schools to develop integrated plans for students to align college and career goals for successful transition to high school and eventual graduation.

The ACS WASC process facilitated additional supports for increased access to A-G courses and identified potential Advanced Placement (AP) students. Disaggregating student data across cohorts and grade levels enabled the middle school staff to see how successful students were in entering the advanced high school courses. Consequently, critical supports and instructional strategies were identified to better prepare students in middle school for greater access to A-G and AP courses in high school.

The goal of the Orange Unified School District is to assist secondary schools in integrating plans to ensure seamless support to faculty and students in meeting goals of student learning. In utilizing the ACS WASC process, Cerro Villa Middle school was able to assimilate the tenets of the 2013 California Distinguished School process including the two school-level Signature Practices of Technology Curriculum Infusion and Response to Intervention and Instruction (RtI2). The school staff can further enhance their process of Professional Learning Communities/Department collaboration, Collaboration Cycle for Effective Instruction and the implementation of State Standards and emergent 21st Century Instructional strategies.

These goals of student learning reviewed and analyzed in the ACS WASC process further reinforced the District LCAP plan combining actions within the eight areas of state priorities in the LCAP grouped under Conditions for Learning, Pupil Outcomes and Engagement. District Leadership can more closely monitor and ensure that actions are being implemented through the planning cycle of ACS WASC. The District has prepared a conceptual framework of ACS WASC and LCAP that are amalgamated into one matrix to ensure that plans are aligned and progress monitoring is in place for student learning.

The matrix allows schools to see where the stakeholder/community engagement process of the LCAP and the student/community profile of ACS WASC all result in the aligned schoolwide learner outcomes or pupil outcomes in the LCAP. The analysis of student learning/pupil outcomes and engagement processes in both ACS WASC and LCAP underscore that the matrix of priorities in the planning processes is truly compatible. In aligning these priorities, the District validates the Secondary ACS WASC process, an integral element of planning for the District Wide LCAP and strategic priorities.
The following framework demonstrates the District integrated initiatives of ACS WASC and LCAP.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conditions of Learning</th>
<th>Pupil Outcomes</th>
<th>Engagement</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Materials</td>
<td>Standardized test performance</td>
<td>Parent participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilities</td>
<td>Academic Performance Index</td>
<td>Parent decision making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Credentialing</td>
<td>College and Career Readiness</td>
<td>School attendance rates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation - State Standards</td>
<td>English Learners Proficient</td>
<td>Chronic absenteeism rates</td>
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<tr>
<td>Course Access</td>
<td>English Learners Reclassification</td>
<td>Middle/High school dropout rates</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>Advanced Placement</td>
<td>High school graduation rates</td>
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<td></td>
<td>A-G Courses</td>
<td>Pupil suspension/expulsion rates</td>
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<td>School climate surveys</td>
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<td>School Connectedness Surveys</td>
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**LOCAL CONTROL AND ACCOUNTABILITY PLAN (LCAP) – STATE PRIORITIES**

**ACCREDITING COMMISSION FOR SCHOOLS, WESTERN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES (ACS WASC) PROCESS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Organization</th>
<th>D. Standards Based Learning: Assessment &amp; Accountability</th>
<th>E. School Culture &amp; Support for Student Personal &amp; Academic Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vision and Purpose</td>
<td>Collect, analyze, disaggregate learning data</td>
<td>Parent/Community involvement wide array of strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governance</td>
<td>Variety of assessments: formative &amp; summative</td>
<td>School culture is safe, nurturing with high expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership and Staff qualified</td>
<td>Monitor achievement on academic standards</td>
<td>Academic and personal support plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources: Human, physical, financial, material</td>
<td>Monitor achievement on college &amp; career readiness</td>
<td>Access to many activities in the school and community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>Monitor achievement on schoolwide learner outcomes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Standards Based Learning: Curriculum</td>
<td>Assessment data determines continuous improvement and allocation of resources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rigorous, standards based</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Equal access to courses</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Prepared for College/Careers</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Graduation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>C. Standards Based Learning: Instruction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Challenging/relevant experiences</td>
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<td>Engaged/technology enhanced</td>
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The ACS WASC accreditation continuum will serve as a systemic process to align the school vision, key priorities, State Standards curriculum development, instructional practices and student assessments to the district’s strategic initiatives and the new Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) Goals.

Gunn Marie Hansen, Ph.D., Deputy Superintendent
Orange Unified School District
The Hawaii Department of Education has embarked on a journey to ensure that all of our Pre K-12 and Adult Education schools are in structured professional dialogue about what it will take for all students to have access to high quality teaching and learning, positive and supportive school environments, opportunities to programs that support college and career readiness and engagement of families and community in the education of the children.

