An Initial Evaluation of the ACS WASC Accreditation Cycle of Quality

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

As one of six major preK-12 school accrediting agencies in the United States, the Accrediting Commission for Schools Western Association of Schools and Colleges (ACS WASC) accredits nearly 5,000 public, private, and adult schools worldwide in California, Hawaii, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas, American Samoa, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Fiji, Asia and other parts of the world.

ACS WASC assists schools in providing rigorous, relevant self-evaluation and peer review that focuses on student learning to ensure that every child succeeds in school by acquiring the academic and social foundations to become a productive adult.

Consistent with its tradition, ACS WASC remains committed to a transforming, coherent *Focus on Learning (FOL)* process that empowers schools to develop an integrated, connected improvement process. Schools are engaged in reflection, assessment, and evaluation culminating in the implementation of an updated action plan that is monitored and continually reassessed based on the impact on student learning and well-being. Two conceptual questions challenge schools as they engage in the ongoing school improvement process, not only during the self-study but throughout the six-year cycle:

1. How does a school know that all students are achieving the desired schoolwide learner outcomes and the essential academic standards that prepare students to be globally competent (e.g., college and career ready)?
2. Is the school doing everything possible to support high-quality achievement of all its students?

In the early 1990s, ACS WASC leaders, the Commission, and regional educators began discussing refinements to the existing accreditation process, which ultimately led to the formation of ACS WASC-initiated committees charged with the revision of the accreditation process. Committee members included public and private school representatives who engaged in important thinking based upon the work of Michael Fullan, Carl Glickman, Peter Senge, Phillip Schlechty, and others.

The revision committees centered their work on the two overarching conceptual questions presented above. They engaged in critical thinking and discussions around topics such as education in the 21st century, school change, learning and teaching, organizational development and leadership, assessment, self-evaluation, accountability and results-oriented processes. As is well known, what evolved from this work was the ACS WASC *Focus on Learning*, the dynamic self-evaluative process that has become widely accepted as integral to the core of education — successful student learning.

During the 1994–1995 school year, 41 schools piloted the new *Focus on Learning* process. Since then, ACS WASC has gathered feedback from schools through written and verbal comments and

special debriefing meetings and made continual refinements and modifications to the criteria and accreditation process. The feedback from schools using the process has continually reinforced the following key points:

- Centered upon a strong focus on student learning
- Facilitates a schoolwide examination of the instructional program
- Promotes school renewal efforts
- Promotes collaborative leadership
- Engages all staff and other stakeholders in meaningful dialogue
- Enhances the sharing of ideas and materials among staff
- Supports the internal use of existing resources
- Enhances the celebration of the strong elements of the school's program
- Supports an increased awareness by students of the school's learner outcomes.

However, as the *FOL* process is examined today, a critical ongoing question relating to transformation and coherence in schools remains:

> *How can the accreditation process be a viable structure for all the external demands yet maintain its commitment to support a school in developing its internal capacity for being accountable to high-quality achievement of all students served?*

Therefore, for the first time in its history, ACS WASC engaged an outside research group to conduct a formal evaluation study centered on the ACS WASC Accreditation Cycle of Quality. Given that multiple stakeholder groups are associated with the ACS WASC accreditation process, an initial question revolved around determining a manageable and reasonable starting point. Thus, this exploratory study examined how schools view and use the ACS WASC accreditation process through the perceptions of California public high school principals.

The study's primary purpose has been aimed toward gaining a deeper understanding of:

- How ACS WASC-accredited schools implement the self-study process
- The relationship between ACS WASC accreditation and ongoing school improvement
- The effects of the ACS WASC accreditation process on schoolwide improvement and increased student learning.

Another impetus for this study emerged from an active national discussion among state and federal policy makers over the quality and effectiveness of accreditation in higher educational institutions. The roles, functions, and effects of school accrediting agencies in the present era of standards-based reform and accountability have become especially important markers for judging the quality of schools in America. Ironically, a dearth of empirical research evidence exists that describes the relationship between accrediting systems and preK-12 school outcomes. In recent years, the federal government has become increasingly interested in, and concerned about, the accreditation of higher education institutions.

During much of the 20th Century, accreditation in higher education became the primary mechanism that held colleges and universities accountable for using federal funds appropriately and effectively (United States Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, 2015). Critics of accreditation in higher education argue that such agencies have become anachronistic — they lack rigor and objectivity; they are cumbersome and irrelevant to the needs and conditions faced by schools; they lack leverage to affect meaningful and durable change in schools, and they lack the backbone needed to make tough accountability decisions (Wilson, 1999). Judith Eaton (2011), president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation outlined four key values of accreditation in higher education:

- Enhances the quality of higher education
- Maintains the academic values of higher education
- Provides a buffer against the politicization of higher education
- Serves the publics' interests and needs.

Although the policy spotlight remains on the accrediting process and outcomes in higher education, many preK-12 school accrediting officials are keeping a close eye on the political environment. Some accreditation organizations, like ACS WASC, are working proactively to provide credible and relevant information in response to potential inquiries from federal and/or state policy makers.

This study consisted of quantitative and qualitative phases centered upon three evaluation questions. These provided the framework for the final analyses and interpretation of the survey and interview data.

- **Evaluation Question One:** How do the ACS WASC-accredited schools use the ACS WASC principles and design elements to implement ongoing analysis and evaluation that address the basic concept questions (i.e., how does a school know that all students are achieving and is the school doing everything possible to support high-quality achievement of all its students)?
- **Evaluation Question Two**: What is the relationship between the implementation of the ACS WASC accreditation process and ongoing school improvement and its effectiveness?
- **Evaluation Question Three**: What is the long-term effect of the ACS WASC accreditation process and the use of its principles and design elements in supporting schoolwide improvement and increased student learning?

Methodology

The primary focus of the study was the ACS WASC accreditation process as implemented at the school-site level and examined through the ACS WASC Accreditation Cycle of Quality. The study was grounded in a *developmental evaluation framework* from which a mixed-methods evaluation design was used to guide data collection, analysis, and reporting. For the quantitative portion, online survey responses from California public high school principals were analyzed.

All school types were included in this study: comprehensive, charter, alternative/continuation, independent study, juvenile, and online comprehensive. Of the nearly 2,100 high schools included in the survey, **43.2%** principals responded to the survey. Most respondents were from comprehensive schools (65.2%), followed by alternative/ continuation (24.1%), and independent study (8.9%). The overall findings from the survey were based on the responses of 763 principals.

Next, interview analyses were conducted with 20 purposefully selected principals based upon an eight-question semi-structured interview guide. The interview questions were aligned with the evaluation and survey questions. Principals were interviewed from schools that were either in the first or fourth year of the ACS WASC six-year cycle. Other selection factors included school type, region of California as identified by the California County Superintendents Education Services Association (CCSESA), and population density within the CCSESA regions. Prior to the interviews, the ACS WASC president contacted the interviewees followed by a call from the evaluation team who scheduled a one-hour interview at the convenience of the interviewee.

Survey participation was not required for interview participation. For both the survey and interview, the purposes of the study as well as the voluntary and confidential nature of the study were explained. The interviews were transcribed and each interviewee received a copy of the transcript. For purposes of analyses, survey responses, input to open-ended survey questions, and the interview data were combined.

A framework based on Patton's developmental framework (Patton, 2016) guided the design and implementation of this study. Although many evaluation approaches exist, this framework is uniquely suited for rapidly changing and innovative environments that characterize the contexts of education in the United States today (Patton, 2008, 2011).

Through this approach the study captured essential perspectives of public high school principals throughout California regarding the ACS WASC accreditation process and how it has influenced their schools in sustaining ongoing systems for analyzing and evaluating school improvement processes that result in more powerful learning and teaching for all students.

Key Findings

The survey and interview results provided rich and sometimes competing views about how principals perceive the ACS WASC accreditation process. While this is not unusual with applied social scientific research, these views provided important and nuanced insights into the process that will guide future ACS WASC program and process refinements and development.

Generally, while responses to the survey items were positive, areas for further study and action were more evident in responses provided through open-ended survey questions and in the interview data.

In the content that follows, the findings from the survey and interview data can be clustered into four primary themes. *More comprehensive and detailed analyses and discussion may be found in the final report.*

Accreditation Self-Study Outcomes

Principals reported positive perceptions of key ACS WASC self-study outcomes. Of all survey respondents (principals), **98.3%** agreed (slightly/strongly agree/agree) with the statement: the ACS WASC accreditation cycle encourages continuous school improvement.

In terms of student learning, **97.9%** reported agreement (slightly agree/agree/strongly agree) with the following statement: my school's participation in the ACS WASC/CDE Six-Year accreditation cycle has positive effects on student learning.

Interviewees easily identified the value of accreditation. One principal commented, "As a principal, I found it valuable because it gave me a process by which I could really reach out to the different stakeholder groups and really get a pulse for what the teachers felt, what the parents felt, [and] what the students felt was the most important thing to work on in the school." Principals identified ACS WASC as a mechanism for bringing key stakeholders together with a focus on assessing and improving their education programs and that meaningful dialogue, reflection, problem-solving, and shared decision-making occurs. Another principal noted: "…it validates the things that are working and really highlights strengths in areas of sound practice, and it shines a light on areas where we could continue to grow, and creates a mechanism to support that growth."

Whereas some principals commented on the challenges in understanding that the school's Single Plan for Student Achievement (SPSA) is the schoolwide action plan to which findings from the ACS WASC self-study/visit have been integrated, others indicated that the ACS WASC self-study and schoolwide action plan are used to inform the development of SPSA.

Principals also reported positive attitudes toward the use of multiple data sources to improve teaching practices, assessment of student learning, training of teachers and staff, the coaching of teachers, and student interventions. For example:

- **98.6%** reported using data to improve the teaching practices at their school, and,
- **95.8%** indicated their schools' use of data to improve student interventions.

The accreditation process has facilitated the examination of multiple types of data (evidence) about students and their schools by the stakeholders (particularly teachers and administrators). The use of data appears to be particularly important in the analysis/evaluation and the planning and implementation stages of the self-study that ultimately results in an identification of strengths and growth areas within their instructional programs; this has then resulted in an

updated schoolwide action plan. However, some schools indicated that there is a challenge with the application of long-term use of data to guide changes in instruction that impact student learning.

Accreditation Benefits

Principals reported multiple benefits of ACS accreditation, especially in the areas of transparency, reinforcing the concept of a collaborative learning community culture, and providing a process that aligns the schoolwide action plan with the schools' areas of greatest need.

- **97.1%** indicated that the process provides transparency in what schools need to accomplish in relation to the research-based ACS WASC criteria.
- **96.5%** indicated that meaningful dialogue, self-reflection, problem solving, and shared decision-making are part of a collaborative learning community culture. Moreover, principals reported other important benefits of the ACS WASC accreditation process — an expectation that all school stakeholders are a part of this culture (**95.3%)** and engage in meaningful dialogue, self-reflection, problem solving, and shared decision-making (**84.2%**).
- **94.6%** indicated that ACS WASC accreditation benefits schools by providing a process that can be used to align a comprehensive schoolwide action plan to the school's areas of greatest need.

Accreditation stimulates the regular review of school improvement and accountability efforts through its ability to foster a transparent lens that the school can use to identify areas of greatest need and to align the schoolwide action plan with these needs. One principal commented, "I think the biggest benefit from WASC is it keeps the school on a focus…it became a living document for us…" Another principal stated, "…it validates the things that are working and really highlights strengths in areas of sound practice, and it shines a light on areas where we could continue to grow, and creates a mechanism to support that growth."

Survey respondents also indicated that the ACS WASC accreditation process benefits schools by providing feedback from fellow educators (i.e., the visiting committee).

The ACS WASC visiting committee offers valuable insights, encouragement, and feedback regarding the school's programs, systems, and outcomes and their alignment with ACS WASC accreditation criteria and important educational standards and practices. However, the school's relationship with visiting committee members generally ends once the formal school visit concludes. Some principals voiced a desire to have an ongoing relationship with the committee (or representatives) to assist the school through the follow-up, implementation, and monitoring processes of the schoolwide action plan.

Planning, Implementing, Monitoring Progress, and Refining the Schoolwide Action Plan

Survey respondents reported high levels of engagement with schoolwide action plan implementation but struggle with using a systematic process for gathering and analyzing evidence to validate and improve student learning.

- **82.8%** indicated that their level of engagement is "high" or "somewhat high" in *implementing* various aspects of the schoolwide action plan.
- **68.2%** report "high: or "somewhat high" engagement in *assessing* the data that is gathered due to implementation of the schoolwide action plan and **74.5%** report similar levels of engagement in monitoring the plan in relation to impact on student learning.
- Similarly, **68.6%** report engagement in the use of assessment data to *refine* the schoolwide action plan.

One principal stated, "The self-study gave everybody an opportunity to look at all the systems that we provide to the schools as a bigger picture and analyze all the services from climate to instruction to assessment." Another principal commented, "I create a yearly plan …we are actually in the process of doing that right now with my teacher leadership body…we look at the [ACS] WASC plan, we highlight what it is we feel like we have begun tackling, and then we develop next year's goals based on the larger [ACS] WASC goals but kind of chunking off some of the smaller action steps and making those your goals for the following year."

The findings did point out that some schools may lack coherent systems for longitudinal analysis of data during the ongoing implementation, monitoring and reassessment of the schoolwide action plan.

Importantly, the results indicated that principals who value the accreditation process related to the use of data and to the broader outcomes of ACS WASC accreditation also reported higher levels of their school's engagement with schoolwide action plan implementation.

Stakeholder Engagement in Planning and Implementing Schoolwide Action Plan

When asked about stakeholders who are involved in *planning* for improvements and those involved in *implementing* improvements in separate survey questions, respondents focused on several groups: (a) credentialed teachers and others, administrators, parents, community members, and (b) district staff and governing board. The results also indicated that two factors influenced the principals' responses — whether they worked at their school during the most recent site visit and the year of the most recent ACS WASC accreditation self-study/full visit.

Credentialed Teachers and Others, Administrators, Parents and Community Members: In this group of stakeholders, respondents report that the highest levels of engagement in *planning and implementation* involved credentialed teachers and others and administrators. Parents were rated higher in planning but lower with respect to implementation. As shown, community members were lower in both planning and implementing.

- Credentialed teachers and others: **98.6%**
- Administrators: **98.0%**
- Parents: **93.8%** (planning) and **87.3%** (implementation)
- Community members: **75.9%** (planning); **67.7%** (implementation).

In the interviews, principals report that a key challenge with teachers is developing trust in the data. As one interviewee stated: "One of the things that I'm working with…is trying to get teachers to first trust data and not shy away from it." Among teachers who trust and are comfortable with data, interviewees report that action plan data was regularly reviewed, especially during the fall and spring of each academic year. According to one principal of a large comprehensive high school: "…one of the last meetings of the year…doing a year in review…we go back and look at…where we are…. A lot of that is data…what do we know about, what we've tried to do, and how do we see that in terms of student outcomes because we spend a lot of time in our work as adults trying to figure out what that work is and what we are trying to do…linking it back to what we see in terms of our effect on kids …"

The engagement of parents in schoolwide planning and implementation activities is important to and valued by principals; yet many schools struggle to engage parents. Respondents report difficulty involving a broad spectrum of parents to participate in ACS WASC, particularly in lower income urban communities and over the long term. One principal noted, "…it's an epidemic that we're all dealing with for the most part, the lack of parent involvement, especially at inner-city schools, but I don't know how to help the process." They also report that parent involvement often consists of a small, insular and highly committed group of people. Finding ways to engage parents in meaningful activities was an ongoing challenge for these principals. One principal stated, "I worked at a school with a large number of students. We had less than 20 families show up when the [ACS] WASC came in." In contrast, one principal related a very positive experience regarding the usefulness of accreditation in facilitating parent involvement, "It provided an opportunity and platform for us to really build a greater connection with our parent base, and involve them at a greater level, and it definitely, through the self-study process, created opportunities for parents to come in and learn more about what's going on in our school, and have a voice in what's going on at our school."

Principals view parent engagement as very useful in the implementation of schoolwide improvements. One principal described the importance of parent engagement this way, "…It [ACS WASC] was an eye opener also not only for our district but it drove us to set up a parent focus group… All of a sudden, the parents that are on this parent focus group are coming in with all this information. I get calls. I get emails. 'Hey, we thought about this. We thought about that.' I said, 'Okay, I am compiling all this [for] when we meet.' They're beginning to feel not only empowered but also they're becoming our voice out there too with other parents." With respect to community members the survey respondents reported a range of involvement in the planning and implementing of the action plan.

District Staff and Board: District engagement in both the planning and implementation phases of school improvement efforts is valued, especially through the sharing of resources, providing

relevant data, and other forms of support for the ACS WASC process such as personnel training. Survey respondents report a range of involvement of district staff and board in *planning* and *implementing* school improvements. In terms of engaging in *planning*, principals report:

- District Staff: **86.7% (planning); 86.2% (implementing)**
- District Board: **68.5 (planning); 66.2% (implementing)**.

The examination of interview data indicates that the district staff are very supportive of principals and schools in their engagement with the accreditation process, especially during site-visits. Several districts regularly provide data to schools that can be used for ongoing school operations and improvement, and most districts provide data to support the ACS WASC self-study process.

Several interviewees stated that their district provides release time for those involved in the ACS WASC self-study as well as simulated self-study visits. When asked about whether district staff members understand that the ACS WASC accreditation is a school improvement process, most interviewees confirmed that the district personnel lacked this knowledge.

In addition, several interviewees provided examples in which district staff members continue to serve on ACS WASC visiting committees. However, when asked about support beyond data or ACS WASC-related training (e.g., district staff serving on self-study committees) interviewees did not affirm that this occurred. Also, in terms of financial support of the accreditation process, most interviewees reported that the self-study is part of the school budget, not the district's budget. At the same time, several interviewees expressed a desire for additional district-level support: "I think it would be great to have a district [ACS] WASC coordinator that their job is to take a look at and to be there to support the [ACS] WASC process in the schools…" Another stated: "It's not just a [ACS] WASC for the site but there's also oversight from our central office people that are working in conjunction with site principals for the [ACS] WASC review, helping provide support for them through that process."

District boards, like district staff, also support schools in their focus on student learning and ongoing improvement. However, the interview data indicated that principals had trouble in commenting on whether their district board members understand the ACS WASC accreditation process as a school improvement process. More specifically, the principals' ability to answer these interview questions depended upon her/his level of and experience with the board.

Conclusions and Implications

Effective school-site leadership is crucial to the successful implementation of the ACS WASC accreditation process in complex and diverse school settings and environments.

It is important for policymakers, practitioners, and the public to understand that the principles and design elements of the ACS WASC accreditation model provide a process through which a school assesses multiple types of data to determine if the program and operations support the desired high-quality student learning. This leads to planning, implementation and reassessment of the schoolwide action plan in an ongoing school improvement process. Because the contexts

and circumstances (e.g., resources, demographics, politics, environments, type of school, teacher quality, etc.) can and will vary dramatically from one school to another, the ACS WASC model was constructed to be adaptable to such differences. The capacity of the model to facilitate strategies and approaches to support improved learning and teaching in all schools will vary. Such variance can, to an important degree be influenced by the qualities and characteristics of a school's principal and co-administrators and the nature of his/her relationship with school district officials.

The importance of leadership on the successful implementation (and follow through) of the ACS WASC accreditation process cannot be overstated. Simply put, in the absence of a principal who is both knowledgeable about and committed to the principles of the accreditation process, the chances of its success are greatly diminished (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2011; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).

The ACS WASC accreditation process supports principals with a data-informed school change framework.

The influence of the principal's leadership on all aspects of the success of the ACS WASC accreditation model at the school-site level is one of the most important findings of this study. This is not surprising given the considerable body of research that underscores the important relationship between leadership and school improvement. Several principals offered examples of how the ACS WASC process strengthens their leadership role, by:

- Providing essential knowledge of the school
- Giving them an opportunity and a framework to shape school change
- Gaining the support and engagement of stakeholders for ACS WASC accreditation
- Enhancing school transparency and accountability
- Helping them develop a process of inquiry at the school
- Giving them leverage to motivate and empower the staff to accomplish their work
- Providing a template from which to examine the educational program.

Politically, ACS WASC can provide an important lever that the principal can use to foster engagement from various stakeholders. As one principal plainly stated, "…one of the benefits is that it's a requirement — it forces the issue." Another principal commented, "…I go back and look at the [ACS] WASC goals and use that as a way to move forward with reform. That's where my political part comes from."

The ACS WASC process provides a structure for school stakeholders a) to engage in meaningful collaboration and dialogue, b) to initiate investigations into the processes and outcomes of school programs, and c) to base decisions on how to best advance powerful learning and teaching for all students.

ACS WASC accreditation is widely regarded by California public high school principals as an important and valuable process for stimulating and guiding schoolwide improvements that

support effective learning and teaching for all students. As one principal described, "It's valued and respected and a kind of certified accountability piece that teachers, staff members, [and] anybody can't argue with because of [its] track record and process." Another principal remarked, "[ACS] WASC really does help the school focus on what's important to meeting the needs of students."

The ACS WASC accreditation process promotes the use of data (and other types of evidence) to strengthen the training of teachers in the use of instructional practices and assessments of student learning. In addition, principals believe that the accreditation process has positive effects on student learning through continuous school improvement activities and interventions.

As one principal put it, "Schools are constantly in this cycle of how we review what we're doing, what data should we look at, how should we look at the data, [and] who should be looking at the data." Also, the use of data by a school in concert with efforts to support the school's leadership in the pursuit of the mission, vision, and goals of the school matters a great deal in terms of moving a school forward.

As a group, principals believe that ACS WASC accreditation supports their efforts to provide focused and meaningful professional development for teachers and staff. One principal commented on how the ACS WASC process encouraged the school "to use staff development time to actually train ourselves…to read the work" (related to student learning outcomes).

The application of structured and systematic processes for analyzing and evaluating school and student data and using the results to improve student learning is uneven across the schools examined in this study.

This research shows that most principals are aware of the criteria, and processes contained in the ACS WASC accreditation inquiry model and how they can support schoolwide improvement efforts. They understand that establishing ongoing structures and processes for analyzing and evaluating data is a critical step toward facilitating continuous schoolwide improvement that, in turn, supports high-quality learning for all students.

However, while principals broadly understand and support the concept of such structures and processes, the survey and interview responses showed limited evidence that they possess a clear sense of what the specific steps of analytic inquiry are. The schools involved in the study provided responses that indicated that there was a stronger use of analytic processes to guide the development of the self-study and in preparing a schoolwide action plan. However, the consistent application of procedures for analyzing, evaluating, and using data becomes increasingly challenging during the follow-up monitoring and adjusting of the schoolwide action plan.

Many interviewees freely admitted that the process is ad hoc, irregular, and not as systematic as they would prefer. Others mentioned that their process for using data doesn't revolve around ACS WASC. Principals generally understand the importance of using multiple sources of data to advance school improvement efforts, yet some appear to struggle with aligning student

assessment data in accordance with the schoolwide action plan. Several interviewees express a desire to network with schools that have successfully implemented and used the ACS WASC accreditation process.

Some principals shared that the ACS WASC *Focus on Learning* process could be more streamlined, less redundant and even more aligned with the Local Control Accountability Plan. The results reinforced that accreditation is widely regarded as a valued activity, but there is room for refinement. One principal stated, "A more user-friendly process would allow for greater buy-in by all stakeholders into the reflection and growth cycle."

Moreover, the survey and interview results noted that for some schools, articulation with the Single Plan for Student Achievement (SPSA) and the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) is uneven. Some schools are still not clear that the SPSA is the schoolwide action plan to which the ACS WASC self-study findings are integrated. In addition, some survey respondents noted that there is a challenge in aligning the ACS WASC school process with the district's LCAP procedures and assessments.

Interviewees would like more frequent informal "check-ins" with ACS WASC regarding the annual implementation of the action plan using "coaches" or another type of input that can be used to improve action plan implementation and the use of data prior to the self-study.

Moreover, interviewees want networking opportunities with other ACS WASC-accredited schools — for example, visiting or interacting with "model" schools with positive accreditation outcomes as well as their implementation of the ACS WASC accreditation process.

Principals appreciate support for ACS WASC accreditation from their district offices; however, the amount and types of support for ACS WASC accreditation varies considerably between districts.

Some principals cite high levels of cooperation and support from their district office leaders; others however have little or no interaction with district officials. In general, principals would like to see more district engagement in providing school and student data, fiscal resources, personnel training, and other forms of administrative support.

While most principals would like to see closer articulation between school districts and schools, it is important that district support for the accreditation process is ongoing rather than episodic.

Most principals express positive attitudes towards visiting committees.

For example, one interviewee stated, "I thought that the feedback was very positive, which we appreciated and helped us feel good about the visit, because it's by nature kind of a tense experience. It was aligned with what we had said, which I appreciated. The areas that we felt we needed to improve, they also felt we needed to improve, so there weren't any surprises or "gotchas." At the same time, principals from charter schools or those from alternative schools were more likely to comment on the need for ACS WASC to ensure a match between the composition of the committee and the nature of the school.

There were some survey respondents who describe their visit as "confrontational" and that the mindsets of visiting committee members are important. One principal said: "I like the process, but found the visit and the team that came to us a little close-minded." Another said: "Sometimes the visiting educators bring their own biases to the process and do not provide objective feedback or are thoroughly engaged in the entire school."

Related to committee composition, respondents describe the need to ensure that the visiting committee approaches the self-study visit fully grounded in the lens of the ACS WASC accreditation process versus emphasizing their own views for how school improvement might occur.

The Big Picture: Future Direction and Opportunities for ACS WASC Action

The "big picture" findings are that ACS WASC:

- Has a strong accreditation model that is widely respected
- Fosters school conditions for high-quality student learning and ongoing improvement through data analysis, reflection, inquiry, and discussion
- Provides a process for regularly examining programs, processes, and data around school goals
- Builds a professional culture to support the schoolwide action plan
- Validates a school's efforts to improve.

The ACS WASC Accreditation Cycle of Quality addresses the basic aspects of school change and transformation through its design elements.

In addition, the study provided important insights into future direction in which areas and processes need to be further examined, studied, revised and refined. These opportunities for ACS WASC are summarized below:

- Increase ongoing and multiple support to schools in the self-study and follow-up processes, and operationalize the use of data in an ongoing inquiry mode beyond the planning and implementation phases (e.g., monitoring and using assessment evidence to change practices and refine school goals).
- Work with districts and school boards on the understanding of accreditation as an ongoing school improvement process.
- Ensure the ACS WASC process facilitates alignment of the SPSA and LCAP.
- Facilitate a further review and refinement of the self-study and follow-up processes to ensure a more streamlined, effective and efficient process based on the ACS WASC principles and design elements.
- Facilitate through the process greater parent and community involvement in the school's improvement efforts.

- Move forward with strengthening a consistent process for the work of the visiting committees.
- Consider how the results of this study may prove helpful as ACS WASC interacts with state and federal policy makers, school district leaders, and school-site principals.
- Continue to engage in ongoing assessment and evaluation as a regional accrediting body through rigorous and longitudinal evaluation-based research.

While the effects of participating in the ACS WASC accreditation process can be examined on the disaggregated level (e.g., though the analysis of features and functions of a school), they should also be considered in the aggregate. Aristotle once said, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts." This is particularly true when one considers the full impact of the ACS WASC accreditation process. While such vital factors as leadership, analyzing and using data to support learning, stakeholder engagement, professional collaboration, a united focus, and a commitment to action and progress are critically important elements of a successfully accredited school, only when taken together can the synergy be appreciated and their unique contributions to each school. To use a popular analogy, understanding the quality of a school requires both bird's eye and ground level perspectives.

Therefore, policymakers and practitioners need to keep in mind that no two schools are exactly alike on any number of important variables related to effectiveness. Accreditation is an empirically grounded process for guiding and facilitating ongoing organizational renewal, transformation, and development that is aligned with a school's core values, mission, vision, schoolwide learner outcomes with the ultimate goal to provide powerful learning and teaching for every student. A recent publication by Michael Fullan and Joanne Quinn (2016) entitled *Coherence, The Right Drivers in Action for Schools, District, Systems* has reinforced the transforming attributes of the ACS WASC Accreditation Cycle of Quality.

Limitations of the Study

It is important to remind the reader that this study was exploratory. The data, findings, and analyses are predicated solely on the perceptions of California public high school principals. Further, these findings cannot be extended or attributed to other important stakeholders (e.g., teachers, staff, parents, community members, students, district office staff). A comprehensive analysis of the ACS WASC accreditation process will require additional study through the application of multiple research methods.

Finally, schools are complex and dynamic entities subject to unpredictable and often uncontrollable influences. Thus, any study that applies quantitative and/or qualitative methods to examine schools and their participants can only provide a partial portrait of how schools work. Simply, there are innumerable latent variables that come to bear on schools and their stakeholders and that can never be accurately or consistently accounted for in a single study.

FINAL REPORT

An Initial Evaluation of the ACS WASC Accreditation Cycle of Quality for Schools

I. INTRODUCTION

How well do ACS WASC-accredited schools implement the ACS WASC self-study process? What is the relationship between the ACS WASC accreditation process and ongoing school improvement efforts? How and in what ways does the ACS WASC influence student learning?

In December of 2015, ACS WASC engaged two California-based consultants as partners in a formal evaluation study centered on the ACS WASC Accreditation Cycle of Quality. These consultants, in collaboration with Dr. Fred Van Leuven and Dr. Marilyn George of ACS WASC, were the "evaluation team" that designed, guided, and conducted the study. This study examines the perceptions of California high school principals on how schools view and use the accreditation process. This preliminary study is the first formal evaluation of the ACS WASC accreditation process since the organization's inception in 1962 (ACS WASC, F. Van Leuven & M. George, personal communication, December 7, 2015).

As one of the six pre-K-12 accrediting agencies in the United States and one of the largest preK-12 accrediting agencies in the world, ACS WASC interacts with a myriad of local, state, regional, national, and international stakeholders. Importantly, ACS WASC operates within complex professional and political environments and must effectively adapt to, and meet, the dynamic and ever-changing needs of schools and their communities. Because ACS WASC places a high value on continuous organizational learning and innovation for the schools it accredits and for ACS WASC as an organization, this study employed a developmental evaluation (DE) approach (Dozois, Langlois, Blanchet-Cohen, 2010; Patton, 2011; Patton, 2012; Patton, McKegg, & Wehipeihana, 2016). Developmental evaluation is not designed to render judgments, solutions to problems, or determinations of capacity or effectiveness. Rather, its central purposes are to examine relationships between an organization's vision and mission and the innovations of organizations, while supporting organizational adaptation to change (Patton, 2011, p. 1). DE, with its focus on the development of evidence for use, occupies a *unique niche* in evaluation as it is especially useful in providing an organization with real-time feedback under complex and uncertain conditions, in essence, a continuous development loop, or "double-loop learning" (Patton, 2011, pp. 11–12). Finally, it is especially responsive to environmental contexts and the emergent dynamics between interdependent elements within organizations (Patton, 2011). This approach to evaluation is further detailed in Section Four ("*The ACS WASC Evaluation Framework*").

Purpose of the Study

Evaluation purposes refer to the intended uses of evaluation evidence. Since this study represents the first time in which ACS WASC has examined its accreditation process at a macro-level, the primary purpose of this study is developmental in nature, that is, supporting real-time ACS WASC learning and decision-making around three key areas:

1. How ACS WASC-accredited schools are implementing the accreditation process.
2. The relationship between the implementation of the FOL cycle in schools and ongoing school improvement efforts.
3. How the ACS WASC accreditation process relates to schoolwide improvement and improved student learning, and more specifically, how and to what extent the ACS WASC principles ("tools") support the implementation of important factors related to school improvement.

The impetus for this study grew primarily from the ACS WASC's desire to acquire a deeper understanding about how (and how well) its preK-12 school accreditation model influences ongoing school improvement and powerful teaching and learning for all students and to exemplify the values and principles embodied within the ACS WASC accreditation process.

Rationale: Focus on Principal Perspectives and Public Schools

The roles, functions, and effects of school accrediting agencies in the present era of standards-based reform and accountability have become especially important markers for judging the quality of schools in America. Ironically, a dearth of empirical research exists that describes the relationship between accrediting systems and preK-12 school outcomes. A comprehensive literature review on the topic of school accreditation revealed a small number of doctoral dissertations focused primarily on accreditation policies and practices among limited samples of schools, a few small-scale studies conducted by regional accrediting agencies (New England Association of Schools and Colleges [NEASC], 2006; Wilson, 1999; Wixom, 2014), and a mixture of empirical and professional literature regarding accreditation in institutions of higher education (and other professional training programs and associations). The results of this review strongly indicate that this study provides the most comprehensive and methodologically rigorous investigation of school accreditation to date. Moreover, it is the first study of its kind to focus on the principles of developmental evaluation, with references to utilization-focused, formative, and summative evaluation approaches. These studies are described in more detail later.

The decision to begin with public schools was a practical one: nearly 50% of all ACS WASC-accredited schools are public high schools in California (ACS WASC, 2015). The rationale for beginning with the principal perspective was also practical. There are many types of stakeholders associated with a school (e.g., students, families, teachers, districts). However, principals possess a singularly unique perspective in schools. First, they stand alone among school employees and stakeholders in terms of the range and the scope of professional responsibility. Second, principals are ultimately responsible for adhering to local, state, and federal laws and policies

relating to public education. Third, at a school site, they alone have complete access to and responsibility for all confidential information regarding the conditions and performance of both the student body and workforce (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe & Meyerson, 2005). As a result, principals are likely to possess both broad and insightful perspectives about and knowledge of the ACS WASC accreditation process and its impact on the school.

While ACS WASC is aware that ongoing longitudinal research is required to adequately examine questions of effectiveness and impact of the ACS WASC accreditation process on student learning (i.e., summative and impact evaluation purposes), ACS WASC and researchers determined that capturing the principals' perspectives is an essential first step in a multi-faceted investigation. Future research would necessarily involve other ACS WASC sub-populations (independent, church-related, international, church-related/international, adult, proprietary) and multiple stakeholder types (e.g., district/local educational authorities (LEAs), teachers, parents, students, community organizations, state and federal entities).

Intended Uses of the Results

While ACS WASC regularly conducts self-assessments and makes improvements to its accreditation model, such a large-scale study has never been conducted before (ACS WASC, 2015; ACS WASC, 2012). The Commission intends to use the evaluation-based evidence from the study to:

- Provide a starting point for comparing the Commission's understanding of how the model functions to support school change and the range of ways in which schools implement the process;
- Identify areas of strength and opportunities for ongoing development of the ACS WASC Accreditation Cycle of Quality;
- Refine accreditation standards and processes;
- Communicate objective and empirically rigorous information about how the ACS WASC accreditation model supports school improvement to policy makers, educational practitioners, and the general public;
- Build a strong foundation for answering questions of effectiveness and impact.

Importantly, the Commission is aware of growing concerns regarding the quality and rigor of accreditation practices in American higher education (Kelderman, 2011; Stratford, 2014) and thus, is taking proactive steps to provide credible, empirical, rigorous, and useful information about the ACS WASC accreditation model to all Commission stakeholders.

Intended Audiences for This Report

This report is both comprehensive and technical in nature. It is primarily intended for those who are interested in a complete description of the study (e.g., those interested in the technical aspects of the evaluation, evaluation practitioners, or for those who engaged in elementary and

postsecondary school accreditation). While the evaluation team drew upon the accreditation literature related to higher education, postsecondary education is *not* the focus of this study.

Report Structure

To gain deeper insights into the structures, systems, and goals of educational accreditation, the first section of the report begins with an introduction. Section two provides a review of institutional accreditation in schools and colleges and traces its evolution from the 1800s to the present and a discussion of the central conceptual and theoretical frameworks around which the ACS WASC accreditation model was designed. The third section provides a discussion of the ACS WASC evaluation framework, followed by the fourth section, evaluation methods. In section five the results of the study are discussed, and section six includes a discussion of the conclusions and implications of the study.

II. HISTORY OF ACCREDITATION: CONCEPTS AND PRACTICES

Origins of Institutional Accreditation

The history of school accreditation can be traced to the enactment of school inspection laws by the British Parliament in the 1830s to ensure that government grants in support of education were effectively used by schools. After nearly 175 years, the school inspection system in Great Britain continues to serve as the government's central school quality control mechanism (Bernasconi, 2004; Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, 2014; Wilson, 1999). Unlike the more recently developed voluntary accreditation systems in America, the inspection system was, and continues to be, mandated by Parliament for designated categories of schools. This approach is primarily summative in nature and provides judgments about the level of quality provided by each school as measured against national educational standards. "Special measures" may be applied to schools that fail to achieve and maintain acceptable levels of quality. Unlike American accreditation systems, British schools are visited and evaluated by a single government inspector rather than a team of volunteer educators. The inspector reports to "Her Majesty's Chief Inspector" who works in the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, 2014).

Some aspects of the inspection system parallel elements of modern American accreditation models. For example, inspection and accreditation both provide independent external assessments of school effectiveness (with an emphasis on teaching and learning). Both approaches promote school improvement, require the development of a self-study by schools in preparation for the inspection and accreditation visits, assess each school on the basis of its alignment with educational standards, and provide feedback to the public regarding school effectiveness.

The accreditation of American educational institutions (both preK-12 and postsecondary) is largely decentralized and not administered through a nationally-regulated system as in Great Britain. Broadly however, preK-12 accreditation in America is often described as being adaptive to the needs and conditions of a mobile and highly diverse society (Brittingham, 2015). It is also considered porous in terms of its ability to interact with institutional and external environments and influences, and forgiving in that it tends to work formatively in helping institutions correct deficiencies. To some extent, accrediting bodies are risk-sensitive. They understand that the vulnerabilities of an institution can be laid bare when they are subjected to deep scrutiny by external agents. While historically, institutional accreditation originated as a voluntary activity, over the past century, federal involvement in the accreditation of postsecondary institutions has expanded (discussed in more detail later in this report) (Brittingham, 2015).

In America, the accreditation of educational institutions can be traced to 1871 and the efforts of Professor A.S. Whitney at the University of Michigan to coordinate and examine the relationship between high schools in the state and universities. Early accreditation processes involved unannounced visits to public high schools by university professors (Wilson, 1999). In 1885, America's first accrediting agency, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges

(NEASC), was established by the president of Harvard University, Charles Eliot, and Cecil Bancroft, Principal of the Phillips Academy. They intended to create a board of colleges and preparatory schools in New England that would examine high school graduates and their level of preparation for college academic work. Over time, the coalition grew to include over 2,000 public and independent schools, colleges and universities in the six New England states (MA, CT, ME, RI, NH, VT) and American/international schools in more than 65 nations worldwide. Accreditation emerged as a regional rather than a national activity and expanded throughout the early 20th century to include six major preK-12 accrediting agencies across America that serve over 7,800 schools and 25 million students (Brittingham, 2015). Historically many of these agencies accredited both K-12 schools and institutions of higher education. However, in recent years, some agencies have split into independent entities, with one focused on higher education and the other on preK-12 schools. Some agencies, such as ACS WASC, have expanded their services to foreign countries.

Accreditation in Higher Education

In 2012–13, there were 85 organizations in the United States that accredited more than 7,000 colleges, universities, and other postsecondary vocational institutions that enrolled nearly 24 million students (Eaton, 2015). U.S. accreditors review programs in both the United States and in 125 other countries. One estimate put the total number of students enrolled worldwide by U.S. accrediting organizations at approximately 28 million. According to Eaton (2015, p.2), who is also the president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, there are four types of accrediting organizations in the United States:

1. Regional accreditors that accredit public and private non-profit and degree granting institutions.
2. National faith-related accreditors that accredit non-profit, degree granting religiously affiliated and doctrinally based institutions.
3. National career-related accreditors that accredit for-profit, career-based, single-purpose institutions.
4. Programmatic accreditors that accredit specific programs, professions, and freestanding schools.

As a whole, the activities of these organizations reflect four key values (Eaton, 2011): enhancing the quality of higher education; maintaining the academic values of higher education; providing a buffer against the politicization of higher education; and serving the public's interests and needs.

Typically, accreditors examine program, faculty members and their qualifications, student support services, institutional financial management, educational facilities, curriculum, and student learning outcomes. The protocols of higher education accreditation commonly include an institutional self-study, an on-site visit and review by a team of peer experts, and a determination of accreditation status by an accrediting body (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2010).

From the latter part of the 19th century into the 1960s, accreditation in American schools and colleges was voluntary and not subject to congressional or state legislative oversight. In addition, for much of the 20th century, K-12 schools, colleges, and university accreditation was primarily designed to facilitate and stimulate institutional self-improvement (Eaton, 2011). Moreover, following World War II, Congress came to view accreditation as an important mechanism to ensure that students who were attending college under the G.I. Bill were receiving a high-quality education. While in the years following the war, the federal government had not yet enacted legislation that tethered itself to accreditation systems and protocols, accreditation became an important "gatekeeper" in terms of guiding the allocation of federal funding for loans and grants. Over time, accreditation in higher education became the primary mechanism that held colleges and universities accountable for using federal funds appropriately and effectively (United States Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, 2015).

The federal government formally enjoined its oversight of the accrediting system in 1965. Congress, with the adoption of the *Higher Education Act (HEA)*, mandated external accreditation for institutions where students had access to federally funded college loans. The act delineated the primary purposes of accreditation to ensure high-quality academic programs, stimulate institutional cultures of continuous improvement, strengthen the rigor of academic standards, and ensure the involvement of faculty and staff in educational planning and evaluation (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

For approximately the past 20 years, the politics of higher education accreditation moved beyond its long-standing focus on serving institutional interests and became an important issue for the general public and policymakers, who increasingly attributed a perceived lack of academic rigor and weak educational standards in colleges and universities to the ineffectiveness of accrediting agencies. Particular concerns have emerged over the quality of accrediting processes and agencies in relation to the proliferation of postsecondary for-profit institutions, many of which are vocationally-oriented (Kelderman, 2011). Importantly, accreditation shifted its emphasis from examining the "process" elements of external organizational review to providing a more formative method of collaborative inquiry and analysis (Wilson, 1999). In addition, the federal government began to look at accreditation both as a way to assure the public that their tax dollars were well spent and that federally supported educational accreditation provided added value to postsecondary institutions (Murray, 2009).

In 2008, the reauthorization of the *Higher Education Opportunity Act* gave greater authority to Congress (via the U.S. Department of Education [ED]) to establish guidelines relating to student learning outcomes and curriculum that traditionally had been within the exclusive purview of college and university faculty members (Eaton, 2011). More recently, on September 24, 2016, Senate Democrats introduced a bill that would strengthen the federal role in higher education accreditation by giving the USDE authority to terminate or fine accrediting agencies that fail to meet acceptable federal standards for institutional review and accreditation (Cameria, 2016).

As federal and state roles regarding institutional accreditation continued to expand over the past 45 years, concerns regarding the return on investment of a college education supported through

taxpayer-funded loans and grants moved closer to the center stage of public policy debates. Similarly, many policy makers and academics feared that America's international competitiveness (e.g., in innovation, productivity, and economic development) was losing ground to foreign countries. The Council on Foreign Relations recently released an education scorecard in which it reported that American high school and college students were falling behind other developed nations in graduation rates and in the acquisition of skills essential for success in the workplace (Council on Foreign Relations, 2013). According to Shackman (2015), there is little, if any, empirical evidence that fully accredited postsecondary institutions (e.g., academic and professional) actually produce better outcomes in terms of graduate competencies and success in the workplace. Continued widespread disagreement among accrediting agencies and their constituent institutions regarding what competencies are most important (e.g., in particular academic domains and professional fields) adds to the growing public debate over the relevance and quality of postsecondary accreditation.

In recent years, questions that examine the focus of accrediting agencies have emerged, specifically, questions about the emphasis of these agencies on an institution's internal alignment and fidelity to educational standards rather than on the academic performance and career outcomes of its graduates (Murray, 2009).

The ability of accreditation in higher education to effectively determine program quality continues as a concern of federal policy makers. For example, Stratford (2014) noted that only 1% of postsecondary institutions have lost their accreditation status and historically, accrediting agencies are no more likely to sanction low-performing institutions than higher-performing institutions. As Congress increased its scrutiny over the question of whether colleges and universities were delivering high-quality educational experiences (e.g., "bang for the buck"), some critics of accreditation maintained that university faculties often struggled to provide objective evidence regarding student learning or to show how such evidence is used to improve program curricula and instruction (Alexander, 2015; Murray, 2009). In addition, some critics have viewed accrediting agencies as being "too insular, obsessed with process, overwhelmed by regulatory demands." Others have called accrediting agencies "cartels" that squash innovation, too tough, and (conversely) not tough enough on underperforming institutions. Some have even called for Congress to eliminate federal oversight of accrediting processes and its requirement of accreditation as a condition for student financial aid (Brittingham, 2004; Kelderman, 2011, p. 3).

Such concerns have fueled the recent action by the United States Department of Education (ED) to strip the accrediting authority of the *Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools* (ACICS) for its lack of rigor and oversight of over 725 schools and colleges. Significantly, the ACICS was the largest accreditor of for-profit (and primarily vocational) postsecondary institutions in the country (Cameria, 2016). But the criticism hasn't stopped there. Former ED Secretary Arne Duncan recently remarked that many higher education accrediting agencies are "the watchdogs that don't bark" (Waldman, 2015, p.1).

Despite its detractors, accreditation remains the central accountability mechanism to ensure that the public's interest in maintaining a vibrant and world-leading system of higher education is

well-served, that taxpayer funds are being spent effectively, and that American colleges and universities regain lost ground in the competitive international educational and economic arenas (Eaton, 2011; United States Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, 2015). In recent years, Congress has established several goals for the accreditation of higher education programs. Briefly, they are to reduce the burdens of federal regulation and encroachment on institutional autonomy, streamline and simplify educational data collection, provide protection from fraud and abuse of federal student aid funds, focus on student success versus educational systems and resources, and provide the public with an assurance of quality (Kelderman, 2011; Pethokoulis, 2015).

Interestingly, a change in the focus of preK-12 educational policy at the federal level may help to explain the federal government's invigorated interest in higher education accreditation. The long overdue reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* in December 2015, now referred to as *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*, replaced the much-criticized *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB). According to *National Education Association (NEA)* President Lily Eskelsen Garcia, "This bill reflects a paradigm shift away from the one-size-fits–all assessments that educators know hurt students, diminish learning, and narrow the curriculum…" (Walker, 2015, p. 3). In addition, this bipartisan legislation corrected several of the problematic elements of NCLB and, in doing so, calmed the turbulent preK-12 policy environment that had reigned over public schools for the past decade (Kelly, 2015). Kelly suggests that the energy and interest in preK-12 policy reform may extend to higher education.

However, while the dynamics of the increased scrutiny and regulatory involvement of the federal government into the realm of higher education accreditation have yet to extend deeply into preK-12 educational systems, the federal government's concerns about school accreditors are not new. In 1999, the Government Accountability Office (GAO), the nonpartisan agency tasked with supporting the Congress and its constitutional responsibilities and ensuring that federally funded programs are held accountable for meeting the needs of American citizens, supported several of the ideas expressed by accreditation critics that such agencies had become anachronistic; lacking in rigor and objectivity; cumbersome and irrelevant to the needs and conditions faced by schools; lacking leverage to affect meaningful and durable change in schools, and lacking the backbone needed to make tough accountability decisions (Wilson, 1999). To many professionals with experience in higher education and preK-12 accreditation, these views represented a shocking lack of knowledge about accreditation processes and their importance to both educational institutions and their constituent communities (Murray, 2009).

Although the policy spotlight remains on the accrediting process and outcomes in higher education, many preK-12 school accrediting officials are keeping a close eye on the political environment. Some like ACS WASC, are working proactively to provide credible and relevant information in response to potential inquiries from federal and/or state policy makers.

Accreditation at the PreK-12 Level

In the preceding sections, the British origins of public school accrediting systems and agencies and their subsequent evolution and development in American schools were briefly described. The history of and policy issues regarding the accreditation of colleges and universities were also examined. In some important ways, the development of preK-12 school accreditation in America paralleled the higher education experience, with the primary exception being that Congress has not (yet) tethered the American preK-12 accreditation system to the granting of federal funds to schools. While the federal government has been a primary provider of postsecondary student loans and grants, it has directed much of its funding for preK-12 schools toward the support of disadvantaged and special needs students. In many large urban schools, the federal contribution to these students and their educational programs represents a sizeable proportion of their annual expenditure budgets (Manna, 2006; Wirt & Kirst, 2005). As with higher education, the federal government's interest in preK-12 accreditation is firmly grounded in its financial relationships with schools.