In order to accomplish this, the Board of Education has put into policy, the implementation of the ASC WASC accreditation process for all of the 289 public elementary, middle and high schools in Hawaii. The high and middle schools have been on a schedule for accreditation for many years along with a few of our elementary schools. In school year 2013-14 the first cohort of new elementary schools were trained for their initial visit in 2015. The process will add on another cohort each year until all elementary schools are integrated into the schedule by 2018-19.

There are many implications for Hawaii Complex Areas (Districts) which are made up of elementary and middle schools that feed up to the high school. Currently, many of these schools are engaged in Pre K-12 complex discussions to align curriculum, instruction and assessments, monitoring and reviewing student performance data with a focus on the transition grades, grade level articulation and school guided visits by complex area school teams to support the implementation of programs and instructional practices through classroom visitations and feedback. The goal of the complex schools is to ensure that there is a seamless transition of all students to the next level, ready to learn, with the knowledge, skills and disposition to succeed.

With this in mind, we would like to consider moving towards an accreditation process for a school complex which creates an interdependence and a sense of responsibility for students as they move throughout the elementary, middle and high schools. In this way, all of the complex schools will embrace the elementary K readiness goals as well as the high school graduation and college enrollment initiatives.

In our Nanakuli-Waianae Complex Areas in the Leeward District, we express our commitment through our theme “E`Pookela” Striving toward Excellence and our dedication reflected in our collective statement of “Hiki No”, It can be done. We believe that we are all responsible for the success of every student in our community and will use the ASC WASC process to identify individual school strengths and challenges but also as a group of feeder schools to monitor and assess our performance as we transition our students through each grade level and on to postsecondary education.

Ann Mahi, Complex Area Superintendent
Hawaii State DOE, Leeward District-3-Oahu
The ACS WASC process helped my school build a template for continuous school improvement. By engaging all stakeholders and by putting student learning at the center of the accreditation process ACS WASC helped our school meet its goals and come into our own. A significant product of the work involved helped each member of our team understand and appreciate each other’s roles and challenges. The ultimate value of the process becomes clear when it is incorporated into the fabric of school improvement, not just as an occasional and hurried accreditation process, but rather as an ongoing interwoven opportunity for educational growth and change.

Jim Munger, Head of School
Marin Montessori School
For the past decade I’ve been a part of many ACS WASC self-studies. I get data; I synthesize information; I create graphs and charts but I never ACS WASCed, until now. I knew the ACS WASC visit was important as an accreditation process, but never realized how valuable it could be for my own professional development as an educator and as a tool for long-term school improvement.

Recently, I decided to go on an ACS WASC visit so I could experience the process myself. I was scheduled, received my materials, and began reading the self-study report from a high school I knew nothing about, in a community I barely knew. Truthfully, ACS WASC couldn’t have come at worse time. Like many, I was preparing for the new SBAC field tests, working on LCAP, and managing my own department. I carved out time at night and the weekends to read the report, took detailed notes for my section (Assessment and Accountability) and prepare a first draft for our evaluation.

ACS WASC is an accrediting organization. It is clear when you see how much effort a community puts into their self-study and visit that their most important concern is whether they’re going to get the gold seal of approval, a recommendation for six-years. I soon realized however that accreditation, though important, is only the carrot. The real value is 1) the self-study process and 2) the professional learning for members of the visiting committee.

**The Self Study Process**

Although I don’t have data to back up this statement, I believe that K-12 educational organizations spend too little time learning because we’re so busy planning, taking action, reporting, or reacting to the unpredictable events that happen at our schools. In other words, I believe we could spend more time reflecting, debriefing, and learning together as educators.

The ACS WASC Self-Study process is a great opportunity for people to monitor their systems to see what’s working and address school improvement. There’s no doubt that the Self-Study is a time-consuming process because it takes time away from teaching, learning, and leading. But here’s the thing, school communities shouldn’t wait to monitor and reflect till their next ACS WASC Self-Study. We should be doing that every day.

On my recent ACS WASC visit, one insightful teacher leader commented, “We’re doing great work, but it’s frustrating that we don’t know what is working, or what is not working.” This is a great place to start. If educators are going to make plans or take actions (something that is now required in both the LCAP and SPSA) we should build in processes to specifically monitor the efforts so we can answer the question, “How will we know if this works?”

**Professional learning for members of the visiting committee**

Once I completed my formal education I continued to learn by attending conferences, receiving professional developing, reviewing research, and working with coaches or mentors. Now I can add an ACS WASC visit to that list. With an ACS WASC visit you get to spend time in a different place, with people from other organizations, learning what a school could be. Although we share the same Ed code, the same standards for academic content, and the same standards for teaching, each district has different board policies, community values, union contracts, and student programs. That makes for an interesting professional learning experience.
First you get exposed to a different school model. Then you get to reflect on your own school/district and reflect on all the things you take for granted. For example, the school I recently visited has three generations of community members contributing to career pathways closely tied to their local economy. My community has mostly new homes and new schools, and is also one of the most ethnically diverse areas in the country. Our students and families value broad educational options and choices. Neither is right or better than the other, but seeing something different, helped me to understand my own community in new ways.