PreK-12 school accreditation policies and practices vary considerably across the country. Some states do not require the accreditation of public schools; some utilize the services of regional accreditation systems; and 30 states have their own school accreditation systems. In addition, some agencies offer different accrediting model options; some accredit both schools *and* districts; some are performance-based (especially in terms of student learning); and some focus more on the quality of educational programs. The concept of ongoing school improvement is an important common thread across many preK-12 accrediting models (Bernasconi, 2004). Bernasconi concludes that preK-12 accreditation in America has had an important impact on the standards movement and on shifting the school reform discussion from the systems and structures of effective schools to student learning outcomes.

In some important ways, the modern era of preK-12 school accreditation was amplified and stimulated by the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983) and the effective schools movement (Edmonds, 1979; Lezotte, 2001). *A Nation at Risk* was a published report by President Ronald Reagan's *Commission on Excellence in Education* that described America's declining competitiveness in several important educational and professional domains. In contrast, *Effective Schools* was a reform movement largely attributed to the research of Harvard Professor Ron Edmonds that targeted the urban poor and outlined a taxonomy of organizational features and dynamics necessary to engender powerful teaching and learning for all children.

Together, these events, along with emerging market-centered theories regarding the privatization of public schools (e.g., via vouchers and charter schools) engendered considerable concerns among the public and policy makers regarding the quality of public schools in America (Wirt & Kirst, 2005). An increasingly skeptical public, fueled in concert with increasingly partisan political perspectives about public education, began to search for solutions (and often quick fixes) to the conditions (real and imagined) that were illuminated by *A Nation at Risk.* These and related state and federal reform initiatives led to the present era of standards-based accountability

in schools and informed the development of many preK-12 accreditation models (Anderson, Evans, Kozak, & Peterson, 2016).

The enactment of NCLB was greatly influenced by this reform agenda. It also represented the deepest penetration into the affairs of the American public school system ever undertaken by Congress. Both liberal and conservative critics of NCLB lamented what they defined as the federalization of public education (Manna, 2006). While NCLB was controversial in a number of ways, it had a profound impact on how public schools thought about and responded to such long-standing issues as achievement gaps between white and non-white students, minority language groups, special needs students, and basic academic proficiency in core academic subjects (Crum & Sherman, 2008). According to Stein (2004), NCLB also had a seismic effect on the culture of education policy in America. Further, Stein asserts that while NCLB reshaped institutional strategies for effectively addressing the persistent achievement gaps between white and minority students, it also altered the incentive structures to ensure (and enforce) its policy objectives and shined a bright light on the ineffective organizational systems and dynamics that were enduring characteristics among underperforming schools.

In response to the energy and sense of urgency generated by these developments, preK-12 accrediting agencies began to reframe and retool both the underlying philosophical bases and operational protocols of their accreditation models. For example, during the 1986–1987 school year (and prior to NCLB), the Western Association of Schools and Colleges unveiled its revised accreditation model known as *Pursuing Excellence*. The model was based on "the degree to which a school is accomplishing the purposes and objectives outlined in its own statement of objectives and on the appropriateness of its 'types' and that the schools and their pupils have been well-served" (ACS WASC, 2012, p. 21). The core elements of the *Pursuing Excellence* protocol aligned with several criteria found in Edmond's (1979) *Effective Schools* model. For example, it supported measures of student achievement used to evaluate school progress and addressed topics related to instructional leadership, administrative leadership of the school and its various functions and operations. Further, The ACS WASC model encouraged a sense of collective accountability and commitment toward student learning, high expectations and equitable learning opportunities for all children. As it is today, parent involvement and engagement was central to an effective school (ACS WASC, 2012; Edmonds, 1979).

In the early 1990s, ACS WASC leaders, the Commission, and regional educators began discussing refinements to the *Pursuing Excellence* model, which ultimately led to the formation of ACS WASC-initiated committees charged with revising the accreditation process. Committee members included public and private school representatives who engaged in important thinking based upon the work of Michael Fullan, Carl Glickman, Peter Senge, Phillip Schlechty and others. The revision committees centered their work on the overarching conceptual questions:

- How does a school know that all students are achieving the desired schoolwide learner outcomes and the essential academic standards that prepare students to be globally competent (e.g., college and career ready)?

- Is the school doing everything possible to support high-quality achievement of all its students?

They engaged in critical thinking and discussions around topics such as education in the 21st century, school change, student-centered teaching and learning, student support systems, organizational development and leadership, program and student assessment, school accountability, and results-oriented improvement processes. All of these factors were prominent elements among 81 recommendations for high school reform described in the study conducted by the National Commission on the Restructuring of the American High School, *Breaking the Ranks* (1996). All of these efforts produced the current ACS WASC accreditation process — *Focus on Learning (FOL)*. As the title implies, *FOL* centers on school structures, systems, and processes and their impact on student learning.

During the mid to late 1990s, ACS WASC piloted the *Focus on Learning* process. The philosophical and structural dimensions of *FOL* were introduced by ACS WASC Executive Director Dr. Donald Haught and Associate Executive Director Dr. Marilyn George in their monograph titled "Focus on Learning: A Schoolwide Renewal Process of Analysis and Action" (George & Haught, 1996). According to George and Haught (p. 13), "the … *Focus on Learning* criteria are research-based guidelines of systemic school improvement that address accreditation's central tenet: a school operates with a clear understanding of its purpose." In a similar vein to Edmond's (1979) effective schools theory, *FOL* attempted to illuminate the concepts and factors that "differentiate between ineffective and effective schools" (George & Haught, 1996, p. 13).

The *FOL* process also aligned closely with John Dewey's philosophical pragmatism and strong belief in the democratic underpinnings of public education. From Dewey's perspective, public schools should be "miniature" communities that connected closely to the values of the home and community, integrated learning and experience, and prepared all children for success in adult society. A central tenet of both Dewey and *FOL* is the idea that it was the core function of a school to help students to reach their full potential as learners and human beings (Dewey, 1915, p. 15). Similarly, George and Haught (1996, p. 19) argued that in the quest to foster (and support) an effective school, all school stakeholders should ask and investigate three critical questions:

1. What should all students know and be able to do upon exit from the school?
2. What does it mean to be an educated person?
3. What is the most effective preparation of students for the future?

The transition to *FOL* occurred during (and helped to inform) an emerging national and state policy focus on student performance (while simultaneously ensuring that the quality and characteristics of organizational systems, structures and protocols were closely aligned with educational standards and successful learning for all students). Launched during the 1994–1995 school year, the new model was designed to help schools facilitate ongoing cycles of improvement through "perpetual cycles of assessment, planning, implementing, monitoring, and

reassessment" (ACS WASC, 2015, p. 3). The *FOL* model was closely aligned with the emergent standards and accountability principles central to federal and state educational reform initiatives discussed earlier. Furthermore, it sharpened the focus on how various types of evidence (e.g., student data and information) are gathered and used to galvanize the human, material, and fiscal resources of the school toward the facilitation of a) high-quality teaching and learning for all students and, b) a schoolwide culture of excellence and ongoing improvement.

Since the implementation of *FOL*, ACS WASC has regularly gathered feedback from schools through written and verbal comments and special debriefing meetings and made continual refinements and modifications to the criteria and the process. According to ACS WASC, feedback from accredited schools has provided baseline data that describes how the *FOL* process:

- Has a strong focus on student learning
- Facilitates a schoolwide examination of the instructional program
- Promotes school renewal efforts
- Promotes collaborative leadership
- Engages all staff and other stakeholders in meaningful dialogue
- Enhances the sharing of ideas and materials among staff
- Supports the internal use of existing resources
- Enhances the celebration of the strong elements of the school's program
- Supports an increased awareness by students of the school's learner outcomes.

ACS WASC officials note that as they engage in ongoing efforts to assess and refine the accreditation process, one overarching question guides their efforts: *How can the accreditation process remain a viable structure for addressing the numerous and constant external demands placed on schools while maintaining its commitment to support each school in developing its internal capacity and systems of accountability for ensuring high-quality learning and achievement of all students?*

Alignment of the FOL Model and Developmental Evaluation Purposes

Importantly, the two guiding *FOL* questions used by ACS WASC today, which emerged from the work of the ACS WASC revision committees in the 1990s, align well with a key developmental evaluation purpose (i.e., evaluation that supports innovation development) (Patton, McKegg, & Wehipeihana, 2016):

1. How are students achieving?
2. Is the school doing everything possible to support high achievement for all students?

Moreover, the model aligns closely with several inquiry frameworks grounded within Developmental evaluation (Patton, 2011). For example, both ACS WASC and Patton emphasize the following principles: a) a focus on learning (both organizationally and individually); b) the

need for a positive mindset toward evaluation that places an emphasis on building upon strengths rather than finding faults; c) a systems-change perspective; d) a values driven approach to organizational inquiry, and e) the challenges of working within complex environments where problems and issues often defy singular solutions (ACS WASC,1994, 2015; Patton, 2011).

Research on the Accreditation of Educational Institutions

As noted earlier, the number of methodologically rigorous and comprehensive empirical research on accreditation systems, agencies, and their impact on schools and colleges is sparse (New England Association of Schools and Colleges [NEASC], 2006). However, in view of the increased scrutiny by federal and state policy makers on postsecondary accrediting agencies and the ongoing public interest in reforming American public schools, it would not be unreasonable to expect similar scrutiny at some point in the future regarding preK-12 accreditors. The questions of whether accreditation is an accurate barometer of school quality, whether it actually stimulates ongoing school improvement efforts, and whether its benefits outweigh its costs in terms of the time and effort necessary to implement accreditation protocols require empirically supported answers (NEASC, 2006; Bruner & Brantley, 2004; Flanders & Wick, 1998; Wilson, 1999).

Although most of the published research on the topic of institutional accreditation relates to postsecondary institutions (e.g., academic and professional), a dozen manuscripts that reported empirically derived findings relating to preK-12 schools were examined. The intent was not to provide an exhaustive review of the literature, or to critique the quality of research studies. Rather, the purpose is to offer an overview of the types of research found in the literature and their key themes.

The review of the 12 studies reveals mixed, and at times, contradictory reports around the impact of accreditation. Eleven of the 12 studies investigated the various ways in which accreditation had an impact on schools while one focused on accreditation processes and not on questions of impact. Of those 11:

- Five reported predominantly positive findings regarding the impact of accreditation (Brunner & Brantley, 2004; Johnson, 2012; Fisch, 2010; Mathews, Hare, & Peck, 1995; New England Association of Schools and Colleges, 2006)
- Two reported a generally negative impact (Ploeg, 1997; Wilson, 1999)
- Four reported mixed effects — some positive elements and some negative around the question of the impact of accreditation (Fairman, Peirce & Harris (2009; Flanders & Wick, 1998; Rosa, 2013; Winterbottom & Piasta, 2005).

When considering the 12 studies as a whole, four overarching themes were identified, the impact of accreditation on student achievement and learning (Theme One); the impact of accreditation on school change and improvement (Theme Two); the value of accreditation on multiple aspects of schooling (Theme Three); and, a comparative analysis of accredited and non-accredited schools (Theme Four). This study focused only on Themes One and Two.

Themes in the Empirical Research. In terms of *Theme One* (Impact of Accreditation on Student Learning), the relationship between accreditation and student learning and achievement was mixed. Johnson (2012) examined the graduation rates, SAT scores, and AYP scores among 745 public high schools in Pennsylvania in an effort to address growing controversy among state legislators and the public over the effectiveness of accreditation. Johnson found that in all three categories accredited high schools were significantly better than non-accredited schools. Importantly, these findings represented an improvement over the findings from a study by Ploeg (1997), which did not detect significant differences in student learning (and other school performance variables) between schools that did and did not participate in a pilot test of the newly developed Kansas Quality Performance Accreditation System.

Bruner and Brantley (2004) found significant differences between a small sample (n=18) of accredited and non-accredited elementary schools in Georgia in 3rd and 5th grade reading scores but no differences in math scores. The authors noted that the action planning developed and implemented in accredited schools seemed to engender professional cultures that supported the value of ongoing school improvement systems. In contrast, Winterbottom and Piasta (2005) determined that there were no differences between accredited and non-accredited preschools in Florida in terms of a child's readiness for kindergarten.

Finally, a study of 149 Mississippi school districts revealed that accredited schools seemed to be associated with higher student and parent socio-economic levels (Mathews, Hare, & Peck, 1995) and by association, student test scores. While these findings are not particularly surprising given the well-established body of research regarding family income levels and student achievement, the authors also found that a school's accreditation status did not always match the state's School Report Card ratings for the school. The latter finding raised important policy issues for the state regarding ways in which to correct the misalignment between accreditation ratings and School Report Card requirements, that as of 2009, had not been rectified (Leonard & Box, 2009).

Regarding *Theme Two* (Impact of Accreditation on School Improvement), three studies (NEASC, 2006; Flanders & Wick, 1998; Rosa, 2013) closely examined the ways in which accreditation influences school change and improvement. While student achievement and success are almost always the ultimate targets of school change efforts, these studies found that other organizational variables can be important stimulants for change and that such variables may be positively influenced by accrediting processes. The New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), in a 2006 study of administrator perceptions across the 581 NEASC-accredited schools, found that the vast majority (between 69–92%) of the 226 survey respondents (school administrators) reported that accreditation was beneficial to the overall quality of education at their schools. They reported improvements in: a) teaching and learning; (b) academic focus of the learning environment; (c) staff teamwork and morale; (d) communication among staff and administrators; (e) professional development; and, (f) organizational management and development.

Flanders and Wick (1998) studied 637 schools across 19 states that were members of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCACS). In particular, they examined the

Outcome Accreditation (OA) process that had been newly implemented by the NCACS and how this process influenced various school improvement factors (Theme Two). They found that the OA process improved organizational learning, engendered a systems thinking approach to school management, encouraged data-based decisions, flattened sclerotic hierarchies, empowered teachers and staff members, and fostered distributed leadership and shared decision-making. However, the authors also found that the implementation of OA posed considerable challenges to schools. For example, increasing state mandates and regulations created feelings of diminished autonomy among many school stakeholders. The time and energy needed to implement and institutionalize the OA system was taxing and frequently perceived as interfering with essential school processes like teaching and the management of basic school operations. Most notably, Flanders and Wick noted that there were,

> "…reports in OA documents of school professionals' skepticism and resistance to this process and evidence of tight control by school districts over improvement plans. In some cases, school professionals were kept at arm's length from their own school's improvement efforts. School districts would, in different situations, identify their schools' goals, use central office personnel to interpret the data, and produce school studies or student profiles in an assembly-line manner" (p. 31).

Rosa's (2013) study of 152 ACS WASC-accredited California secondary schools examined principal perspectives regarding the self-study component of the accrediting process and its relationship to school improvement. Rosa found general agreement among principals that the self-study process helped to foster ongoing improvement efforts in schools. However, the vast majority of respondents (92%) agreed that the development and implementation of an action plan that emerged from the self-study was most strongly related to school improvement. Interestingly, no significant relationship was found between a school's accreditation status and its performance on the state's Academic Performance Index (API). Finally, Rosa found that when a school's API score was high, principals were more likely to perceive that positive relationships existed between the score, the accreditation process, and subsequent school improvement efforts.

Fairman, Peirce, and Harris (2009) focused on the costs and benefits of accreditation among high schools in Maine. The authors conducted 50 structured telephone interviews with a combination of superintendents, principals, and school board members from schools and district members of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC). Respondents indicated that the self-study process provided the greatest benefit for schools through its ability to stimulate reflection, dialogue, inquiry, empowerment and a sense of purpose among administrators and teachers. They also noted the benefits of the immediate feedback and guidance received from visiting committees while on-site. However, respondents had mixed perceptions about the relevance, accuracy, and fairness of visiting committee final reports. Most acknowledged accreditation's political value in terms of communicating school performance to members of the broader school-community, for example, a strong accreditation result engendered a sense of community pride and helped validate a school's own perceptions of quality and effectiveness. Concerns were raised by virtually every respondent regarding the time, effort, and resources required to prepare for, conduct, and follow up on accreditation protocols. Financially, the

average cost of supporting the accreditation process over ten years was estimated to be $33,000 per school. In the midst of America's greatest recession in nearly 60 years, such costs were difficult to absorb as district and school funding shriveled. However, despite this, most respondents believed that the costs of accreditation were outweighed by its benefits (Fairman, Peirce, & Harris, 2009).

The processes of accreditation were studied by Wilson (1999) and Fisch (2010). Briefly, Wilson maintained that across NEASC member schools, the signature event of the accreditation process was the on-site visit by a team of peer educators. In contrast to Fairman, Peirce, and Harris (2009), Wilson found that the self-study process was the least helpful component of accreditation. The author pointed to familiar concerns expressed by some school practitioners that the self-study was cumbersome, time-consuming, and an unnecessary distraction from the important work of the schools.

Fisch (2010) provided a somewhat novel perspective on accreditation processes. Sponsored by the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges (SASC), Fisch conducted a 10-month study on how a single high school implemented a portfolio approach to the self-study process where an emphasis was placed on storytelling and deep descriptive narratives. In this case, the study focused on identifying and supporting the formative aspects of the accreditation process rather than more summative or outcomes-based aspects. According to Fisch, the portfolio strategy helped school stakeholders to clarify individual and collective values regarding education and to build a shared culture around effective schooling. At the end of 10 months, there was emergent evidence that the school was engaged in collaborative and relevant improvement efforts.

Summary

The overview of the preK-12 accreditation research literature provides some important insights. First, accreditation processes are generally perceived as being helpful in promoting powerful teaching and learning and school improvement activities. However, the degree of improvement can vary between academic subjects and school contexts. Second, the impact of school accreditation appears to be strongly influenced by various contextual factors, such as district office involvement and support, regional and community demographics, organizational culture and professional dynamics, and accreditation protocols. Third, there are challenging aspects of accreditation processes that may produce stress in school stakeholders around issues of time, effort, and perceptions of the costs versus benefits of accreditation. Finally, while the purposes of school accreditation are almost universally directed toward the improvement of student learning, there are other operational and cultural aspects of a school that might benefit from inclusion in the accreditation process.

In the following section, the evaluation team examined the common elements of preK-12 accreditation protocols and their theoretical and conceptual foundations in American schools. Note that much of the theoretical literature is multi-disciplinary and not limited to education.

Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations of School Accreditation

Understanding the theoretical and conceptual foundations of accreditation is more than an academic exercise — it is integral to the effective functioning and ongoing development of accreditation systems and processes. While the theoretical bases of accreditation have emerged from multi-disciplinary research perspectives (e.g., education, business, organizational and leadership theories, social psychology, human learning and cognitive development), they also provide useful explanations that illuminate causal inferences about what accreditation does, and how well, that are grounded upon rational and objective investigations of complex organizations and their social systems. Moreover, accreditation models that are explicitly grounded in theory can provide a clear focus on the elements of accreditation that are most important and a basis upon which socially complex populations can find common vision and purpose.

The analysis of the theoretical and conceptual foundations of accreditation is organized around three primary theoretical and conceptual constructs:

- Organizational dynamics (i.e., change, learning, development, systems thinking)
- Social and adult learning
- Participatory action research.

Rather than examining each construct independently, the evaluation team discussed how they align with the ACS WASC accreditation model concurrently, for it is only through the dynamic interplay among these constructs that the accreditation model can be accurately described and understood.

The approach was to use the ACS WASC accreditation model as an exemplar for preK-12 accreditation systems in America. While the evaluation team realizes that variations in model design elements and protocols exist among the six major education accrediting agencies, three components that appear in the accreditation processes of the six, including ACS WASC, were identified:

1. **Self-Study Process**: The development of a schoolwide self-study based upon collaborative inquiry across multiple stakeholder groups to include data analysis, standards-based program assessment, and a focus on student learning.
2. **Continuous Improvement through Action Plan Implementation and Evaluation**: The development and implementation of a schoolwide action plan that is aligned with self-study findings. Schools are expected to evaluate the resulting assessment data and to use the evaluation evidence to drive ongoing school improvement, again with a focus on student learning
3. **Organizational Action Research**: Together, design elements one and two represent a form of organizational action research that is cyclical and continuous and can be described as "…social inquiry through which members of social groups interact with one another, engage in open dialogue about their intergroup relationships, and

> collectively participate in a learning process to create social change within their communities" (Glassman, Erdem, & Bartholemew, 2012, p. 274).

In some important respects, the ACS WASC model represents a form of participatory action research that emphasizes a "reflective process of progressive problem solving led by individuals working with others in teams or as part of a 'community of practice' to improve the way they address issues and solve problems" (Atkins & Wallace, 2012, p. 131).

Importantly, the ACS WASC Accreditation Cycle of Quality was designed to be a catalyst for thoughtful, collaborative, and evidence-based school improvement. It was not designed to be a template for reform nor as a prescription for change (ACS WASC, 1994, 2015). Rather it offers a comprehensive, robust, and developmental framework to assist and facilitate organizational learning, inquiry, change, and the evaluation of improvement interventions and innovations (Von Bertanlanffy, 1968; Patton, 2011). Since the early 1990s, ongoing efforts by ACS WASC to improve upon the Accreditation Cycle of Quality have been deeply informed by the work of Michael Fullan (1991, 2001, 2007, 2008, 2016) and Douglas Reeves (2004, 2007). Both Fullan and Reeves have studied and written about a wide range of topics relating to school change and reform including, but not limited to, leadership and teacher development, organizational learning, organizational systems and structures, data-based accountability and improvement processes, and school culture. Their influence has been profound both among academics and practitioners.

The ACS WASC accreditation process recognizes and encourages organizational support for double-loop learning (Argyris, 2002) that moves away from the insularity of closed system thinking and toward a dynamic interplay between a school and its external environments and across organizational hierarchies (Schein, 2002). Bandura (1971, p. 39) described this dynamic as a "reciprocal influence process" where the interaction between an organization and its controlling influences (e.g., both internal and external) promote social learning. Schein (2002, p. 35) further explains that complex human systems are in a state of "quasi-stationary equilibrium," which in essence describes much of the underlying change assumptions of the ACS WASC process (e.g., that change processes can simultaneously include activities and events that are ongoing, dynamic, fluid, disruptive, nonlinear, iterative, and irregular).

It is also noteworthy that the disorienting nature of change and its potential to stimulate transformative learning in adults is an implicit feature of the ACS WASC model and has been supported empirically by Kotter (1996), Mezirow (1991), and Schein (2002). Essentially, the theory of transformative adult learning posits that the seeds of change are planted when a schism between processes, procedures, and outcomes creates dissonance among members of an organization (things aren't working as planned and what can be done to fix them). Movement towards changed practices, systems, and structures begins when those within the organization (schools) "unfreeze" deeply held assumptions, world-views, beliefs, and practices. Unfreezing occurs when new cognitions and attitudes emerge from self-reflection, social discourse, observations, and constructive feedback from unsuccessful practices. Change occurs once new concepts, meanings, and standards (e.g., performance, regulatory, cultural, etc.) are realized and

acknowledged by members of the organization. Finally, a "refreezing" process occurs when the change initiative becomes internalized, institutionalized, and routinized (Lewin, 1947; Schein, 1996). Under the ACS WASC model, the organizational change cycle is intended to be dialectic, ongoing, and nonlinear.

The social construction of learning (Flanders & Wick, 1998) is a central theoretical foundation of the ACS WASC self-study and action plan components. For each component, the accreditation model encourages the mediation of social discourse and professional collaboration in pursuit of team and organizational learning that produces multiple strategies for organizational development and improvement (Mwanzia & Wong, 2011; Schein, 1993 Senge, 1990). The ACS WASC model engenders organizational development through the application of human process based interventions (e.g., inter- and intra-group relations and collaboration); techno-structural strategies that align organizational processes, systems and structures, and organizational transformational strategies that align vision, goals, strategy, and practices (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Collins & Porras, 1994; Mwanzia & Wong, 2011; Porras & Berg, 1978; Senge, 1990). Collins and Porras (p. 215) maintain that in complex and developing social service organizations, "the real question to ask is not 'is this practice good?' but is this practice appropriate for us — does it fit with our ideology and ambitions?"

Key elements of Senge's (1990) learning organization help to describe the operational and conceptual logic of the ACS WASC model. The model's self-study and action planning requirements can only unfold (effectively) when traditional intra- and inter-organizational boundaries are spanned (Schein, 1993), when synergies between seemingly disparate professional actors and structures are created, when the development of personal mastery helps to create new mental models and habits of mind, and when team learning is energized through a shared vision and common purpose (Senge, 1990). In addition, the ACS WASC model encourages what Senge (1990, p. 171) refers to as the "balancing of inquiry and advocacy" (i.e., thinking deeply and critically about the organization, its purposes, confirming and disconfirming data, outcomes, and causal inferences while also giving voice to the organization's accomplishments, vision for the future, and core purposes). It is important to note that the philosophical underpinning of ACS WASC is not about uncovering all that is wrong with a school or passing summative judgments regarding its various attributes and functions, but rather, it places a developmental emphasis and offers structured guidance on how a school can engage in continuous renewal and improvement by examining its strengths and opportunities for change honestly, openly, and critically (ACS WASC, 1994, 2015, 2016).

The ACS WASC model encourages schools to examine their processes, structures, systems, student-learning outcomes, and supporting evidence through multiple lenses. The three approaches to the examination of organizational systems described by Von Bertalanffy (1968) align closely with the spirit of the ACS WASC model, that is, (a) holistic, b) reductionist, and c) functionalist. From a holistic perspective, the accreditation process asks schools to examine themselves as complete functioning units. In essence, looking at the synergistic qualities and characteristics of the school from "high altitude." In contrast, the reductionist perspective examines the function of how sub-systems operate and perform within the larger system

(e.g., grade levels, academic departments, subject matter). Finally, the functionalist approach looks upward from the sub-system level to examine its roles and relationships to the larger system. Together, these three approaches provide a school with a coherent and comprehensive way of engaging in deep, thoughtful, and objective inquiry that recognizes "circles of causality" (Senge, 1990, p. 171), interdependencies, and the nonlinear dynamics of school operations (Argyris, 2002; Fullan, 2007; Von Bertalanffy, 1968).

It is important for policy makers, practitioners, and the public to understand that the content and protocol of the ACS WASC model was designed to teach, support, and stimulate ongoing improvement activities in schools that lead to powerful teaching and learning for all students. Because the contexts and circumstances (e.g., resources, demographics, politics, environments, type of school, teacher quality, etc.) can and will vary dramatically from one school to another, the ACS WASC model was based on basic principles of school change and constructed to be malleable, agile, flexible, and adaptive to such differences. The capacity of the model to guide, stimulate, engender, and foster better teaching and learning in any given school will vary. Such variance can, to an important degree be influenced by the qualities and characteristics of a school's principal and co-administrators.

Theories of organizational leadership abound in the research literature. But the immense complexities and turbulence of school administration defy efforts to apply a singular theory to explain what effective school leadership is (Davis, 2004; Davis & Leon, 2011). What the evaluation team can say, with a reasonable degree of confidence, is that the chances of a school undertaking meaningful and lasting change initiatives without an effective leader is very small (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). As a consequence, the effectiveness and impact of the ACS WASC accreditation model on the development of institutionalized reforms and continuous improvement systems in a school is likely to depend largely on the commitment of the principal to the accreditation process. But a leader's commitment to a process alone is not enough to ensure its success, especially in the uncertain and ever-changing dynamics characteristic of preK-12 schools. The principal's ability to motivate teachers and staff, facilitate collective decision-making, and establish positive and productive working conditions in the school are critical attributes necessary for a successful accreditation outcome (Lambert, Walker, Zimmerman, Cooper, Lambert, Gardner, & Ford Slack, 1995). These conclusions are also supported by an extensive Wallace Foundation commissioned study on the relationship between principal leadership actions and student learning (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, (2010).

The conceptions of the leadership necessary to effectively implement a meaningful and lasting accreditation process also include the ability to skillfully (and often artfully) "see" the school, its environments (internal and external), and its challenges through multiple frames of reference. The successful implementation of schoolwide change initiatives almost always involves attention to the structural dimensions of a school (e.g., organizing protocols, hierarchies, regulations, etc.), the human resource needs and implications relating to change, an awareness of (and ability to navigate) the political influences and pressures facing a school, and the ability to apply various

symbolic actions and strategies to build a common appreciation for and understanding of accreditation (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Finally, the open systems theory that underlies effective school accreditation leadership supports a constant and dynamic interaction between a school and its school district (Leithwood, et al., 2010; Senge, 1990; Schein, 1993; Von Bertalanffy, 1968). In the ideal, the implementation of an accreditation process would involve a constructive interplay between the school principal (and other school stakeholders), district superintendent (or designee), and other district office departments. Together, these entities would coordinate and align resources while supporting a school through each stage of the accreditation process. By definition, open systems theory in complex and multi-dimensional organizations requires cooperation, an exchange of ideas and valued resources, and a commitment to double-loop learning (e.g., where all entities of the organization learn with and from each other) (Argyris, 1976; Glassman, Erdem, & Bartholemew, 2012).

To summarize, the ACS WASC accreditation model is deeply anchored in several established theories and conceptions of complex organizations. It is a model designed to guide, support, and facilitate school improvement in pursuit of powerful teaching and learning for all students. And, it conceptualizes school reform as a developmental process (e.g., one that is ongoing, adaptive, innovative, and recursive). It is also an evidentiary model in that it is inquiry and standards-based and outcome centered rather than process centered (e.g., the quality of student learning is more important than the characteristics of the processes and systems used by a school to effectively educate children). At the same time, the power of the ACS WASC accreditation process in producing meaningful and lasting improvement in a school, and by extension, student learning, rests not with the accreditation model, but with the degree of fidelity to which the school implements the model. Other key factors include the principal's commitment to the accreditation process and the principal's leadership skills in terms of galvanizing and facilitating the efforts of multiple stakeholders both during the self-study and during the implementation of the ACS WASC Accreditation Cycle of Quality. Finally, the quality of the support provided by additional educational structures such as the administrative bodies overseeing public schools is another factor that impacts the fidelity between the intent of the ACS WASC model and the implementation of this model.

III. THE EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

Defining Evaluation

Evaluation is defined as a systematic and applied inquiry process that involves collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing evidence that supports the learning, judgments and decisions around the "…state of affairs, value, merit, worth, significance or quality of a program, product, person, policy, proposal, or plan" (Fournier, 2005a, p. 140). The term "systematic" means that the evaluation evidence is gathered in such a way that it is impartial, credible, reliable, valid, and useful (Shulha & Cousins, 1997). The evaluation process involves the use of *evaluative logic*, thinking with the end in mind (Fultz & Davis, 2014; Patton, 2016). The three basic evaluation questions are: What? So What? Now What? (Driscoll, 1994).

What is Developmental Evaluation?

Developmental evaluation (DE), as defined by Patton, McKegg, and Wehipeihana (2016), "… is a way of approaching the challenge of social innovation through guiding principles" (p. 290). It is not suited for a prescriptive focus on goals and an adherence to activities that must be followed in order to achieve short-, medium- and long-term outcomes (p. 290). DE supports "innovation development" to guide adaptation to emergent and dynamic realities in complex environments (Patton, 2011, p. 1). Unlike formative evaluation (process improvement) or summative evaluation (evaluation that occurs when the program/evaluand is "set"), DE focuses on adaptive development.

Patton also asserts that DE differs from traditional forms of action research (solving a problem), monitoring (tracking progress on measurable outcomes), and organizational development (increased organizational effectiveness) because of the focus on development (2016, pp. 6–7). Developmental evaluation does not require the use of any evaluation method, design, tool, or inquiry framework; qualitative, quantitative, or both types of data can be used within the context of a range of evaluation designs, including qualitatively-oriented evaluations. In fact, DE can be used when an evaluation focuses on outcomes or impacts (Patton, 2016, p. 10). A range of tools can be used, including those that the evaluation team employed in this study (survey, semi-structured interview) as well as any inquiry framework (e.g., appreciative inquiry) (p. 11).

Partnership: Key Aspect of the Developmental Evaluation Mindset

A partnership between the evaluator(s) and those sponsoring or engaging in evaluation is a key feature of developmental evaluation. This approach is unlike the traditional function of the external evaluator who works apart from the sponsoring agency. For this project, the evaluation team collaborated closely with ACS WASC officials and essentially functioned as partners in the co-creation and implementation of the evaluation, Together, members of the evaluation team became "critical friends," framing important evaluative questions, challenging assumptions, intellectual rigor, supporting the evaluation implementation process, and analyzing and interpreting the resulting evidence together.

Focus of This Evaluation

With the initiation of this evaluation, ACS WASC formalizes the ACS WASC Evaluation Framework, which underscores ACS WASC's long-standing commitment to ongoing innovation as a regional preK-12 accrediting body. In this preliminary study, the focus, or major unit of analysis, rests on the ACS WASC accreditation process as implemented at the school level. In essence, ACS WASC turns the evaluative lens on the ACS WASC Accreditation Cycle of Quality with the goal of ensuring that the process itself meaningfully and effectively contributes to the capacity of ACS WASC-accredited schools to foster excellence in education through the use of the school improvement strategies.

Matching Situations and Evaluation Approaches: The Fidelity Challenge

During its first meeting, the evaluation team realized that traditional formative, summative/outcome, and impact evaluation purposes were not well-aligned with the dynamic context within which the ACS WASC accreditation process occurs. These purposes assume that the "intervention," in this case, the implementation of the Accreditation Cycle of Quality across nearly 5,000 ACS WASC-accredited schools, is known and is stable across all schools. However, as a guiding principle, the evaluation team asserts that the level of fidelity between the accreditation process in the ideal compared to how the process is actually implemented across ACS WASC schools is an empirical question that requires solid evaluation evidence that validates the values, purposes, benefits, and impact of accreditation, promotes the fidelity of application of the accreditation cycle across schools, and supports the replication or adaptation of the accreditation model by other entities. In fact, whether these traditional evaluation purposes could ever fit the context of ACS WASC accreditation remains an open question that requires much more discourse and evaluative inquiry. The evaluation team also maintains that a "developmental evaluation" (DE) approach can provide the evidence that ACS WASC needs to address the needs of the intended users (e.g., ACS WASC, state and federal policy makers, school and district leaders).

Next, the evaluation team considered the context in which ACS WASC operates as an organization as well as the context of districts and schools. There are many ACS WASC stakeholders who are a part of this context, therefore the focus on the use of evaluation evidence by intended users requires the identification of multiple stakeholder groups: students and their families, community and support organizations related to education and the support of youth, ACS WASC-affiliated organizations, including the California Department of Education, legislative staff and lawmakers in states, territories, and commonwealths under the purview of ACS WASC accreditation, professional organizations, governors and leaders of the states, territories, and commonwealths, and others.

Another challenge relates to span of control and the question of the impact of accreditation on schools and student learning. Like other regional accrediting bodies, ACS WASC has a limited sphere of authority in that schools voluntarily engage in an evaluation process (accreditation is not mandated by the federal or state governments). More specifically, ACS WASC

"…encourages school improvement through a process of continuing inquiry and evaluation and recognizes institutions through granting accreditation to the schools that meet an acceptable level of quality in accordance with the established academic standards and accreditation criteria (ACS WASC, 2016b). According to ACS WASC, accreditation is "…a voluntary dual-purpose process that schools, 1) must be worthy of the trust placed in them to provide high-quality learning, and 2) clearly demonstrate continual self-improvement" (ACS WASC, 2016c).

Further, the ACS WASC theory of action posits that a school's engagement in the initial and subsequent accreditation processes increases the likelihood that the school will make positive changes, which in turn, will promote the attainment of student outcomes, will help to maintain a qualified faculty, and will facilitate an effectively organized school. In addition, the deep implementation of a collaboratively developed schoolwide action plan grounded in a six-year assessment and evaluation cycle has a greater likelihood of generating valid evidence that is continuously used to inform school change. Finally, a mid-cycle report serves as a formative assessment while the final accreditation decision made by the Commission reflects a summative evaluation purpose. Essentially, the ACS WASC Accreditation Cycle of Quality is a framework, a set of principles (tools), and a process, that if implemented at the school level with a high degree of fidelity to the intent and purposes of accreditation, will increase the likelihood that the school will receive a strong accreditation rating. A strong accreditation signals stakeholders that the school demonstrated an "acceptable level of student achievement and school improvement" (ACS WASC, 2016d).

The evaluation team continued to explore the parameters of the situation in which the evaluation would occur (e.g., the *fidelity challenge*) (Patton, McKegg, & Wehipeihana, 2016). More specifically, the key question was: to what degree does the context of ACS WASC accreditation match the principles and purposes of DE? Or, as Patton, et al., (2016) states: "…to what extent does the evaluation incorporate the core characteristics…" of developmental evaluation? (p. 3). This is a key stage in evaluation planning and design as it requires the alignment of purposes, methods, timelines, data analyses, reporting, politics, with the needs and use of the evidence by the intended users (Patton, p. 15). Because DE also involves the principle of utilization (designing evaluations for use by the intended users), the evaluation team took great care to include the critical questions of accreditation effectiveness and impact that are central to the immediate needs and uses of ACS WASC. Therefore, DE questions were included that aim to gain a deeper understanding of how school principals view accreditation effectiveness and impact.

The ACS WASC Developmental Evaluation Framework

Below the ACS WASC evaluation framework is described within the context of eight core principles of developmental evaluation (DE): (1) developmental purpose, (2) evaluation rigor, (3) utilization focus, (4) innovation, (5) complexity perspective, (6) systems thinking, (7) co-creation, and (8) timely feedback.

Developmental Purpose

The development of innovation rests at the core of an application of the DE framework. Thus, the evaluation team carefully considered the following types of DE to determine which type best matched the context of this evaluation.

1. Developing a new intervention
2. Innovatively adapting an existing intervention
3. Taking a program or practice to a new context (taking to scale)
4. Supporting major systems change/cross systems change, and/or
5. Developing quick responses to crisis situations (Patton, 2011; Patton, et. al., 2016, pp. 292–293).

Of the five, the evaluation team determined that type two was most similar to ACS WASC's "adaptive" approach of ongoing improvements to the ACS WASC accreditation model. ACS WASC was not in the process of developing a new intervention, but instead, continued to focus on adapting the *Focus on Learning* (*FOL*) model in innovative and research-based ways.

Evaluation Rigor

In developmental evaluation, rigor refers to discipline in terms of the thinking and the manner in which an evaluation is conducted. In DE terms, a rigorous evaluation is empirically driven and data-based. Further, diligent situation recognition occurs during evaluation plan and activities involve evaluative thinking, design thinking, the appropriate use of methods based upon the context, and practical thinking (Patton, et. al., 2016, pp. 296–297). Concepts and practices that promote reliability and validity are used. Ultimately, intellectual rigor is the organizing concept.

Developmental purpose and rigor serve as the foundation upon which the remaining principles were anchored (e.g., purpose provides the scope or focus of the evaluation and the usefulness and quality of the evaluation evidence depends upon rigor) (Patton, et. al., p. 298).

Utilization-Focused Evaluation

Developmental evaluation is grounded in utilization-focused evaluation (UFE), that is, the design of evaluation for use by the intended users (ACS WASC) (Patton, 2008). More specifically, the "intended use (purpose) of developmental evaluation is to support adaptation and development of the innovation," (Patton, et. al., p. 300). In this evaluation, the innovation is the ongoing adaptation of the ACS WASC accreditation model. Thus, "use" means that the evaluation is conducted <u>with</u> the innovation team (ACS WASC). In fact, the evaluation team began the planning of this evaluation with "use by the intended users" in mind as the diverse ACS WASC stakeholder groups and developed evaluation questions that set the boundaries for the study (described below) were considered. Essentially, UFE is a decision framework that helps to ensure that the evaluation evidence can be used by ACS WASC (the intended user).

Innovation

Identifying the innovation is a key aspect of developmental evaluation and something that must be determined by those engaged in the innovation as well as the evaluators. Innovation means to change the current situation, program, and status to something new and noteworthy. By definition, those who innovate are not satisfied with the way things are. However, adaptation differs from innovation. Thus, from a DE perspective, the challenge was to define both innovation and adaptation from the perspective of ACS WASC, even in situations characterized by "wicked" problems or dilemmas (situations that are difficult to resolve) (Patton, et. al., 2016, p. 302). As defined by Tyack and Cuban (1995), wicked dilemmas are challenges that arise within organizations that are so complex and "messy" that they can rarely be resolved to the satisfaction of all stakeholders. Instead, they can only be managed. Instead of shying away from such dilemmas, ACS WASC embraces them.

There are a host of local, state, regional, and federal factors that touch the accreditation function. At the school level, there is a local context and culture that may or may not adapt well or implement schoolwide improvements with fidelity to the ACS WASC *FOL* model. Also, there are other school-level factors that can impact the degree of fidelity between the ideal and actual implementation of the model by a school (e.g., the skills and abilities of school leaders, the training of school stakeholders around the ACS WASC Accreditation Cycle of Quality, the messaging around accreditation and buy-in of stakeholders). However, the role of these factors within the context of accreditation is an empirical question that this study only begins to address. At the state level, there are ongoing changes to how education is delivered in the schools that fall under ACS WASC's purview. ACS WASC must understand and integrate these changes into their accreditation policies and process, and in turn, communicate these changes to schools and districts. Given such complexities, a principles-focused DE approach was a useful way to learn about and adapt to changes in the education and accreditation.

The primary "innovation" in the context of this study is the Commission's unwavering focus on incorporating research-based improvements to the ACS WASC accreditation model by "innovatively adapting an existing intervention, approach, or program to changing conditions, new knowledge, and new clientele" (Patton, et. al., 2016, p. 292). From a DE perspective, the challenge is to understand the nature of the *Focus on Learning* model as it functions within schools and districts and to understand the interaction of schools and their districts around the six-year accreditation cycle. A key part of this challenge is to understand how and to what degree the principles of the ACS WASC accreditation models appear within or are integrated into the actual implementation of the model at the school and district levels.

Through this initial study, it is important to understand the impact of changing the ACS WASC accreditation process using double-loop learning that moves toward developing solutions that question the "…assumptions, policies, practices, values, and system dynamics…" in ways that modify the interrelated systems in which ACS WASC functions. A key result of double-loop learning is systems change (Patton, 2011, p. 11).

Four Other Core Principles of Developmental Evaluation

The remaining principles of DE are *complexity perspective*, *systems thinking*, *co-creation*, and *timely feedback*. In this study, DE occurs through the application of complexity concepts in relation to the adaptive innovation. The context in which ACS WASC engages in its accreditation mission is most accurately described as complex, systems-oriented, and one in which the Commission must negotiate with, and adapt to, a wide variety of external forces and ongoing change. While the Commission develops and implements policies and processes around accreditation, it must also anticipate and adapt to both macro- and micro-level system dynamics.

At the macro level, ACS WASC accreditation, as an organization and process, embodies a network of complex dynamic systems. If conceptualized from a systems perspective, then the competing motivations and interests of various ACS WASC stakeholders must be considered (Williams & Hummelbrunner, 2009). Moreover, thinking systematically causes the evaluation team to examine assumptions on how the Accreditation Cycle of Quality is actually implemented at the school level. In this study, the evaluation team decided to focus on the perspectives of school principals (e.g., who possess both a wide-angle view and deep understanding of the school as an organization). The researches acknowledge that gaining the insights of teachers, classified staff, district-level personnel, parents and community members in future evaluation studies will expand the body of evidence that ACS WASC is building around the three evaluation questions described in the next section.

Nonlinearity is another complexity construct that helped to assess the context of this study. The evaluation team asserts that school change does not occur in a linear fashion. In schools, the dynamics of change can be iterative, episodic, and inchoate. Further, even small changes to the accreditation process and systems can result in large reactions, also known as "tipping points" (Gladwell, 2002; Patton, 2011, p. 125).

ACS WASC operates in *conditions of uncertainty* that characterize modern public and private schools and educational systems worldwide. Under these conditions, ACS WASC must constantly anticipate what might happen (expect the unexpected) and position both the organization and the accreditation process accordingly (i.e., adapt). ACS WASC must "anticipate, watch for, and capture the unexpected" so that it can integrate the unexpected into the mission and work of ACS WASC. According to Patton (2011, p. 127), this illustrates another key construct of complex systems known as *Emergence*. Patton explains, "Interacting elements and agents respond and adapt to each other, and to their environment, so that what emerges is a function of ongoing adaptation both among interacting elements and the responsive relationships interacting relationships have with their environment. Innovators adapt…" (p. 131).

Co-creation and timely feedback are the two remaining core principles of developmental evaluation. The members of the evaluation team functioned as partners in the development of evaluation questions, survey questions, interview questions, interim report development, and in the interpretation of the results found in subsequent sections of this report. This partnership exemplified a relatively new development in the trans-disciplinary nature of evaluation (Patton,

et al., 2016, p. 307). The optimal co-creation in developmental evaluation should increase the reliability, validity, and credibility of the resulting evaluation evidence.

The Unique Nature of This Study from an Evaluation Perspective

This study is unique in a number of ways. First, based upon the literature review, it is the first formal evaluation that employs the degree of intellectual and methodological rigor described in the following section *(Methods*). Second, instead of ignoring complexity, this study identifies these as key elements of the context in which ACS WASC operates and directly incorporates these into the study. Third, the study represents the first use of both developmental evaluation and principles-focused developmental evaluation with preK-12 accreditation as the focus (or "evaluand"). Through the use of these innovative evaluation approaches, we moved beyond the traditional formative and summative distinctions in a way that maximized the degree to which the evaluation evidence optimizes the potential for use by ACS WASC and preK-12 accreditation by promoting learning and adaptive innovation.

Finally, it is important to note that policy makers are particularly interested in identifying chains of causality between accreditation models/processes and valued school and student outcomes (e.g., achievement, SAT scores, graduation rates, etc.). What we know from research (e.g., Orr and Orphanos, 2011), is that determining causality in schools is almost (but not entirely) impossible to do. Using mathematical/statistical techniques to identify causal relationships, for example, between accreditation and student learning, is enormously complex. These analyses only allow us to look at very narrow "slices" or effects and impacts of a particular change process or intervention.

Key Evaluation Questions

Evaluation questions establish the scope (boundaries) of the evaluation and reflect the evaluation purposes presented above. These questions direct all aspects of the evaluation, including data analysis, reporting, and use of the evidence. The three key questions were developed collaboratively between November 2015 and February 2016 by the evaluation team.

Evaluation Question One revolves around the "how," and reflects developmental and formative evaluation purposes. Importantly, this question is grounded in *ACS WASC Accreditation Status Determination Worksheet* as Questions One and Two: How are students achieving? Is the school doing everything possible to support high achievement for all students? Thus, even prior to conducting this initial evaluation, ACS WASC was using the developmental evaluation lens to inform its work with schools and other stakeholders.

At the macro level, evaluation question (EQ) one asks: How do the ACS WASC-accredited schools use the ACS WASC principles as tools to implement ongoing cycles of inquiry, reflecting both developmental and summative purposes. More specifically,

- **EQ 1A**: How are schools structuring their cycles of inquiry so that all students achieve the desired schoolwide learner outcomes and the essential academic standards that prepare students to be globally competent (e.g., college and career ready)?

- **EQ 1B**: Is the school doing everything possible to support the defined high-quality learning, that is, how does the ACS WASC accreditation process influence the school's work around the following *essential tools* of the ACS WASC accreditation process?
    a. Development of school processes and procedures that support student learning.
    b. The refinement of the vision, mission, and schoolwide learner outcomes.
    c. Development of a constructive school culture that engenders professional collaboration.
    d. Development and support of effective communication structures and systems within schools.
    e. Development of a broad-based planning, implementation, and monitoring process.
    f. Development, implementation, and monitoring of the schoolwide improvement plan.
    g. Evaluation of collegial strategies used to implement innovations.