**It’s not just about accreditation**

Finally, from my perspective as a person who works in a district office, there seems to be an opportunity to use ACS WASC in totally new ways to help schools and districts improve. What if ACS WASC was a model of quality schooling to ensure sustained improvements in districts, rather than individual schools?

Recall the statement by the teacher leader on my recent ACS WASC visit, “We’re doing great work, but it’s frustrating that we don’t know what is working, or what is not working.” That’s a beautiful statement because it is an opening for a district leader to sit down with a school leader and listen to them, then listen some more and then offer ideas, suggestions, and coaching. If we help site leaders to create structures and tools such as checklists, objective trackers, and long range planners, they won’t have to scramble to prepare for an ACS WASC visit because they will know exactly what is working or not working.

Call it action research, continual improvement, organizational learning, or an ACS WASC accreditation; what is critical is a commitment to making progress over time.

Joel Rabin, Ph.D., Executive Director
Research and Data, Natomas Unified School District
I just finished a four-day ACS WASC (Accrediting Commission for Schools, Western Association of Schools and Colleges) accreditation visit at a nearby public high school — my third time volunteering as a visiting team member.

Somewhere in the midst of dozens of class observations, hours of poring over the school’s self-study report, and numerous meetings with staff, students, and community members, I stopped and asked myself a simple question: Why do this?

After all, it’s not as if my own job will magically take care of itself; I don’t (yet) possess Mickey’s magic broom from Fantasia.

It’s time away from my family. It requires me to open up even more mental bandwidth (a stretch for sure, especially in the Ides of March of our school year) to take in all that has happened and is happening at a school I most likely know nothing about. And then I’m asked to think about what needs to happen at that school over the next three to six years...

So, why do it, when normal life is already tough enough? When I walked out of our parting presentation to staff, I composed a Top Five almost instantaneously:

1) **Service:** I am a public educator. I am a product of public education (in fact, I had attended grades 4–7 in the same district as this recent school I visited). People working in public education are my colleagues; students experiencing public education are our responsibility and future adults in our shared society. There are 1,000 students in whom I have an immediate stake in seeing navigate a safe, healthy path to happiness and success, in school and beyond; there are many thousands more that I care about just as much.

2) **Connection:** Ideas know no boundaries. During our visit, I met the coach of a global technology entrepreneurship program and competition for young women — he was more fired up about getting girls into technology than many sports coaches I've seen at the late stages of a tight game. I witnessed a librarian who was the hub of an energetic, bustling, sometimes boisterous library culture (one of the rules was definitely not “Be Quiet!”) which was also the research hub of the school. I witnessed a school culture so accepting and non-assuming that a group of boys practiced their free-style dancing in the cafeteria during lunch. Over the course of my three visits, I have had my eyes opened by new ways of thinking and doing — and I’ve brought seedlings of those ideas back to my own school.

3) **Challenge:** The ACS WASC process is a transparent, inclusive accountability measure that helps schools and communities identify their successes while focusing honestly (sometimes painfully) on areas that need real work. Great schools and organizations learn to do this as a normal, embedded practice — so much so that it becomes the default culture. But so many schools are not there yet; the ACS WASC process is an opportunity for everyone to look in the mirror together while opening up their school to outside eyes. We should all try it more often.

4) **Reflect:** It is easy for us, in the bubble of our individual school sites, to think we have left no stone unturned. But an examination of another school’s entire program — along with sweeping panoramic views of its history, traditions, climate, and living culture — lets you quickly know that there are many roads leading to Rome. And some are better paved, more scenic, and with better roadside amenities than you have thought up at your own site. I don’t mean they have more money to throw at problems; I mean they have invested more in the human capital it takes to bring great ideas and practices to the forefront and not let them get stymied by “This is the way things have always worked” and “You’re new here — pipe down!”
5) Pure, Selfish Curiosity: What can I say? I love my school, but distance can make the heart grow fonder. These visits are like being a tourist doing “Education Travel” — I see the sights, snap some pictures, meet new people, speak a slightly different language (every school has its own dialect), and come back home with new memories made. The only thing missing are the hours idling by the poolside...

The teams I’ve been on have been made up of incredible, dedicated educators who have the same sense of curiosity, service, and professionalism that inspired me to take the plunge. I count them among my growing cohort of colleagues in this wonderful profession we share.

How do I feel after four days of non-stop observation, conversation, reflection, writing, editing, and meeting new people? Tired, sore, stressed and totally, completely fired up by the students, staff, and community members I met, the energy and culture I witnessed, and the specific practices and programs at the school that my own students and staff would gobble up.

Here’s how you can be a part of a visiting committee — buckle up. Visit the ACS WASC website at www.acswasc.org for further information.

Eric Saibel, Assistant Principal
Sir Francis Drake High School