Evaluation Question Two examines how and in what ways the Accreditation Cycle of Quality is correlated with school improvement. At the macro level, this question asks reflects a developmental evaluation perspective: How does the ACS WASC *Focus on Learning* (*FOL*) accreditation process influence school improvement? More specifically, there are two sub-questions:

- **EQ 2A**: What is the relationship between the implementation of the ACS WASC *Focus on Learning* (*FOL*) accreditation process and ongoing school improvement?
- **EQ 2B**: To what extent was the ACS WASC accreditation process effective through its influence on the following:
    a. Development of school processes and procedures that support student learning.
    b. The refinement of the vision and mission and schoolwide learner outcomes as the foundation for student achievement and school improvement.
    c. Development of a constructive school culture that engenders professional collaboration.
    d. Development and support of effective communication structures and systems within schools.
    e. Development of a broad-based planning, implementation, and monitoring process.
    f. Development, implementation, and monitoring of schoolwide improvement plan.
    g. Evaluation of collegial strategies used to implement innovations.

Evaluation Question Three reflects a question that might be asked by variety of accreditation stakeholders, especially those in the policy arena. That is, how are the effects of participation in the ACS WASC accreditation processes apparent at the school-site level? Although this study focuses primarily on developmental and formative evaluation purposes, the evaluation team

included this question to inform future ACS WASC evaluation efforts around questions of accreditation effectiveness and impact.

- **EQ 3A**: What is the long-term effect of the ACS WASC accreditation process on schoolwide improvement and improved student learning?
- **EQ 3B**: To what extent did the ACS WASC principles (essential tools) support the long-term implementation of the following?
    a. The school's capacity to diagnose organizational strengths, weaknesses, opportunities for growth, and implement self-corrective strategies.
    b. A culture of collaboration, shared decision-making and self-reflection among stakeholders.
    c. A schoolwide action plan that is based on a shared vision for successful student learning and global competence (i.e., college and career ready).
    d. Student achievement of schoolwide learner outcomes and academic standards.
    e. An ongoing learning community and professional development for all staff in support of powerful teaching and learning for all students.
    f. Organizational systems, policies, and procedures that focus all fiscal, material, and human resources toward the attainment of successful learning for all students.
    g. The school sustainability of ACS WASC-initiated improvement initiatives over time.

IV. EVALUATION METHODS

In this section, we detail the evaluation approach and design, the participants, and the procedures associated with the development and deployment of the data collection instruments.

Mixed-Methods Research Approach

Given the developmental purpose of this preliminary study, the evaluation team employed a mixed-methods research (MMR) approach, in which both quantitative (QUANT) and qualitative (QUAL) data were combined in a rigorous and predetermined way. The use of MMR is based upon the proposition that using both types of data will result in a better understanding of the phenomenon under study while addressing the limitations of using one type of data (QUANT or QUAL) over the other (Creswell, 2014, 2015; Edmonds & Kennedy, 2016; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). This approach specifies the order in which each data type is collected, the analysis of each data type separately, and explicit integration of both data types back into the research (evaluation) design. Typically, one type of data is emphasized over the other (Creswell, 2014, 2015). Other terms for this approach include "multi-method," and mixed-methodology (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Mixed-methods research involves a significant investment of time both in the extensive data collection procedures as well as in the analysis of both quantitative AND the qualitative data (Creswell, 2014).

Evaluation Design

In this study, an *explanatory sequential mixed-methods evaluation design* was employed, which is well-aligned with the principles of developmental evaluation as well as with the context in which the ACS WASC accreditation process operates (e.g., a complex, adaptive, systems-oriented, and dynamic environment [Patton, 2008, 2011]). The design consisted of two phases, a quantitative strand, the single-model *2016 ACS WASC Principal Survey* followed by a qualitative strand, the conduct of semi-structured interviews using the *2016 ACS WASC Public High School Principal Interview Protocol* (see Table 1).

The development of the content and structure for the survey and interview protocols were grounded in the evaluation purposes and scope of the studies (through use of the key evaluation questions). As the survey administration came to a close, the initial survey results were analyzed and used to design the interview protocol.

Study Participants

All *public* high school principals in California (n=2,066), whose schools were fully accredited by ACS WASC on or before December 15, 2015, were asked to participate in the survey phase of the study. Table 1, which is based upon ACS WASC data, disaggregates this sub-population by ACS WASC "Type" and "Category." Participating schools were organized around seven school types and two categories (public schools and charter schools).

Table 1: Number and Percent of Survey Participants (California Public High School Principals)

SCHOOL TYPE	PUBLIC	CHARTER	TOTAL
Alternative/Continuation	408 (97.14%)	12 (2.86%)	420 (20.33%)
Comprehensive	1,074 (80.45%)	261 (19.55%)	1,335 (64.62%)
Independent Study	99 (42.13%)	136 (57.87%)	235 (11.37%)
Juvenile Court	34 (100.00%)	0 (0)	34 (1.65%)
Online/Distance	6 (16.22%)	31 (83.78%)	37 (1.79%)
Special Education	3 (100.00%)	0 (0)	3 (.15%)
State Special School	2 (100.00%)	0 (0)	2 (.10%)
TOTAL	**1,626 (78.70%)**	**440 (21.30%)**	**2,066 (100.00%)**

For the follow-up interviews, a sample of 40 principals was drawn from the population of 2,066 schools using random and stratified purposeful sampling strategies. Of those, 20 participated in interviews. Participation in the survey was not a requirement for participation in the semi-structured interviews.

Survey and Interview Instruments

Survey Design Considerations and Pilot Test

Survey item development occurred through an ongoing collaboration between ACS WASC and the evaluation team during the period of January 2016 through mid-February, 2016. All items were assigned to an evaluation question during survey development in order to promote reliability and validity of the resulting data.

Initially, several design and administration considerations were considered (e.g., timing of survey administration, length of the survey administration period, and mode of survey administration). The researchers decided to use a browser-based web survey format (Surveymonkey.com) due to the assumption that principals would be more likely to participate if the request came to them first via email. Various factors influenced the survey approach such as, ease of administration, low costs, decreased data processing time, speed of participant response, and the potential for participants to use a range of devices, including desktops, tablets, and smartphones. This approach has gained immense popularity in recent years for these very reasons (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014; Fowler, 2014).

The response options in the survey reflect a combination of six-point Likert-type rating scales[1] (ordinal/interval level of measurement), a five-point unipolar Likert-type rating scale, a four-

[1]Six-point rating scale anchors included: Strongly Disagree=1, Disagree=2, Slightly Disagree=3, Slightly Agree=4, Agree=5, Strongly Agree=6. The five-point rating scale anchors included: Very High=5; Somewhat High=4;

point Likert-type unipolar rating scale, and a forced choice (nominal level of measurement) (yes, no, unsure or yes, no) (Fowler, 2014; Groves, Fowler, Couper, Lepkowski, Singer, & Tourangeau, 2009).

In addition to analyses planned around answering the evaluation questions, another design consideration emerged from the questions around the degree to which survey responses might differ depending upon several school-level variables (e.g., principal leadership experience, school size, race/ethnicity distributions, graduation and dropout rates, and University of California a-g course completion rates). Since its inception, ACS WASC has assumed that the accreditation process is "blind" to these types of contextual (school) variables. The evaluation team decided to engage in a preliminary test of this assumption through the collection of this data.

Respondents were provided specific instructions and the URLs needed to guide them to an online report on which they had already provided data about their schools: the *Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) State Priorities Snapshot*[2] (2014–2015 report). Once principals navigated to the report page, they entered the following 2013–2014 data from their own school into the web-based survey form:

- Enrollment
- Percentage of enrollment by race/ethnicity
- 2014 four-year high school graduation rate
- Graduating class 4-year high school dropout rate
- Percent of the 4-year cohort that complete the University of California A-G requirements (Question #25)
- Percent of students who passed an AP exam with a score of 3 or higher (Question #26).

Finally, in the week prior to the official 2016 survey administration, the evaluation team conducted a small-scale pilot test involving a group of seven school district leaders identified by ACS WASC and DFCG. Input from the pilot test participants informed final changes to the survey.

Interview Protocol Design Considerations

Toward the end of the survey administration, initial survey data were used to initiate development of the interview protocol. As a first step, the evaluation team identified the maximum interview duration: 60 minutes, given the hectic and time-sensitive nature of the

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Average=3; Somewhat Low=2; Low=1. The four-point rating scale anchors included: Very Engaged=4; Somewhat Engaged=3; Somewhat Disengaged=2; Disengaged=1.

[2]The LCFF is California's new school (K-12) finance model, signed into law by Governor Jerry Brown on July 1, 2013 and became active for the 2013–2014 school year (California Department of Education, 2016; retrieved 8/22/2016: http://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/aa/lc/lcffoverview.asp). The LCFF State Priorities Report for a school may be found by navigating to http://ias.cde.ca.gov/lcffreports/.

principal's role in schools. Interviewees could voluntarily extend the interview length if necessary.

Next, the evaluation team decided that a *semi-structured interview format* was most appropriate for this evaluation, specifically because a second interview would not be scheduled (Bernard, 2013). Finally, the evaluation team aligned the interview questions with both the survey and evaluation questions as well as the applicable ACS WASC accreditation principles and design elements and refined this alignment during the course of the interviews. The final interview questions appear in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Principal Interview Questions

Question One:

1A: From your perspective as principal, what is the value of the ACS WASC accreditation process?

1B: As a principal, how does the ongoing accreditation process influence your efforts to foster school improvement?

Question Two: How does your school use the ACS WASC accreditation process to:

2A. Enhance stakeholder understanding of the school's overall goals for students (e.g., schoolwide student goals, the assessment of student achievement around these goals and the academic standards)?

2B: Examine student achievement and demographic data?

2C: Examine educational programs for their effectiveness in supporting student learning and well-being (through the lens of the ACS WASC criteria and indicators)?

2D: Align the ACS WASC schoolwide plan, the SPSA, and the LCAP?

Question Three: Provide an example of improved practices/systems/programs that occurred because of your school's engagement in the accreditation process.

Question Four: As you think about the ACS WASC accreditation process we discussed in Question Two, what are some suggestions that you have for improvement, specifically:

4A: The self-study process, including training delivered by ACS WASC or by your district/school?

4B: How the accreditation process helps your school examine data?

4C: How the process helps your school use data to update and improve educational programs and initiatives?

4D: How the process helps your school use data to update the schoolwide action plan?

Question Five: In terms of the schoolwide action plan, how does the accreditation process help you to:

5A: Implement the plan?

5B: Monitor and assess progress toward plan goals?

5C: Use findings to inform changes in educational programs and practices?

5D: Update or revise the action plan?

Question Six: How did you use the feedback and reflections of the ACS WASC visiting committee for your last full self-study/visit process (or for the mid-cycle or other type of visit)?

Question Seven

7A: Please comment on the degree to which you feel that your (a) governing/school board and (b) district leaders understand the ACS WASC accreditation process as a school improvement process.

7B: How does each of these entities (governing/school board, district) support your school's focus on student learning and ongoing school improvement?

Question Eight: How has the ACS WASC accreditation process facilitated the engagement of parents in your school's educational program? (consider engagement with program planning and implementation)

Survey Procedures

Census of the Target Population. The survey phase involved a census of all public high school principals in California (N=2,066). More specifically, the intent was to gather information from every principal from every ACS WASC-accredited public high school in California. *Therefore, the evidence obtained in this study can only be generalized to this subgroup of the 4,600 schools accredited by ACS WASC on December 15, 2015*.

Survey Administration Timeframe. The official survey administration began on February 17, 2016, and ended on March 1, 2016. Respondents received an email reminder on February 24, 2016, from ACS WASC president.

Recruitment. The survey link was distributed to the ACS WASC population of public high school principals in California (N=2,066) through a personal email sent by the ACS WASC president. The president also sent an informational email regarding the survey and its purposes to the superintendents of principals' districts. Principals were informed that their participation was voluntary and were invited to complete an informed consent form. The informed consent protocol explained the confidential nature of the data provided via survey completion as well as how the data would be protected and used.

Interview Procedures

Sampling from a Qualitative Perspective. A *random and stratified purposeful sampling* method was used to select interview participants from 40 schools across California. The first step was to identify the type and characteristics of the principals whom the evaluation team wished to interview. The decision was based on four personal and school-based characteristics upon which to develop the sample:

1. School type (e.g., alternative/continuation, comprehensive)
2. Completion of self-study and receipt of accreditation decision in 2014–2015 (Year One group of schools) and in 2011–2012 (Year Four group of schools)
3. Region of California (as defined by the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association [CCSESA, 2016]), and
4. Population density of the CCSESA region in which the school was located.

In terms of school type, the evaluation team wondered if there were any differences around how different types of schools implemented the ACS WASC Accreditation Cycle of Quality. Second, the evaluation team based the decision to focus on year one and year four schools within the six-year accreditation cycle. The purpose was to obtain input from principals whose schools were at the start of the accreditation process versus those with four years of experience in the cycle.

In addition, the evaluation team wondered whether there might be differences in how schools approached the accreditation process across different parts of California, especially given the diversity in regions, socio-economic status around schools, etc. Thus, to facilitate an exploration of this question, sources that divided California Counties into regions or groups of counties were

examined. This included California government websites, the U.S. federal census website, the California Interscholastic Federation (CIF) regions, and the CCSESA categorization of counties. The latter was chosen as it divided the counties into a greater number of regions than did the number used by the CIF.

Finally, given the diversity of population density across California, and the assumption that the number of students and financial resources would be greater in larger metropolitan centers than in less populated areas of the state, the evaluation team included this as another factor to examine (see Table 3 below). A proportional sampling was selected from the sub-population of 620 high schools that were in either year one or year four of the accreditation cycle. The final distribution of schools appears in Table 4.

Table 3: Distribution of Year One and Year Four ACS WASC-Accredited Schools by CCSESA Region and CCSESA-Based Population Density

CCSESA Region (County) (Total of 11)	**CCSESA-Based Population Density** (% of Total Population of California)	**Study Group: Year One or Year Four**		**Total** (Year 1, Year 4 Schools)
		Year One (2014–2015 Self-Study)	**Year Four** (2011–2012 Self-Study)	
One: Del Norte, Humboldt, Lake, Mendocino, Sonoma	1.61	16	8	**24**
Two: Butte, Glenn, Lassen, Modoc, Plumas, Tehama, Trinity, Shasta, Siskiyou	1.88	14	9	**23**
Three: Alpine, Colusa, El Dorado, Nevada, Placer, Sacramento, Sierra, Sutter, Yolo, Yuba	3.58	16	18	**34**
Four: Alameda, Contra Costa, Napa, Marin, San Francisco, San Mateo, Solano	5.22	31	23	**54**
Five: Monterey, San Benito, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz	6.32	24	20	**44**
Six: Amador, Calaveras, San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Tuolumne	6.56	30	13	**43**
Seven: Fresno, Kings, Madera, Mariposa, Merced, Tulare	6.82	25	16	**41**
Eight: Kern, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Ventura	11.53	43	21	**64**
Nine: Imperial, Orange, San Diego	13.24	30	39	**69**
Ten: Inyo, Mono, Riverside, San Bernardino	16.98	54	30	**84**
Eleven: Los Angeles	26.27	96	44	**140**
TOTAL	**100.00%**	**379**	**241**	**620**

Table 4: Initial Sample of Schools Selected for Interviews (n=40)

CCSESA Region (Total of 11)	**CCSESA-Based Population Density** (% of Total Population of California)	**ACS WASC School "Type"** (A=Alternative / Continuation) (C=Comprehensive) (I=Independent Study)	**Study Group: Year One or Year Four**		**Total** (Year 1, Year 4 Schools)
			Year One (2014–2015 Self-Study)	**Year Four** (2011–2012 Self-Study)	
One: Del Norte, Humboldt, Lake, Mendocino, Sonoma	1.88	0	0	0	**0**
Two: Butte, Glenn, Lassen, Modoc, Plumas, Tehama, Trinity, Shasta, Siskiyou	1.61	0	0	0	**0**
Three: Alpine, Colusa, El Dorado, Nevada, Placer, Sacramento, Sierra, Sutter, Yolo, Yuba	6.56	C=2	C=1	C=1	**2**
Four: Alameda, Contra Costa, Napa, Marin, San Francisco, San Mateo, Solano	13.24	A=1 C=5	A=1; C=3	C=2	**6**
Five: Monterey, San Benito, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz	6.82	C=2	C=1	C=1	**2**
Six: Amador, Calaveras, San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Tuolumne	3.58	C=2	C=1	C=1	**2**
Seven: Fresno, Kings, Madera, Mariposa, Merced, Tulare	5.22	A=1; C=5	A=1; C=3	C=2	**6**
Eight: Kern, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Ventura	6.32	C=2	C=1	C=1	**2**
Nine: Imperial, Orange, San Diego	16.98	A=1; C=4	A=1; C=2	C=2	**5**
Ten: Inyo, Mono, Riverside, San Bernardino	11.53	C=2	C=1	C=1	**2**
Eleven: Los Angeles	26.27	A=3; I=1; C=9	A=2; I=1; C=5	A=1; C=4	**13**
TOTAL	**100.00%**	**A: 6, C: 33, I: 1 TOTAL=40**	**24**	**16**	**40**

Recruitment. The initial recruitment of principals occurred through personal phone calls made to the principal of a school by the ACS WASC president. During this initial call, the president explained the purpose of the study, the one-hour time limit, and introduced the interviewers. If the principal consented to participate in the interview, the principal was contacted to schedule the interview. Interviews were conducted primarily face-to-face. Other interview modalities were used, primarily phone interviews, if this better suited the schedule of the principal.

During the initial contact with the principal, the informed consent component was described. After an interview was scheduled, principals were sent a follow-up email (on the same day) to confirm the date and time. This email also explained that the interview would be audio-recorded and that the interviewee would receive a copy of the transcript as it became available.

Informed Consent. At the beginning of the interview, components of informed consent were shared with principals. Raw transcripts would not be shared with ACS WASC, that only the evaluation team would be analyzing the data, and that the person's input would be combined with the input of all interviewees. Principals were informed that they would receive a copy of the transcript and would be notified when the final report became available. Principals were asked to indicate their consent into the voice recorder.

Conduct of the Interview. The interviews were conducted during the period of April 7, 2016, through June 2, 2016. Most interviews were conducted in person, while others took place over the phone. After each interview, interviewees were encouraged to send an email to the evaluation team if they had additional thoughts or input to share.

V. EVALUATION RESULTS

In this section, the evaluation team presents the results in accordance with the Mixed-Methods Explanatory Sequential Evaluation Design (introduced in *Evaluation Framework* section), that is, the qualitative results are used to "explain" or illuminate the survey (quantitative) results. The analysis of data was approached from three perspectives, 1) a descriptive analysis of survey items, 2) a nonlinear principal component analysis to examine how responses from individual survey items 10–21 clustered conceptually, and 3) the analysis of interviews. In this section the results are presented from the three analyses. In the final section of the report (Discussion) an integrative analysis of these results and their relationship to the three primary research questions is provided.

Survey Results

Response Rates

Surveys were sent via SurveyMonkey to all 2,066 public high school principals in California. 994 responses were received. For the substantive survey content in items 4 through 21, this represented a 43% response rate. However, not all submissions included complete information. As a result, the evaluation team excluded 231 incomplete and other ineligible responses (e.g., explicit refusals via the informed consent process, whole case exclusions, and patterns of missing data at the survey item level) to arrive at a final sample size of 763 (37%). This exceeds the average response rate of 24% for online surveys (Ilieva, Baron, & Healey, 2002). While imputation methods for addressing missing responses were considered, it was determined that the strong sample size was representative of the entire population of California public high school principals and therefore contained adequate statistical power. In addition, the analysis did not identify patterns of missing responses. That is to say, missing responses appeared to be either missing at random (MAR) or missing completely at random (MCAR). In such cases, the imputation of missing data is not recommended (Cheema, 2014). Finally, even in cases where imputed response methods are used, they provide estimates only and are difficult to verify empirically.

The patterns of nonresponse were monotone in nature. That is, the data were ordered such that if items are missing earlier in the survey, then the remainder is also missing (i.e., the pattern is not rectangular nor arbitrary) (Shafer & Graham, 2002). Because the greatest number of non-responses were observed toward the end of the survey, the pattern of missing responses is MAR, and thus ignorable (Shafer & Graham, 2002). More specifically, this was not due to respondents' attitudes around the key quantitative items, but instead is most likely explained by factors such as fatigue and/or lack of available time to complete the survey.

Survey items 4 through 21 contain both the demographic and substantive content item responses (see Tables 5 and 6).

Demographics

Specifically, items 4 through 9 contained demographic data (see Table 5), while items 10 through 21 (Table 6) provided the survey's substantive and descriptive "content." Among the 763 respondents, 80.9% Item 16 (A-G) asked principals to respond "yes," "no," or "unsure" to seven sub-items contained within the statement, "When we plan for improvements we want to see at our school, the following stakeholders are involved." The percentage of yes responses to each sub-item are listed in descending order. 80.9% worked in public schools, 65.3% worked in comprehensive schools, 24.2% worked in alternative or continuation schools, and the remaining worked in various independent study, juvenile, or online schools. These distributions were very close in proportion to the larger population of public high school principals in California.

The majority of respondents worked in 9-12 school grade level configurations (70.8%). About 16.3% worked in preK-12 and 10-12 schools (8% and 8.3% respectively), while the remaining 12.9% represented a wide range of grade level configurations. Over three quarters (76.8%) of the respondents were actually working at their present school site during the most recent accreditation visit. In nearly two thirds (63%) of the schools the most recent accreditation visit occurred prior to the 2013 school year. Finally, almost 90% of respondents reported that their schools most recently received a six-year accreditation status with a mid-cycle progress report.

Table 5: Descriptive Frequencies for Survey Questions Four through Nine

Question 4: Is your school a charter school?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	146	19.1	19.1	19.1
	No	617	80.9	80.9	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Question 5: Your high school type?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Comprehensive	498	65.3	65.3	65.3
	Alternative / Continuation	185	24.2	24.2	89.5
	Independent Study	67	8.8	8.8	98.3
	Juvenile Court	8	1.0	1.0	99.3
	Online Comprehensive School	5	.7	.7	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Question 6: Grade levels of your school?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	PK-12	2	.3	.3	.3
	K-12	61	8.0	8.0	8.3
	1-12	1	.1	.1	8.4
	4-12	1	.1	.1	8.5
	5-12	1	.1	.1	8.6
	6-12	29	3.8	3.8	12.4

	7-12	33	4.3	4.3	16.7
	8-12	5	.7	.7	17.4
	9-12	540	70.8	70.8	88.2
	10-12	63	8.3	8.3	96.5
	11-12	23	3.0	3.0	99.5
	K-8 Homeschool, 9-12 Independent Study	1	.1	.1	99.6
	K-8	2	.3	.3	99.9
	9-12 and Adult Transition SPED	1	.1	.1	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Question 7: Were you working at your school during the most recent ACS WASC/CDE Site Visit?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	586	76.8	76.8	76.8
	No	163	21.4	21.4	98.2
	Other	14	1.8	1.8	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Question 8: Year of the most recent ACS WASC/CDE accreditation self-study / full visit for your school?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	2009–2010	36	4.7	4.7	4.7
	2010–2011	81	10.6	10.6	15.3
	2011–2012	76	10.0	10.0	25.3
	2012–2013	160	21.0	21.0	46.3
	2013–2014	128	16.8	16.8	63.0
	2014–2015	182	23.9	23.9	86.9
	2015–2016	100	13.1	13.1	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Question 9: Current status of ACS WASC/CDE accreditation for your school?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Six-Year Accreditation Status with Mid-Cycle Progress Report	139	18.2	18.2	18.2
	Six-Year Accreditation Status with a One-Day Mid-Cycle Progress Report	353	46.3	46.3	64.5
	Six-Year Accreditation Status with Two-Day Mid-Cycle Progress Report	190	24.9	24.9	89.4
	One-Year Probationary Accreditation Status with an In-Depth	8	1.0	1.0	90.4
	Two-Year Probationary Accreditation Status with an In-Depth	38	5.0	5.0	95.4
	Progress Report and Visit	24	3.1	3.1	98.6
	Accredited, Status Unknown	11	1.4	1.4	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item Responses

For survey items 10, 11, and 18 principals were asked to respond to a 6 point Likert scale that ranged from "strongly disagree" (1.0) to "strongly agree" (6.0). For items 12, 13, and 15 a simple "yes" or "no" response was required. For items 16 and 17 principals were asked to respond "yes," "no," or "unsure." For item 19 principals were asked to respond to a 5 point Likert scale that ranged from "low" (1.0) to "very high" (5.0). Finally, on item 21 principals responded to a 4 point Likert scale ranging from "disengaged" (1.0) to "very engaged" (4.0).

Across items 10 through 21 principal responses indicate highly positive perceptions regarding the ACS WASC accreditation process. The descriptive data are presented below in Table 6.

On item 10, 97.3% generally agreed that ACS WASC accreditation process encouraged continuous school improvement and on item 11, 96.4% agreed that ACS WASC has a positive effect on student learning (e.g., two key goals of the accreditation model).

Item 12 (A-F) described the **purposes** of the ACS WASC accreditation process. Respondents were asked to respond yes or no regarding the relevance of each purpose statement in their schools. For each of the sub-items the percentage of yes responses regarding the purpose(s) of accreditation exceeded 90%. The percentage of yes responses to each purpose statement in item 12 are listed in descending order.

- 96.5%: Validate the integrity of the school's educational program.
- 95.7%: Assure the school community that the school was trustworthy in its focus on high-quality student learning.
- 95.2%: Support an ongoing improvement process at the school.
- 94.5%: Develop an updated schoolwide action plan.
- 92.8%: Support the school's leadership.
- 90.8%: Obtain valuable insight from educators who visit the school (i.e., as part of the accreditation process).

Item 13 (A-G) described the **benefits** of the ACS WASC accreditation process. Respondents were asked to respond yes or no regarding the relevance of each benefit statement in their schools. For each of the sub-items the percentage of yes responses regarding the benefit(s) of accreditation exceeded 91%. The percentage of yes responses to each benefit statement in item 13 are listed in descending order.

- 94.8%: Provides transparency in what our schools need to accomplish in relation to the research-based ACS WASC/CDE criteria
- 94.2%: Reinforces the concept that a collaborative learning culture involves meaningful dialogue, self-reflection, problem-solving, and shared decision-making

- 93.8%: Helps our school sharpen its focus on helping students achieve desired schoolwide learning outcomes and academic standards
- 93.6%: Provides a process to align a comprehensive schoolwide action plan to the school's areas of greatest need
- 92.5%: Results in an expectation that all school stakeholders are a part of a collaborative learning community culture
- 92.3%: Feedback from fellow educators yields supportive encouragement and feedback to the school
- 91.9%: Facilitate teachers and others in the examination of multiple types of data.

Item 14 asked principals to reply to the statement that "because of my school's last self-study, we implemented a formal process for ensuring the implementation of our schoolwide action plan." Respondents were provided with a 6 point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1.0) to strongly agree (6.0). Results show that 86% of respondents generally agreed with this statement.

Item 15 (A-E) asked principals to respond "yes" or "no" to five sub-items contained within the following statement, "Our process for ensuring the implementation of the schoolwide action plan results in one or more of the following." The percentage of yes responses to each sub-item are listed in descending order.

- 93.7%: Updates to the schoolwide action plan
- 93.1%: Evidence of improved student learning
- 90.0%: Assessment data that is systematically gathered in accordance with the plan
- 89.3%: Systematic use of evidence to improve student learning
- 87.4%: Use of systematically developed assessment data to upgrade the schoolwide action plan.

Item 16 (A-G) asked principals to respond "yes," "no," or "unsure" to seven sub-items contained within the statement, "When we **plan** for improvements we want to see at our school, the following stakeholders are involved." The percentage of yes responses to each sub-item are listed in descending order.

- 96.2%: Credentialed teachers
- 95.8%: Credentialed administrators
- 91.9%: Parents
- 91.2%: Classified staff
- 84.4%: District staff
- 74.7%: Community members
- 67.0%: District Board.

Item 17 (A-G) asked principals to respond "yes," "no," or "unsure" to seven sub-items contained within the statement, "When we **implement** improvements we want to see at our school, the following stakeholders are involved." The percentage of yes responses to each sub-item are listed in descending order.

- 98.3%: Administrators
- 96.7%: (Tied) — credentialed teachers and classified staff
- 84.9%: Parents
- 83.1%: District staff
- 66.4%: Community members
- 64.9%: District Board.

Using a 6 point Likert scale for item 18 (A-G) principals were asked to indicate their level of agreement (or disagreement) with the following statement: "Because the ACS WASC accreditation process requires us to examine our data, we strengthened our use of multiple data sources to improve." The level of agreement with each sub-item is listed in descending order.

- 95.0%: Teaching practices at our school
- 92.8%: Formative assessment of student learning
- 92.0%: Summative assessment of student learning
- 88.7%: Training of teachers
- 88.2%: Training of staff
- 88.2%: Student interventions
- 85.2%: Coaching of teachers.

Using a 5 point Likert scale for item 19 (A-D) principals were asked to rate from low to very high their school's level of engagement regarding four aspects of the accreditation action plan. Below is listed in descending order the percent of "somewhat high" and "very high" responses.

- 80.1%: Implementing various aspects of the schoolwide actions
- 72.7%: Monitoring progress in relation to student impact
- 67.4: Using assessment data to refine the action plan
- 65.7: Assessment of the data related to schoolwide actions.

Finally, on item 21 principals were asked to indicate the level of parent engagement in the educational focus of the school. They were given four choice options that ranged from disengaged to very engaged. 78.1% indicated that parents were either "somewhat" or "very engaged."

Table 6: Survey Content Item Frequency Tables: Survey Items Ten through Twenty-One

Item 10: The ACS WASC/CDE Six-Year Accreditation Cycle encourages continuous school improvement.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	7	.9	.9	.9
	Disagree	6	.8	.8	1.7
	Slightly Disagree	7	.9	.9	2.6
	Slightly Agree	71	9.3	9.3	11.9
	Agree	355	46.5	46.5	58.5
	Strongly Agree	317	41.5	41.5	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 11: My school's participation in the ACS WASC/CDE Six-Year Accreditation Cycle has positive effects on student learning.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	8	1.0	1.0	1.0
	Disagree	7	.9	.9	2.0
	Slightly Disagree	13	1.7	1.7	3.7
	Slightly Agree	123	16.1	16.1	19.8
	Agree	372	48.8	48.8	68.5
	Strongly Agree	240	31.5	31.5	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

NOTE: For items 12,13, 15-17, respondents were asked to indicate “yes” or “no” or “yes,” “no,” or “unsure” to each of the questions instead of indicating all that apply.

Item 12: The purposes of ACS WASC/CDE accreditation are:

Item 12A: Assures a school community that our school is trustworthy in their focus on high-quality student learning.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	730	95.7	95.7	95.7
	No	33	4.3	4.3	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 12B: Validates integrity of the school's educational program (e.g., transcripts for worldwide university, UC "a-g" requirements)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	736	96.5	96.5	96.5
	No	27	3.5	3.5	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 12C: Supporting ongoing school improvement process at my school

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	726	95.2	95.2	95.2
	No	37	4.8	4.8	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 12D: An updated schoolwide action plan is developed (e.g., the Single Plan for Student Achievement linked to the Local Accountability Control Plan)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	721	94.5	94.5	94.5
	No	42	5.5	5.5	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 12E: Obtaining valuable insight from educators who visit the school.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	693	90.8	90.8	90.8
	No	70	9.2	9.2	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 12F: Supporting the schools' leadership (e.g., supports a principal's focus on using practices that support the school vision and mission)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	708	92.8	92.8	92.8
	No	55	7.2	7.2	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 13: The benefits of ACS WASC/CDE accreditation are:

Item 13A: Helps our school sharpen its focus on helping students achieve desired schoolwide learner outcomes/academic standards.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	716	93.8	93.8	93.8
	No	47	6.2	6.2	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 13B: Facilitates teachers and others in the examination of multiple types of data.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	701	91.9	91.9	91.9
	No	62	8.1	8.1	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 13C: Provides transparency in what our schools need to accomplish in relation to the research-based ACS WASC/CDE criteria.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	723	94.8	94.8	94.8
	No	40	5.2	5.2	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 13D: Results in an expectation that all school stakeholders are a part of a "collaborative learning community culture."

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	706	92.5	92.5	92.5
	No	57	7.5	7.5	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 13E: Reinforcing the concept that a "collaborative learning community culture" involves meaningful dialogue, self-reflection, problem-solving, and shared decision-making."

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	719	94.2	94.2	94.2
	No	44	5.8	5.8	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 13F: Providing a process to align a comprehensive schoolwide action plan to the school's areas of greatest need.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	714	93.6	93.6	93.6
	No	49	6.4	6.4	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 13G: Providing feedback from fellow educators (through the visiting committee process) yields supportive encouragement and feedback to the school (e.g., about a school's strengths, growth areas, and action plan implementation)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	704	92.3	92.3	92.3
	No	59	7.7	7.7	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 14: Because of my school's last self-study, we implemented a formal process for ensuring the implementation of our schoolwide action plan.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00 Strongly Disagree	12	1.6	1.6	1.6
	2.00 Disagree	53	6.9	6.9	8.5
	2.60	2	.3	.3	8.8
	3.00 Slightly Disagree	32	4.2	4.2	13.0
	3.40	2	.3	.3	13.2
	3.60	2	.3	.3	13.5
	3.80	4	.5	.5	14.0
	4.00 Slightly Agree	131	17.2	17.2	31.2
	4.20	2	.3	.3	31.5
	4.40	7	.9	.9	32.4
	4.60	2	.3	.3	32.6
	4.80	1	.1	.1	32.8
	5.00 Agree	335	43.9	43.9	76.7
	5.20	1	.1	.1	76.8
	5.40	2	.3	.3	77.1
	6.00 Strongly Agree	175	22.9	22.9	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 15: Our process for ensuring the implementation of the Schoolwide Action Plan (e.g., the SPSA aligned to the LCAP) results in one or more of the following:

Item 15A: Assessment data that is systematically gathered in accordance with the plan.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	687	90.0	90.0	90.0
	No	76	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 15B: Evidence of improved student learning.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	710	93.1	93.1	93.1
	No	53	6.9	6.9	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 15C: Systematic use of evidence to improve student learning.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	681	89.3	89.3	89.3
	No	82	10.7	10.7	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 15D: Updates to the schoolwide action plan.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	715	93.7	93.7	93.7
	No	48	6.3	6.3	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 15E: Use of systematically developed assessment data to update the Schoolwide Action Plan.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	667	87.4	87.4	87.4
	No	96	12.6	12.6	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 16: When we plan for improvements we want to see at our school, the following stakeholders are involved:

Item 16A: Credentialed Teachers and others.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	734	96.2	96.2	96.2
	No	15	2.0	2.0	98.2
	Unsure	14	1.8	1.8	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 16B: Credentialed Administrators.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	731	95.8	95.8	95.8
	No	27	3.5	3.5	99.3
	Unsure	5	.7	.7	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 16C: Classified Staff.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	696	91.2	91.2	91.2
	No	44	5.8	5.8	97.0
	Unsure	23	3.0	3.0	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 16D: Parents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	701	91.9	91.9	91.9
	No	48	6.3	6.3	98.2
	Unsure	14	1.8	1.8	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 16E: Community Members

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	570	74.7	74.7	74.7
	No	110	14.4	14.4	89.1
	Unsure	83	10.9	10.9	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 16F: District Staff

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	644	84.4	84.4	84.4
	No	95	12.5	12.5	96.9
	Unsure	24	3.1	3.1	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 16G: District Board

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	511	67.0	67.0	67.0
	No	175	22.9	22.9	89.9
	Unsure	77	10.1	10.1	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 17: When we <u>implement</u> improvements we want to see at our school, the following stakeholders are involved:

Item 17A: Credentialed Teachers and others

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	738	96.7	96.7	96.7
	No	25	3.3	3.3	3.3
	Unsure	0	0.00	0.00	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 17B: Administrators

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	750	98.3	98.3	98.3
	No	13	1.7	1.7	1.7
	Unsure	0	0.00	0.00	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 17C: Classified Staff

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	738	96.7	96.7	96.7
	No	25	3.3	3.3	3.3
	Unsure	0	0.00	0.00	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 17D: Parents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	648	84.9	84.9	84.9
	No	73	9.6	9.6	94.5
	Unsure	42	5.5	5.5	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 17E: Community Members

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	507	66.4	66.4	66.4
	No	151	19.8	19.8	86.2
	Unsure	105	13.8	13.8	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 17F: District Staff

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	634	83.1	83.1	83.1
	No	95	12.5	12.5	95.5
	Unsure	34	4.5	4.5	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 17G: District Board

		Frequency	Percent	Valid	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	495	64.9	64.9	64.9
	No	174	22.8	22.8	87.7
	Unsure	94	12.3	12.3	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 18: Because of the ACS WASC/CDE accreditation process requires us to examine our data, we strengthened our use of multiple data sources to improve:

Item 18A: Teaching practices at our school.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00 Strongly Disagree	4	.5	.5	.5
	2.00 Disagree	15	2.0	2.0	2.5
	3.00 Slightly Disagree	10	1.3	1.3	3.8
	3.20	1	.1	.1	3.9
	3.40	4	.5	.5	4.5
	3.60	2	.3	.3	4.7
	3.80	2	.3	.3	5.0
	4.00 Slightly Agree	147	19.3	19.3	24.2
	4.20	10	1.3	1.3	25.6
	4.40	8	1.0	1.0	26.6
	4.60	5	.7	.7	27.3
	4.80	5	.7	.7	27.9
	5.00 Agree	380	49.8	49.8	77.7
	5.20	9	1.2	1.2	78.9
	5.40	9	1.2	1.2	80.1
	5.60	1	.1	.1	80.2
	6.00 Strongly Agree	151	19.8	19.8	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 18B: Formative assessment of student learning

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00 Strongly Disagree	6	.8	.8	.8
	2.00 Disagree	17	2.2	2.2	3.0
	2.20	1	.1	.1	3.1
	3.00 Slightly Disagree	26	3.4	3.4	6.6
	3.20	3	.4	.4	6.9
	3.60	1	.1	.1	7.1
	3.80	1	.1	.1	7.2
	4.00 Slightly Agree	158	20.7	20.7	27.9
	4.20	5	.7	.7	28.6
	4.40	10	1.3	1.3	29.9
	4.60	5	.7	.7	30.5
	4.80	11	1.4	1.4	32.0
	5.00 Agree	353	46.3	46.3	78.2
	5.20	9	1.2	1.2	79.4
	5.40	10	1.3	1.3	80.7
	5.60	3	.4	.4	81.1
	6.00 Strongly Agree	144	18.9	18.9	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 18C: Summative assessment of student learning

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00 Strongly Disagree	6	.8	.8	.8
	2.00 Disagree	17	2.2	2.2	3.0
	2.40	1	.1	.1	3.1
	2.80	2	.3	.3	3.4
	3.00 Slightly Disagree	27	3.5	3.5	6.9
	3.20	1	.1	.1	7.1
	3.60	1	.1	.1	7.2
	3.80	6	.8	.8	8.0
	4.00 Slightly Agree	141	18.5	18.5	26.5
	4.20	5	.7	.7	27.1
	4.40	8	1.0	1.0	28.2
	4.60	7	.9	.9	29.1
	4.80	7	.9	.9	30.0
	5.00 Agree	385	50.5	50.5	80.5
	5.20	7	.9	.9	81.4
	5.40	6	.8	.8	82.2
	5.60	4	.5	.5	82.7
	5.80	1	.1	.1	82.8
	6.00 Strongly Agree	131	17.2	17.2	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 18D: Training of teachers

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00 Strongly Disagree	8	1.0	1.0	1.0
	2.00 Disagree	24	3.1	3.1	4.2
	2.60	4	.5	.5	4.7
	2.80	4	.5	.5	5.2
	3.00 Slightly Disagree	31	4.1	4.1	9.3
	3.20	5	.7	.7	10.0
	3.40	3	.4	.4	10.4
	3.60	2	.3	.3	10.6
	3.80	5	.7	.7	11.3
	4.00 Slightly Agree	150	19.7	19.7	30.9
	4.20	4	.5	.5	31.5
	4.40	3	.4	.4	31.8
	4.60	7	.9	.9	32.8
	4.80	11	1.4	1.4	34.2
	5.00 Agree	314	41.2	41.2	75.4
	5.20	6	.8	.8	76.1
	5.40	4	.5	.5	76.7
	5.60	2	.3	.3	76.9
	5.80	2	.3	.3	77.2

	6.00 Strongly Agree	174	22.8	22.8	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 18E: Coaching of teachers

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00 Strongly Disagree	10	1.3	1.3	1.3
	1.40	1	.1	.1	1.4
	2.00 Disagree	36	4.7	4.7	6.2
	2.20	2	.3	.3	6.4
	2.40	2	.3	.3	6.7
	2.60	1	.1	.1	6.8
	2.80	2	.3	.3	7.1
	3.00 Slightly Disagree	41	5.4	5.4	12.5
	3.20	3	.4	.4	12.8
	3.40	5	.7	.7	13.5
	3.60	4	.5	.5	14.0
	3.80	6	.8	.8	14.8
	4.00 Slightly Agree	181	23.7	23.7	38.5
	4.20	4	.5	.5	39.1
	4.40	7	.9	.9	40.0
	4.60	1	.1	.1	40.1
	4.80	9	1.2	1.2	41.3
	5.00 Agree	290	38.0	38.0	79.3
	5.20	4	.5	.5	79.8
	5.40	2	.3	.3	80.1
	5.60	4	.5	.5	80.6
	6.00 Strongly Agree	148	19.4	19.4	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 18F: Training of staff

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00 Strongly Disagree	5	.7	.7	.7
	2.00 Disagree	28	3.7	3.7	4.3
	2.20	1	.1	.1	4.5
	2.60	1	.1	.1	4.6
	3.00 Slightly Disagree	37	4.8	4.8	9.4
	3.20	4	.5	.5	10.0
	3.40	4	.5	.5	10.5
	3.60	3	.4	.4	10.9
	3.80	7	.9	.9	11.8
	4.00 Slightly Agree	169	22.1	22.1	33.9
	4.20	5	.7	.7	34.6
	4.40	5	.7	.7	35.3
	4.60	5	.7	.7	35.9

	4.80	6	.8	.8	36.7
	5.00 Agree	316	41.4	41.4	78.1
	5.20	6	.8	.8	78.9
	5.40	4	.5	.5	79.4
	5.80	2	.3	.3	79.7
	6.00 Strongly Agree	155	20.3	20.3	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 18G: Student Interventions

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00 Strongly Disagree	7	.9	.9	.9
	2.00 Disagree	21	2.8	2.8	3.7
	2.20	1	.1	.1	3.8
	2.80	1	.1	.1	3.9
	3.00 Slightly Disagree	17	2.2	2.2	6.2
	3.20	2	.3	.3	6.4
	3.40	2	.3	.3	6.7
	3.60	7	.9	.9	7.6
	3.80	2	.3	.3	7.9
	4.00 Slightly Agree	122	16.0	16.0	23.9
	4.20	4	.5	.5	24.4
	4.40	4	.5	.5	24.9
	4.60	1	.1	.1	25.0
	4.80	9	1.2	1.2	26.2
	5.00 Agree	301	39.4	39.4	65.7
	5.20	7	.9	.9	66.6
	5.40	13	1.7	1.7	68.3
	5.60	8	1.0	1.0	69.3
	5.80	3	.4	.4	69.7
	6.00 Strongly Agree	231	30.3	30.3	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 19: Because of your last ACS WASC/CDE self-study, how would you rate your school's level of engagement in:

Item 19A: Assessment of the data related to the schoolwide action plans.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00 Low	6	.8	.8	.8
	2.00 Somewhat Low	29	3.8	3.8	4.6
	2.40	1	.1	.1	4.7
	2.60	1	.1	.1	4.8
	3.00 Average	196	25.7	25.7	30.5
	3.20	3	.4	.4	30.9
	3.40	4	.5	.5	31.5

	3.60	11	1.4	1.4	32.9
	3.80	11	1.4	1.4	34.3
	4.00 Somewhat High	268	35.1	35.1	69.5
	4.20	11	1.4	1.4	70.9
	4.40	5	.7	.7	71.6
	4.60	5	.7	.7	72.2
	4.80	4	.5	.5	72.7
	5.00 Very High	208	27.3	27.3	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 19B: Implementing various aspects of the schoolwide action plans.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00 Low	6	.8	.8	.8
	2.00 Somewhat Low	12	1.6	1.6	2.4
	2.20	3	.4	.4	2.8
	2.40	3	.4	.4	3.1
	2.80	2	.3	.3	3.4
	3.00 Average	109	14.3	14.3	17.7
	3.20	4	.5	.5	18.2
	3.40	4	.5	.5	18.7
	3.60	4	.5	.5	19.3
	3.80	5	.7	.7	19.9
	4.00 Somewhat High	302	39.6	39.6	59.5
	4.20	7	.9	.9	60.4
	4.40	11	1.4	1.4	61.9
	4.60	7	.9	.9	62.8
	4.80	2	.3	.3	63.0
	5.00 Very High	282	37.0	37.0	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 19C: Monitoring progress in relation to student impact

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00 Low	6	.8	.8	.8
	2.00 Somewhat Low	18	2.4	2.4	3.1
	2.60	1	.1	.1	3.3
	3.00 Average	153	20.1	20.1	23.3
	3.20	4	.5	.5	23.9
	3.40	5	.7	.7	24.5
	3.60	8	1.0	1.0	25.6
	3.80	13	1.7	1.7	27.3
	4.00 Somewhat High	299	39.2	39.2	66.4
	4.20	11	1.4	1.4	67.9
	4.40	10	1.3	1.3	69.2
	4.60	3	.4	.4	69.6

	4.80	4	.5	.5	70.1
	5.00 Very High	228	29.9	29.9	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 19D: Using assessment data to refine the actions

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00 Low	7	.9	.9	.9
	2.00 Somewhat Low	37	4.8	4.8	5.8
	2.60	1	.1	.1	5.9
	2.80	1	.1	.1	6.0
	3.00 Average	172	22.5	22.5	28.6
	3.20	3	.4	.4	29.0
	3.40	7	.9	.9	29.9
	3.60	12	1.6	1.6	31.5
	3.80	9	1.2	1.2	32.6
	4.00 Somewhat High	291	38.1	38.1	70.8
	4.20	10	1.3	1.3	72.1
	4.40	3	.4	.4	72.5
	4.60	3	.4	.4	72.9
	4.80	2	.3	.3	73.1
	5.00 Very High	205	26.9	26.9	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Item 21: As a result of your school's self-study, how engaged or disengaged are parents in the educational focus of the school?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00 Disengaged	31	4.1	4.1	4.1
	1.80	5	.7	.7	4.7
	2.00 Somewhat Disengaged	99	13.0	13.0	17.7
	2.20	3	.4	.4	18.1
	2.40	4	.5	.5	18.6
	2.60	12	1.6	1.6	20.2
	2.80	13	1.7	1.7	21.9
	3.00 Somewhat Engaged	464	60.8	60.8	82.7
	3.20	9	1.2	1.2	83.9
	3.40	4	.5	.5	84.4
	3.60	2	.3	.3	84.7
	4.00 Very Engaged	117	15.3	15.3	100.0
	Total	763	100.0	100.0	

Survey Scales: Nonlinear Principal Component Analysis

Items 10 through 21 of the survey contain 58 response options. When examined individually, each response option provides only a small "snapshot" of the principals' accreditation perspectives. While the individual analysis of survey responses allows the evaluation team to learn about principals' perspectives on particular items, it does not provide the evaluation team with a coherent and comprehensive perspective of the critical concepts embedded within and across multiple survey items. The survey also contains mixed data that are not linearly related to each other (nominal, multiple nominal, ordinal).

In order to acquire a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of survey items in the aggregate, a *Nonlinear Principal Components Analyses (NLPCA)* was conducted. The purpose of NLPCA is to explore the relationships (interdependence) between multiple categories of survey items with the goal of reducing a large number of survey items into a smaller set of components (i.e., "scales") without sacrificing the information contained across all survey items. In doing so, NLPCA both condenses large sets of diverse data (e.g., unordered categories) into standardized numerical values while simultaneously enhancing their interpretation by preserving as much variance from the variables as possible. The results can then be used to construct composite scores comprised of individual survey items (Manisera, van der Kooij, & Dusseldorp, 2010; Meulman, van der Kooij, & Hesier, 2004; Meulman & Heiser, 2011).

NLPCA involves *nonlinear optimal scaling (monotonic) transformations* of ordered categorical or continuous (ordinal) data in which the order of the original data is maintained (Meulman, Van der Kooij, & Heiser, 2004). NLPCA was applied to survey items 10, 11, 14, 18(A-G), 19(A-D), and 21. These items, which reflect non-ordered or categorical data, were assigned "optimal quantifications," that is the nominal and ordinal variables were transformed into quantitative (numerical) data (ibid., p. 56). Quantified variables have variance in the traditional sense and correlations are then performed on the quantified data and not on the original data (Linting, Meulman, Groenon, & Van der Kooij, 2007a). The method maximizes the amount of variance of the first scale based upon the correlation matrix of the quantified variables. It repeats this process with each successive scale.

NLPCA: Five Scales

The NLPCA describes five scales (also referred to as "components" in the NLPCA process), with each scale containing survey items that hang together conceptually. After examining each scale the evaluation team derived a title or "definition" that best captured the overarching concept explained by the scale (Linting & Van der Kooij, 2012). When taken together, the five scales explain 44.36% of the total variance among all survey items. In addition, they offer a more nuanced and comprehensive perspective on survey items 10 through 21 and how they interrelate conceptually. Essentially, the 58 survey items have been reduced and organized around five central "themes" that provide a more expansive analysis of principal perspectives about accreditation than a simple item by item analysis of the survey. Below are the five scale themes.

1. Accreditation Outcomes Scale
2. Site Level Accreditation Benefits Scale
3. School Engagement in Schoolwide Action Plan Implementation Scale
4. District and other Non-Instructional Stakeholder Engagement in Schoolwide Action Plan Implementation Scale
5. School Site and Instructional Stakeholder Engagement in Schoolwide Action Plan Implementation Scale.

In the following analysis provided are three coefficient values. Each coefficient provides a uniquely important view into the degree to which each scale and its sub-items relate to its overarching concept. The first coefficient refers to the strength of each sub-item's contribution to its "scale." In NLPCA language, this is referred to as a "component loading" coefficient. The higher the value, the more strongly related the sub-item is to the scale. The second coefficient refers to the reliability of sub-items within each scale. That is, the internal consistency (or interrelationship) among the sub-items in each scale. This value is expressed as Cronbach's Alpha. In exploratory research such as this study, a Cronbach's coefficient Alpha of .70 is the minimum required to establish credible relationships (see Table 7) (Nunnally, 1978). Across the five scales the Alpha values ranged from a low of .737 (Scale 5) to a high of .864 (Scale 1). This finding indicates strong reliability among scale sub-items.

Finally, the third coefficient represents the total variance accounted for by individual survey sub-items within a particular scale. As with Cronbach's Alpha, the higher the coefficient value the greater the effect of that sub-item in terms of its explanatory power in relation to the other sub-items in each scale. So, a variance of .687 with sub-item 18D essentially means that this particular item is more powerful than, say, sub-item 10 which has a variance of .321. It also means that the other sub-items in the scale combined explain only .313 of the remaining variance for the scale (e.g., 1.0 minus .687).

In the following section, the five scales and their related coefficients (i.e., component loadings, Cronbach's Alpha, and variance) are described followed by a more descriptive analysis of the five scales.

Scale 1: Accreditation Outcomes

Scale 1 is comprised of nine items listed below. The coefficient alphas (component loading and variance) calculated through the NLPCA appear in parentheses (*note: component loading alphas are conceptually similar to factor loadings used in LPCA and factor analysis)*. Alpha values do not denote causality, but rather are correlation coefficients that indicate the strength of the relationship between each survey item and the scale. For example, Question 18D is the strongest of the nine variables with a component loading coefficient of .792. Conversely, Question 10 is the lowest at .455. According to Linting & Van der Kooij (2012) in social scientific research

strong component loading coefficient alphas are higher than .400. For the analysis only items with alphas of .400 or higher were reported.

Respondents used a six-point Likert rating scale (Strongly Disagree-Agree) to answer these items. Seven of the nine survey items in this scale reflect the use of data to improve student and adult learning outcomes while the remaining items reflect outcomes of the six-year accreditation cycle.

In particular, the interpretation of the scale titled "accreditation outcomes" emphasizes responses to item 18. However, the NLPCA results also indicated that Questions 10 and 11 "hang together" and are related to item 18, although the differences in the coefficient alphas between these items suggests the need for future research around the conceptual similarities between them.

An important purpose of ACS WASC accreditation is to help schools use data to identify areas in curriculum and instruction that need to be addressed and that can foster high-quality learning. As a whole, Scale 1 relates to the ACS WASC/CDE *Focus on Learning* Schoolwide Criteria A4 (Staff: Qualified and Professional Development), D1-3 (Standards-based Student Learning: Assessment and Accountability). Ideally, the accreditation process engenders changes in how and what schools do to promote high-quality learning not just for students, but for adults as well. The NLCPA revealed that responses to Survey Questions 18A through G illuminated how ACS WASC most prominently stimulates such outcomes, especially as these outcomes relate to the use of data. The responses to Survey Questions 10 and 11 also contributed to the pattern under Scale 1, but the difference between the Question 18 items and Questions 10 and 11 suggest that these questions reflect overall accreditation outcomes, while Question 18 items reflect site-specific outcomes related to student and adult learning. In Table 8 below, each scale, its sub-items, and its related coefficient values are outlined.

Table 8: Scale 1 Component Loading and Total Variance Coefficient Values

Scale 1: Accreditation Outcomes (Cronbach's Alpha = .864)

Item 18: Because the ACS WASC accreditation process requires us to examine our data, we strengthened our use of multiple data sources to improve:	**Component Loading**	**Total Variance**
18D: Training of teachers	.782	.687
18F: Training of staff	.769	.635
18E: Coaching teachers	.763	.630
18A: Teaching practices at our school	.745	.647
18B: Formative assessment of student learning	.684	.566
18C: Summative assessment of student learning	.681	.543
18G: Student interventions	.670	.511
Item 11: My school's participation in the ACS WASC six-year	.479	.403

accreditation cycle has positive effects on student learning		
Item 10: The six-year accreditation cycle encourages continuous school improvement	.479	.403

Scale 2: Site Level Accreditation Benefits

Whereas Scale 1 speaks to the use of data in ways that improve instructional outcomes and continuous school improvement, Scale 2 primarily addresses the benefits of accreditation perceived by principals. In this case, principals emphasized the benefits of accreditation as related to the school (and in some cases cultural) processes and functions rather than the actual conduct of teaching and learning. In this scale, the principals' perceptions of benefits are more process oriented than results oriented.

Survey respondents indicated "yes" or "no" to each item as the intent was to gain an understanding of what principals viewed as the purposes and benefits of ACS WASC/CDE accreditation (and not their attitude toward these outcomes via the use of a Likert-type rating scale). Three following sub-items did not contribute to the NLPCA "solution" and were excluded from the analysis:

- Item 12A: Assures a school community that our school is trustworthy in their focus on high-quality student learning.
- Item 12B: Validates the integrity of the school's educational program (e.g., transcripts for worldwide universities, University of California "a-g" requirements).
- Item 12D: An updated schoolwide action plan is developed (e.g., the Single Plan for Student Achievement linked to the Local Accountability Control Plan).

Scale 2 is comprised of eight items related to both items 12 and 13. Interestingly, although items 12 and 13 made a clear distinction between the purposes and benefits of ACS WASC/CDE accreditation, the coefficient alphas of sub-items under Scale 2 suggest that the principals did not make the same distinction. While the interpretation of the scale titled "accreditation benefits" emphasizes responses to item 13, three sub-items under item 12 were strongly related to the NLPCA "solution." Scale 2 included the following sub-items and their corresponding coefficient alphas:

Table 9: Scale 2 Component Loading and Total Variance Coefficient Values

Scale 2: Accreditation Benefits (Cronbach's Alpha = .819)

Item 13: The benefits of ACS WASC/CDE accreditation are:	**Component Loading**	**Total Variance**
13D: Results in an expectation that all school stakeholders are part of a "collaborative learning community culture"	.602	.697
13E: Reinforces the concept that a "collaborative learning community culture" involves meaningful dialogue, self-reflection, problem-solving, and shared decision-making (.574)	.574	.635
13B: Supports teachers and others in the examination of multiple types of data	.538	.630
13H: Provides an annual opportunity to review school capacity related to ongoing improvement and accountability	.532	.647
13A: Helps our school sharpen its focus on helping students achieve desired schoolwide learner outcomes/academic standards	.528	.566
13G: Provides feedback from fellow educators (through the visiting committee process) yields supportive encouragement and feedback to the school (e.g., about a school's strengths, growth areas, and action plan implementation)	.528	.511
Item 12: The purposes of ACS WASC/CDE accreditation are:		
12F: Promoting positive effects on student learning	.529	.566
12E: Obtaining valuable insight from educators who visit the school (across the six-year cycle)	.507	.403

Scale 3: School Engagement in Action Plan Implementation Scale

Scale 3 refers to two constructs, factors relating to the implementation of schoolwide action plans and factors relating to the use of data. The focus here is organizational rather than individual (e.g., what kinds of things does a school do, and how engaged is the school as a unit in these things?). Interestingly, the coefficient loadings for sub-items 15A, C, and E were negative, which reflects an inverse relationship between these variables and the scale. Interview feedback may help to clarify this. Several principals stated that while their schools used data to inform the development of action plans and assessments of their impact, they did not do so systematically (e.g., as an ongoing structured process across the school). The survey sub-items 15B and D were excluded as they did not contribute to the five-component NLPCA solution (i.e., evidence of improved student learning and updates to the schoolwide action plan).

Table 10: Scale 3 Component Loading and Total Variance Coefficient Values

Scale 3: School Engagement in Action Plan Implementation Scale (Cronbach's Alpha = .809)

Item 19: Since your last ACS WASC/CDE self-study, how would you rate your school's level of engagement in:	Component Loading	Total Variance
19A: Assessment of the data related to the schoolwide plans	.827	.744
19D: Using assessment data to refine the actions	.826	.736
19C: Monitoring progress in relation to student impact	.809	.711
19B: Implementing various aspects of the schoolwide actions	.737	.608
Item 15: Our process for insuring action plan implementation results in one or more of the following:		
15C: Systematic use of evidence to improve student learning	-.480	.371
15E: Use of systematically developed assessment data to update the schoolwide action plan	-.460	.371
15A: Assessing data that are systematically gathered in accordance with the plan	-.445	.328

Scale 4: District and Other Non-Instructional Stakeholder Engagement in Schoolwide Action Plan Implementation (.789)

Scales 1, 2, and 3 were primarily concerned with data-related accreditation outcomes, accreditation benefits, and the school's engagement with schoolwide action plan implementation processes and outcomes. For scale 4, the focus rested on the presence of non-instructional stakeholders who are not involved in the day-to-day implementation of the schools' education programs. Seven sub-items from survey items 16 and 17 formed this scale (note: the absence of classified staff was due to its low composite loading coefficient value).

During the survey design phase, the evaluation team wanted respondents to make a distinction based on *planning* for improvements as compared to *implementing* those improvements. However, the results of the NLPCA suggested that respondents focused more on the type of stakeholder involved versus the distinction between planning and implementation. The instructional focus of stakeholders who cluster under Scale 5 support this assertion. Thus, Scale 4 reflects respondents' perceptions regarding the engagement of those who are typically **not involved** in the daily administration and implementation of instruction and education programs at the school.

While classified staff can be involved in both planning and implementation, in retrospect, this label is too broad to distinguish between instructional aides who serve in the classroom versus other classified staff such as clerical, library, or staff in charge of the physical plant. Refinement of the ACS WASC Principal Survey can provide finer distinctions between each group.

Among stakeholders in this group, district board members emerged as the most strongly related to both planning and implementation phases of the action plan. Interestingly, parents did not correlate highly with planning activities and were comparatively less important than board members and community members in action plan implementation processes.

Table 11: Scale 4 Component Loading and Total Variance Coefficient Values

Scale 4: District and Other Non-Instructional Stakeholder Engagement in Schoolwide Action Plan Implementation (Cronbach's Alpha = .789)

Item 16: When we plan for improvements we want to see at our school, the following stakeholders are involved (response options: yes, no, unsure)	**Component Loading**	**Total Variance**
16G: District Board	.704	.529
16E: Community members	.633	.424
16F: District Staff	.447	.394
Item 17: When we implement improvements we want to see at our school, the following stakeholders are involved		
17G: District Board	.756	.594
17E: Community Members	.704	.534
17F: District Staff	.511	.415
17D: Parents	.511	.343

Scale 5: School Site and Instructional Stakeholder Engagement in Schoolwide Action Plan Implementation

Scale 5 represents the engagement of school-site stakeholders who are the closest to the delivery of the schools' educational program and the daily operations of the school (e.g., teachers, administrators, classified staff). Five items "cluster" under this scale based upon the NLPCA solution, and of those, Question 16A demonstrates the strongest relationship with the scale.

- Question 16: When we **plan** for improvements we want to see at our school, the following stakeholders are involved (response options: yes, no, unsure).
  - 16A: Credentialed teachers (.872)
  - 16B: Administrators (.640)
  - 16D: Parents (.592)
- Question 17: When we **implement** improvements we want to see at our school, the following stakeholders are involved:
  - 17A: Credentialed teachers (.772)
  - 17C: Parents (.533).

Since Question 17B (Administrators) did not contribute to the final NLPCA solution, it was excluded from further analysis. Of note, parents appear with administrators and teachers in this scale, which means that the survey respondents (school-site principals) not only report parent engagement in school improvements, but also that that parents make contributions to those improvements. This is an example of how particular elements of one scale may also appear in other scales.

Table 12: Scale 5 Component Loading and Total Variance Coefficient Values

Scale 5: School Site and Instructional Stakeholder Engagement in Schoolwide Action Plan Implementation (Cronbach's Alpha = .737)

Item 16: When we plan for improvements we want to see at our school, the following stakeholders are involved (response options: yes, no, unsure)	Component Loading	Total Variance
16A: Credential Teachers	.972	.779
16B: Administrators	.640	.436
16D: Parents	.592	.436
Item 17: When we implement improvements we want to see at our school, the following stakeholders are involved		
17A: Credentialed Teachers	.772	.602
17C: Parents	.533	.350

Interview Results

The following section provides the results of interviews conducted with a group of 20 California public high school principals selected through a stratified random procedure. Most principals interviewed were male (approximately 75%) and were more likely to lead traditional comprehensive schools. Of the female school leaders, only one functioned as principal of a traditional comprehensive high school. None of the interviewees had been a principal longer than 10 years and several had served for less than one year. The median time on the job was three years. More than half of the interviewees had been at the school or in their current position at the time of the last ACS WASC activity (i.e., self-study, mid-cycle).

The purpose of the interviews was to extend the understanding of survey responses by providing deeper and more nuanced insights into the ACS WASC accreditation process. Because the interviews were designed to support the survey, and given the comparatively small number of interviewees, the results were not intended to (and cannot) be generalized to the larger population of public high school principals in the state. In presenting these results, there was sensitivity to the relative weighting of interview versus survey responses. For example, while comments made by some principals were often quite positive, or in other cases, quite critical, the analysis was intentionally modest in terms of how the evaluation team interpreted the salience of

interview questions. The intent was to illuminate, but not to amplify, principal perceptions about the accreditation process.

In conducting the analysis, the evaluation team used a qualitative software program named "Dedoose," which allowed the evaluation team to analyze, organize, and reduce over 500 pages of written interview transcripts into key concepts and patterns. This section provides selected and samples of interviews in an outline form that allows the reader to see each interview question, representative responses, and coding schemes. In a similar fashion to the development of survey scales (described above), Dedoose was used to develop overarching code-themes (e.g., a code is a title given to a collection of conceptually aligned interview responses).

Within each "code-theme" are a number of sub-codes that further reduce the interview responses into conceptual "chunks" or clusters. For example, in item 1, the interpretation of "promotes stakeholder collaboration" was further "unpacked" and described in sub-codes 1–4. In some cases, there was no need to create sub-codes. The same process was used throughout the interview analysis. Note that the number in parentheses after each sub-code represents the number of responses provided by different principals.

The analysis began using first-cycle coding, which consists of reading the transcript, developing memos throughout transcript review, and then coding text that appears in a transcript (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Throughout the first-cycle coding process, a team-coding approach was employed that involved ongoing cycles of coding as individuals and then regularly calibrating around and adjusting the coding as the evaluation team proceeded through the interview phase. Calibration was an important step in ensuring the reliability and validity of this data. Calibration meetings were then used to refine coding conventions such as the use of analytic memos to document the thinking about emerging concepts. During these meetings, codes were combined with similar ideas, which was important to developing an overall dataset that was manageable and which facilitated analysis.

As more data was accumulated, the evaluation team began moving back and forth between first- and *second-cycle coding* (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Second-cycle coding involves taking codes from first-cycle coding and generating patterns codes, that is, linking the codes from first-cycle coding together (e.g., how school size influences the types of leadership strategies used by principals). Leads that emerged from the patterns (e.g., leadership strategies used at small schools and the breadth and depth of the self-study) were investigated. There were codes, however, that did not seem linked to a pattern. In these cases, the evaluation questions were referenced to guide the analyses. Finally, given that a developmental evaluation approach guided this entire study, the evaluation team engaged in ongoing discussions around both the survey and the emerging qualitative (interview) data.

Interview Questions: Coded Themes and Selected Quotes

Question 1A: What is the value of the ACS WASC accreditation process?
(Note: Question 1A aligns with Survey Questions 11, 12, and 13 and with evaluation questions 3A and 3B)

Key Code-Themes

- Promotes stakeholder collaboration
- Forces and reminds us to look at our program, processes and data regularly
- Fosters a school's capacity for internal reflection
- Helps the school maintain focus on educational programs and students
- Promotes accountability.

1. **Promotes stakeholder collaboration**

   Sub-Codes

   a) Brings people together to collaborate (6)
   b) Hears all stakeholder voices (6)
   c) Brings staff closer together (5)
   d) Promotes celebration for success (5)

   Related Quotes:

   - "I think the biggest value really comes from the fact that everyone needs to be involved in it."
   - "…we pull everybody together."
   - "As a principal, I found it valuable because it gave me a process by which I could really reach out to the different stakeholder groups and really get a pulse for what the teachers felt, what the parents felt, what the students felt was the most important thing to work on in the school."
   - "…gives an opportunity for the school to gather together and say… "Is what we're about really being communicated to all of our stakeholders?"

     "…really see…how effective we are and areas where we need to improve, areas where we shine, areas where we do best.

2. **Forces and reminds us to look at our program, processes, and data regularly**

   Related Quotes:

   - "…at the end of the day, it's not something you can keep putting off and putting off and putting off. You [have] to do it."
   - "…one of the benefits is that it's a requirement — it forces the issue."

- "The value is that it incorporates what the school should naturally be doing and it brings it to the forefront. Schools are constantly in this cycle of how we review what we're doing, what data should we look at, how should we look at the data, [and] who should be looking at the data."

3. Fosters a school's capacity for internal reflection

Sub-Codes

a) ACS WASC helps the school develop a culture of inquiry and reflection (4)

Related Quotes:

- "The value of the process is really to provide each site with the opportunity to reflect…at the data being collected…and [is] something we should be doing on a daily basis…"
- "…it validates the things that are working and really highlights strengths in areas of sound practice, and it shines a light on areas where we could continue to grow, and creates a mechanism to support that growth."

4. Helps the school maintain focus on educational programs and students

Sub-Codes

a) Helps keep our focus on improvement (7)

b) Helps us define and affirm the school's purpose (6)

c) Helps us understand and validate where the school is effective (5)

Related Quotes:

- "I think the biggest benefit from [ACS] WASC is it keeps the school on a focus…it became a living document for us…we always reference back to that document during staff meetings…"
- "It's valued and respected and a kind of certified accountability piece that teachers, staff members, [and] anybody can't argue with because of [its] track record and process."
- "The self-study gave everybody an opportunity to look at all the systems that we provide a the schools as a bigger picture and analyze all the services from climate to instruction to assessment."
- "I use it as a framework in order to evaluate how we're doing as a staff and as a school."
- "I think [ACS] WASC helps to define who we are as a school and how we are going to achieve what we want to achieve."
- "[ACS] WASC really does help the school focus on what's important to meeting the needs of students."

5. Promotes accountability

Sub-Codes

a) Promotes accountability to a larger community (5)

b) Provides a fresh "eye" on the school and how it thinks about improvement (5)

Related Quotes:

- "It's leverage as well as it holds you accountable."
- "Knowing that [ACS] WASC was coming I was much more attuned to the way academic discourse was taking place in the classroom. Not only was I more aware of it, but I made sure the teachers knew that I was looking for the steps, so they became more aware of it."
- "…it assures parents and colleges and the community that programs are aligned [and] prepare kids for life beyond high school."
- "The value is to get a fresh eye on the school and see what some of our areas for improvement are."

Question 1B: How does the ongoing accreditation process influence your efforts to foster school improvement?

(Note: Question 1B aligns with survey question 12 and with evaluation question 1A)

Key Code Themes

- Strengthens the role of the principal in the change process
- Impact of the leader on the success of [ACS] WASC implementation at a school

1. Strengthens the role of the principal in the change process

Sub-Codes

a) Assists principal in planning inquiry process (8)

b) Provides a springboard from which the principal can ask questions and guide discussions (7)

c) Political value (useful in gaining support of stakeholders for change (5)

Related Quotes:

- "I used it [ACS WASC] as a tool for us to figure out what direction we wanted to go."
- "As a principal, I found it [ACS WASC] valuable because it gave me a process by which I could really reach out to the different stakeholder groups and really get a

pulse for what the teachers felt, what the parents felt, and what was the most important thing to work on in school."

- "…I go back and look at the [ACS] WASC goals and use that as a way to move forward with reform. That's where my political part comes from."

2. Underscores the impact of the leader on the success of ACS WASC implementation at a school (6)

Related Quotes:

- "The change only happens if the principal establishes this is our plan, this is what we're going to do, and then enlists the teachers to go along."
- "…the leadership…is what is going to really determine the impact and effect of [ACS] WASC."
- "Frequently, it's the personality of the principal that makes it happen."

Question 2: Could you elaborate on the following elements of the accreditation process in relation to your school:
(Note: Question 2 aligns with survey question 12 and 16)

Key Code Themes

- ACS WASC enhances school's understanding of goals for students (79)
- ACS WASC process helps us examine our data (172)
- Supports examination of programs for effectiveness of student learning and well-being (29)
- Supports stakeholder collaboration around data, goals, effectiveness (64)
- Supports alignment of Schoolwide Action Plan with other plans (55)

1. How ACS WASC enhances school's understanding of goals for students

Sub-Codes

a) School goals provided by interviewees (13)

b) Focuses us on importance/priority of goals (4)

c) Focuses thinking more broadly/holistically (4)

d) ACS WASC process helps us maintain focus on our school's Schoolwide Action Plan goals (4)

Related Quotes

- "…to spend some time thinking about the goals and vision that we have for students and for families. What is our purpose, and what are the dreams we have,

what's the endpoint that we really want to drive, the difference we want to make in the community."

- "…during the mid-year cycle, it was the chair and one other member from the original group, and she and he were the first ones that said, "We want to support your school. What goals would you like to see come out of this?"
- "It does help me, but what it does is it guides us. We form goals for students every year. The bottom line is the students."
- "A focus on the bigger picture, a focus on the overall and also goals after graduation. Is this student going to go to community college? Is this student going to go to university eventually? Is this student going to go straight into the workplace, et cetera, but how does what they are teaching relate to the bigger picture of the whole schools graduation rate?"
- "…let's align these, and now let's make sure that's aligned with the LCAP goals that we have set for our district and everything else."
- "Our goals, we have four goals and we call them our LCAP goals, our single plan for student achievement goals, and that's making sure students are college and career ready, providing a 21st century learning."
- "We went through some key statements as to "This is what you said about yourself and these are some areas that you've said you want to improve. Let's start there and let's start talking about how we do that."

2. How the ACS WASC process helps us examine our data

<u>Sub-Codes</u>

a) School assessment tools and data sources (15)

b) Transition from STAR to SBAC (10)

c) School's assessment system status (9)

d) Using/selecting data to examine program effectiveness (7)

d) Cycle of inquiry practices (7)

e) Continuous engagement with data promotes deeper analysis around data (5)

f) Grades (5)

g) Monitoring parent engagement (5)

h) School's assessment process (5)

i) Using multiple measures (5)

<u>Related Quotes</u>

- "At the teacher level, where they're using technology to get instantaneous feedback and have an understanding of where their classes are and whether they need to

review or they can move forward, that's happening throughout campus. Not in every classroom, because I'd be lying if I told you it was happening in every classroom."

- "One thing [ACS] WASC does I think it helps us provide … you have so much data. When you look at a school everything from attendance to discipline, office referrals to grades, test scores. We have all that data and on top of it we also have community input. We've been sending surveys to parents and to staff and to students."
- "We continuously look at the cycle of inquiry within our own PLCs and then we use that to also look at, within the district, for professional development."
- "What's happened is there is no procedure for analyzing student work and looking at data. Most of the data analysis was done on summative data. Nothing really connected to the assessment pieces. There was no cycle of inquiry and no reflection on it…"
- "Right now, as we're starting to look at implementing programs and implementing either homework centers or various things like that, it's "What data do we need to look for? What do we need to collect?" in order to determine if this is effective. What's the purpose of what we're doing? What are we trying to see if it's making a difference?"
- "We're also looking at grade distribution. We're looking at how many students are getting As, how many students are getting Bs. We do that on a regular basis. We do that quarterly. We've done it three times this year and after that, we come back and say, "Has this improved or not?"

3. Examining programs for effectiveness of student learning and well-being

Sub-Code

a) We don't have a systematic process for examining program effectiveness based upon data (4)

Related Quotes

- "There's strategies that we implement when we look at data. We have and we use different strategies."
- "What data do we need to look for? What do we need to collect?" in order to determine if this is effective. What's the purpose of what we're doing? What are we trying to see if it's making a difference?"
- "That's something I think we would like to do. I think because we review some of that, but we're not collecting it [data] in a sense that we can look at it during the mid- cycle... That's something that I think would be beneficial."

- “There’s probably a lot more data-based decision-making, but [it is] a small fraction of the school. When we go into the classrooms and we say, "How often is that being used? How often are we really reflecting on this strategy that I just used with kids? Am I collecting data to say these are the strategies I'm going to continue to use or not use?"

4. Stakeholder collaboration around data, goals, effectiveness

Sub-Codes

a) Levels of staff commitment, mindsets, dispositions (7)

b) How the school collaborates (6)

c) Frequency of collaboration (6)

d) Engagement in cycles of inquiry (5)

e) Structures that effectively promote staff collaboration (5)

f) Factors affecting collaboration/collaboration effectiveness (5)

Related Quotes

- “It makes us brainstorm much more. It makes us go beyond what we’ve thought were our strategies, to go beyond just the strategies that we’re saying that we’re going to do in all areas to make sure that there’s much more accountability. It does a lot of things. It makes us really focus on the way we’re doing things, and it also makes us get together more to assess if what we’re doing is making a difference.”
- “…we look at data and then, we go around and everybody mentions what stood out. Then, once everyone mentions what stood out, we look at patterns and trends. Then, after we look at patterns and trends, we come back and try to dig a little bit deeper in terms of these patterns or trends that come about. There's a lot of different ways you can do that.”
- “For us, quite honestly, where we’ve struggled is so much of the traditional forms of collaboration that I think our teachers really want to have don’t fit as well into our structure…. It’s much more natural for us to be a collaborative disciplinary team.”
- “Out of the month, we have 4 collaboration days, which is an early release, 2 of them are department done.”
- “There are some other items on our plan, too, that, coming back to it now, we are able to see that, when we put them on there, we weren't necessarily thinking them through so closely, but instead, saying, ‘What if we put this on there?’ And we all said, ‘Yeah! Let’s do that’!”

5. **Alignment of Schoolwide Action Plan with other plans**

Sub-Codes

a) Alignment of ACS WASC with parts of LCAP and SPSA (9)

b) Alignment of Schoolwide Action Plan and the SPSA (6)

c) Alignment of SPSA with relevant LCAP components (5)

d) See advantage of one plan (5)

Related Quotes

- "We have a school-choice organization, have been [sigh] working to find a new way to measure students' learning in the absence of STAR, in the absence of CASHEE. We are doing SBAC. I guess there's still a small component of the CST that's out there. But we're just still needing to find our own footing as far as an internal measurement."
- "I want my action plan to look very much like my SPSA. It should basically be my SPSA template."
- "The LCAP and the single site plan are one thing even though they're two separate documents. To me, they're one plan and they go together very nicely."
- "The data for self-study and the data for SPSA and the data for LCAP produced similar results. The surveys we give out they produce similar results. They became each other's extension in a way."
- "I really get frustrated by the notion of doing parallel plans. That's a real pet peeve of mine, so I really fought against doing that."

Question 3: Provide an example of improved practices/systems/programs that occurred because of your school's engagement in the accreditation process.
(Note: Question 3 aligns with survey question 12C and evaluation question 1B)

Key Code Themes

- Professional development
- Parents
- School culture

1. **Professional development**

Sub-Code

a) Changing instructional strategies to address Common Core (5)

Related Quotes

- "We identified instructional strategies that align with those vigorous curricula [Common Core] and we talked about the critical thinking questions."
- "…another thing that came out of the self-study is a real focus on writing across the curriculum, which dovetails with common core, and we are looking at a way for doing schoolwide writing and then grading. We started it in the fall, and the English department said…"we're never doing this again." It was way too much work. Next year, we're going to come up with a way to do it where, build it into the staff development time so that everyone writes in say, third period. Then we use staff development time to actually train ourselves and all [of us] as a staff read the work. Then we'll have a benchmark in the fall [and] one in the spring. Then we can start tracking writing data. That'll be a new thing for us to do, and aligned with the [ACS] WASC. It'll be in our [ACS] WASC plan to do that."

2. Parents

Sub-Code

a) Enhancing parent involvement (4)

Related Quotes

- "The thing that stands out to me, right off the top of my head, is a greatly increased level of student involvement in the school, and parent involvement in the school, and really improved communication from school to home and home to school. That's something that our [ACS] WASC process had really shined a light on, that we needed to do a better job of engaging students in the school as a community, and has led to a lot more rich offerings of extracurriculars, a sports program, many things that have enriched the overall experience of our students and made them feel a part of a school community, as opposed to just coming in for their independent study."
- "The feedback from the [ACS] WASC team was a little more robust, to use your word, as well as giving us greater vision and a sense of possibility with utilizing parents and including parents... To answer your question, in coming up with our new action goals, or even monitoring our last year's action goals, we're using parents in the process, and we never have before."
- "One of the goals that we established, which is a little bit off, was more parent involvement. Increased parent involvement in terms of academic achievement or academic growth of our students."

3. School culture

Sub-Code

a) Student engagement and student support (3)

Related Quotes

- "…we've been looking into working with local community colleges to offer our students opportunities to take remedial college classes...In terms of school climate we've been working on offering our student in the mental health services and the counseling services. All these things came up during the self-study and the visit. Not all of them were visiting team recommendations. We went beyond it and have been looking at all the things that came up during the self-study and using them as our guiding framework as we brainstorm what we can offer next."
- "One of our things that we wanted to attack was student engagement, and the survey work that we did pretty early on told us that kids were not finding their classes and the course work and curriculum as relevant as they would like. That's a problem I think every high school has."

Question 4: As you think about the accreditation process, what are some suggestions that you have for improving the process, specifically…?
(Note: Aligned with Survey Questions: 12, 13, 18)

Key Code Themes

- Improving self-study process (170)
- Examining data (20)
- Using data to update Schoolwide Action Plan (24)
- General concerns (49)

1. **Improving self-study process**

Sub-Codes

a) Strengthen the VC process (9)

b) Develop and/or recommend programs of distinction (e.g., models) to visit (6)

c) Reduce complexity, redundancy, language of the self-study prompts and indicators (5)

d) Incorporate more pre self-study formative work with VC and Chair (and the school)

Related Quotes

- "Yeah, come and meet the principal. Come and meet some of the staff. Get familiar with where the school is located. Develop some foundational information of the school with not much pressure."
- "…what is it, a three-day process typically? I don't know if it could be extended by a day just to give a little bit of a sense of depth to the process? I think they would validate sometimes the work of the schools so that it's not just, 'Well we think we saw this, we think we saw that, we think we saw this'."

- “How can we create it in more of a coaching model? It can't be ones and dones…”
- “The [ACS] WASC team leaves and then for the most part the meeting ended and everyone gets to go home. There isn’t a reflection piece in terms of “Okay, let's process this.” There would be things I would look to change or improve.”
- “Maybe that could be the recommendations also of the [ACS] WASC committee if when they leave or when they share out, maybe at that time, they could also say, “Hey, we have a school here,” or a school there, or maybe that surrounding, “that has these two of your three goals that you might want to go look at.” Maybe it’s an exemplar or maybe it’s where we were a couple of years ago.”
- “If there were some schools that really used [ACS] WASC as part of that culture, I would love to know who those schools are so that I could go visit them, take a couple of people from my leadership team and see how they’ve used [ACS] WASC to build their culture. It would be very helpful.”
- “Our teachers need to know that they're doing a good job and if the [ACS] WASC process could in some way, give us something to work towards, where I could hang a banner in the front of the school that says “[ACS] WASC Program of Distinction” or “[ACS] WASC Gold Ribbon School.”
- “I believe the language could be altered in such a way that it becomes a little bit more accessible.”
- “…the self-study process is guided by indicators and prompts within each of the focus group areas. And they are the most convoluted and cumbersome things to work your way through and unpack to decipher what is really being asked of us. I spend a great deal of time working with the staff to just help them figure out what in the world they’re supposed to be examining, because the questions are worded so horribly. Those questions, and oftentimes there are three questions that essentially ask the same thing.”
- “you would really need to reach out to schools in some way shape or form before you have to go through the process ... This is the people part of our business, continually reaching out and looking for things. Helping find ways to turn qualitative data into quantitative data, and helping find new ways to measure this stuff.”

2. Examining data

<u>Sub-Code</u>

a) Individualize charts for alternative school models (3)

Related Quotes

- "I think it is that there is one selection of data requested for all schools, and for alternative programs like ours, they don't fit. Maybe making that a little bit more fluid, to be more reflective of the program that's being accredited."
- "I think it would be nice if there were some flexibility in allowing us to go about how it will work best with our community, or with our staff. I think sometimes it feels so scripted it takes away from ... You're focused on the process, as opposed to focusing on the outcomes."
- "Within the [ACS] WASC process, there are extra questions for charter schools, but there are no extra questions for continuation, or independent study, or any of the other kinds of alternatives."

3. Using data to update schoolwide action plans

Sub-Code

a) Provide specific guidance about aligning ACS WASC, SPSA, LCAP (6)

Related Quotes

- "One thing that I recommend is that while they have a template for writing the report, I've not seen a template for the actual action plan."
- "…the way I've been looking at it the LCAP, the 8 areas of the LCAP and the self-review sections of [ACS] WASC, there's a lot of overlaps in between. I don't know if [ACS] WASC wants to maybe even bring them closer to each other so when somebody goes to the [ACS] WASC self-review it's pretty much aligned with the LCAP areas as well…if [ACS] WASC wants to align them even further maybe that might alleviate some concerns."
- "What initially comes to mind is a movement with LCFF focused on those eight state priorities. A greater emphasis perhaps with [ACS] WASC on the state priorities? I think that if [ACS] WASC was to move in that direction, then it would also move when the state defines the API, however that's going to be."
- "…it would be helpful if [ACS] WASC could give us more input on how all of this comes together…"

4. General concerns

Related Quotes

- "Schools sometimes are just inundated with demands and improvement initiatives. We want you to focus on this, we want you to focus on that and then you've got [ACS] WASC and that seems like it might sometimes overlap, sometimes it doesn't. It just becomes almost overwhelming."

- “Because we feel like it’s the same question being asked over and over, and we’ve been through Question 1 and Question 2. We’ve provided evidence. And then we’re onto Question 3, it looks the same as the others. Then we’re just sort of shooting in the dark, I think, at times, to figure out how to support what we’ve already supported two times before.”
- “[ACS] WASC, to some people, sort of feels like the enemy. Like, here are these guys who don’t really know what’s going on with us. We know we gotta do it, but this is not a friendly kind of an interaction.”
- “They kept asking me to be on a panel, not a panel, but a visiting committee. I’ve always said no, because I’ve always thought in my mind, ‘I don’t want to be the one putting someone through what other people put me through’.”
- “[ACS] WASC at this point has taken more of a negative connotation because we never get it right and they always come back.”
- “…for newer administrators, it could seem a little bit daunting. It could seem…like, "Oh, they’re looking for the bad so I’m going to try to hide the bad and highlight the good,” that whole kind of game that you get into if you think it’s adversary, if you think it’s a gotcha.”

Question 5: In terms of the schoolwide action plan, how does the accreditation process help you to…?

(Note: Question 5 is aligned with Survey Questions 10, 14, 15, 19 and Evaluation Question 2)

Key Code Themes

- Action plan implementation (21)
- Monitoring plan implementation (9)
- Assessing progress towards goals (30)
- Updating action plans (39)

1. **Action plan implementation**

Sub-Codes

a) Building the culture and reflection piece to support plan implementation (6)

b) Using the ACS WASC plan to drive SPSA development (4)

c) Working the plan (3)

Related Quotes

- “We’re trying to connect our [ACS] WASC goals with our SPSA goals, our Single Plan for Student Achievement.”
- “You’ve got to work the plan. I think that’s all there is to it. You can only find value in something like that, if you actually have some kind of outcomes. Outcomes have to be more than just we put a plan together, and we put it on the shelf. You have to actually work it, and you have to make the accountability portion of it.”
- “I don’t think that truthfully there’s any help with implementing the plan. I think it’s the roadmap and then you’ve just got to do it.”
- “They set up the feedback, and then we get together and develop an action plan. They’re gone when we develop the action plan. The action plan happens after they leave. It’s not set up.”
- “It’s been part of that challenge where "Let’s build a structure and look at what’s missing," which is the reflection and then the data analysis and using those pieces as key fundamental driving forces.”
- “One of my intentional goals was not to mention [ACS] WASC but to start building the structures I needed for [ACS] WASC to be successful and for us to be able to reflect.”
- “Building that data reflection piece and putting an inquiry cycle in place with people realizing it or not makes it important.”
- “The change only happens if the principal really establishes this is our plan, this is what we’re going to do, and then enlists the teachers to go along…I tried to make them realize that this is not my school, this is their school, and it’s the students’ school, and they have to own it. They have to be willing to talk to their colleagues about it.”
- “Even though we get goals out of [ACS] WASC that we develop and that are reviewed and reflected on, they still fit within those four [schoolwide] goals and support those four goals. I would say that’s the best way that it promotes that or affects the school site plan.”

2. Monitoring plan implementation

Sub-Codes

a) Constantly refer to Schoolwide Action Plan goals during the year and align actions (7)

b) Use collaborative approaches to monitoring (2)

Related Quotes

- "Yeah, but actually using it as something that you base all year long on. And then for me, I just have the copy of the action plan on my desk, and every time we do something where I can actually document, and then say, "Oh yeah, this is actually going towards that." It's kind of filling it in there, and then providing the opportunity for your staff to see that it isn't just something that sits in a binder, that it's actually stuff that we're working on."
- "As I said, we use our [ACS] WASC goals. I always feel that if you've got good goals that's what you fall back on as you're moving forward with professional development, because it definitely is a map. Too often, you get steered all over; people say, "Why are we doing this or that?" so for us… [ACS] WASC has been very helpful."
- "How we keep it current is by making sure that in our collaborations throughout the year, we continue to answer those questions that were posed in our self-study and those recommendations that were made through the [ACS] WASC committee as well so it's not, ok "they're coming next year, okay, it's time to pull out the binder or what needs to get edited or what did we say we would have by the mid-year review?"

3. Assessing progress towards goals

Sub-Codes

a) Examples of assessing progress toward goals (6)

b) School information management systems as tools to promote assessment (5)

c) Lack of school systematic assessment process (4)

Related Quotes

- "Our Special Projects Coordinator has just started ... It started as a running file of all the things that we are doing and have done since the [ACS] WASC visit to kind of keep things current or progressing. Now, it's an electronic file that staff has access to and we all have access to, and we continue to store evidence in particular ... as they pertain to the particular recommendations as well as our schoolwide goals."
- "Trying to take one of those last meetings and doing kind of year in review, that's a focus on learning year in review, where we go back and we look at our staff and we see where we are, and do kind of a little mini thing. A lot of that is data. Kind of like, what do we know about what we've tried to do, and how do we see that in terms of student outcomes?"
- "This what we use, the A through G. We use graduation rate. We use our enrollment data and discipline. Those are usually our measures for that. One of the

more structured one is our AVID program. We have an AVID certification meeting every year where we review all this information, but we also have quarterly meetings within AVID that reviews exactly that student discipline, their A through G progress. We look at their grade point average. We also tracking student involvement through a program called Five Star. We upload all our students into this program and then, we scan them whenever they go to a football game. We'll scan them if they're part of the sewing club…"

4. Updating action plans

Sub-Codes

a) School's annual updating processes (21)

b) Matching funding to school goals (5)

d) Using data to update ACS WASC and SPSA (4)

e) Stakeholders involved in annual updating process (4)

Related Quotes

- "…we constantly update where our money is flowing and how that goes to our goals and if we need to update it."
- "We're constantly looking for the newest form of data and then redirecting our path based on that data."
- "…we are spending this spring looking at what we set as goals and agreed to a year ago when the team was here, and updating. It is an ongoing process. I learned early on in my administrative career that [ACS] WASC is not something that you do six months before the team comes and then forget about."
- "I create a yearly plan, so we are actually in the process of doing that right now with my teacher leadership body where we go and we look at the [ACS] WASC plan, we kind of highlight what it is we feel like we kind of have begun tackling, and then we develop next year's goals based on the larger [ACS] WASC goals but kind of chunking off some of the smaller action steps and making those your goals for the following year."
- "…most of our monies do go or align with the three goals that we have sent forward or …the three goals that were important to this campus, that were also supported by the [ACS] WASC team."
- "I want my action plan to look very much like my SPSA. It should basically be my SPSA template."
- "…we look back on the action plan to update our results … I'll be aligning [it] with SPSA."

- “It’s a matter of evaluating those goals on an annual basis which would then be connected to our overall [ACS] WASC goal. It builds on it.”
- “They meet the parents, they meet the students, multiple stakeholders, and they give us feedback. The feedback from the [ACS] WASC team was a little more robust, to use your word, as well as giving us greater vision and a sense of possibility with utilizing parents and including parents. To answer your question, in coming up with our new action goals, or even monitoring our last year’s action goals, we’re using parents in the process, and we never have before.”

Question 6: How did you use the feedback and reflections of the visiting committee for your last full self-study/visit process (or for the mid-cycle or other type of visit)?
(Note: Question 6 is aligned with Survey Question12E and Evaluation Questions 2B and 3B)

Key Code Themes

- Value of VC feedback and reflections (34)
- Importance of VC chair (5)

1. Value of VC feedback and reflections

Sub-Codes

a) We’ve had good experiences with VC feedback and team (10)

a) Principals use feedback to improve action plan/goals/focus (6)

b) VC provides different/new/unbiased perspective (5)

Related Quotes

- “We really had a great experience with our chair and visiting committee this time around. They came in from the very beginning and advocated a position of support and wanting us to succeed, in particular. "We’re here for you," and really, the actions followed those words, which was wonderful.”
- “I thought that the feedback was very positive, which we appreciated and helped us feel good about the visit, because it’s by nature kind of a tense experience. It was aligned with what we had said, which I appreciated. The areas that we felt we needed to improve, they also felt we needed to improve, so there weren’t any surprises or gotchas.”
- “Obviously our visiting team left us some recommendations and I brought those to my school site council’s attention. We said the recommendations are basically pretty much what our priorities are and they align pretty well. We were in agreement. From there while we were creating our SPSA we basically looked at programs and initiatives that will help us to reach those goals. Some of them were instructional, some of them were about school climate.”

- "The feedback that I got over the last time really met up with the things that we knew we had to improve on, and that we really weren't as focused on certain areas as we should have been. In other areas, of course, we were very focused. It was good to just bring that back to us for us to focus on it."
- "He came at the 3 year and gave us just some great ideas of how to do it, and we listened. We hear what they've got to say if they've got some new ideas."
- "[VC] coming in and seeing the things that maybe you don't see because you're in it every day. That's what I think the committees do. They come in with a set of eyes, they're coaches, and they're seeing things that we probably don't see. Being a principal here, I would look at…things that I have an eye for that my predecessor didn't and I kind of go why are we not doing that? It's because everybody has a different perspective. They have different things they focus on, that they're passionate about. It's a good thing."
- "I think that it validates the process because it's not of a specific team that's coming from a research group or whatever that has a certain focus... It's people who are coming from different backgrounds and I think it's a positive."
- "The positives come from someone else visiting you — you get non-political eyes. You get a fresh point of view from someone who's not connected to your district; who is not passing judgment in any way shape or form."

2. Importance of VC chair

<u>Sub-Codes</u>

a) Importance of pre-self-study interaction with chair (5)

b) Essential for chair to understand school (4)

<u>Related Quotes</u>

- "Yeah, come and meet the principal. Come and meet some of the staff. Get familiar with where the school is located. Develop some foundational information of the school with not much pressure."
- "…The chair was great. We got along well. We talked before the visit."
- "… the chair has so much ... we took direction from our chair. Our chair helped to frame our thinking. Our chair also helped to say 'no, you're really missing this point. You may think this about math because that's what goes on at your school for math.' I think it's key that that chair has an understanding [of the school]. I know how hard it is to staff [ACS] WASC visiting teams, or can be, but if the chair has an understanding, then they can really help…"
- "I would say that there really should be a focus on those members really having a good understanding of the [ACS] WASC purpose in curriculum…"

- "I spend a lot of time talking to the chair to make sure the chair understands what happens at the school, our everyday lives, how we work [with] students, and parents…" "Like as soon as the chair gets assigned, as soon as I get assigned, I typically reach out to the school, and say, 'Show me what you have'."

Question 7A: Please comment on the degree to which you feel that you're a) governing body and b) district leaders understand the ACS WASC accreditation process as a school improvement process?
(Note: Question 7A is aligned with Survey Question 17 and Evaluation Question 2)

Key Code Themes

- ACS WASC understanding by board and district (72)

1. ACS WASC understanding by board and district

Sub-Codes

a) District examples of some/strong understanding (15)

b) Board examples of some/strong understanding (11)

b) Board examples of limited understanding (9)

d) Central administrators experience with ACS WASC (5)

e) District examples of limited understanding (5)

Related Quotes

- "I would say as much as I could get support for other programs, I wouldn't say I would get more or less. I don't think they'll say, "Oh, [ACS] WASC is not important so we're not going to do that" or "[ACS] WASC is super important so we're going to give you extras." I would say it's just as much as I could ask support for any other program that I would have."
- "We have, within our CMO, we have a Lead-Accreditation Coordinator who, she herself, has served as a visiting committee chair for many, many visits, so her level of understanding of the process is very strong."
- "I think the board's understanding is in more in line with the parents' understanding, which is more based on that six-year accreditation."
- "I don't think they understand the process. I think they see it more like state testing where they want that cherry on the top. They want the highest mark and they don't really understand the benefit of what we were talking about."
- "I'm not certain about my school board. I think that they see it as an accreditation process, perhaps. Not necessarily an integrated part of the school process, but I don't know for certain."

- "I'm not sure if they really understand the importance of the cycle of inquiry and continually looking at data that may or may not change."
- "We have in our district leadership right now not a whole lot of secondary people who have direct experience with [ACS] WASC, so they may see it as an accreditation process, but they don't understand the work that it takes."
- "We send the report out. I don't get a lot of people coming to me to talk to me about WASC before or after, other than a congratulations, you got a six or whatever. That's only because I've emailed them that we got a six. I'm sure, somewhere down the line they find out…"
- "From a district point of view, I think at times it feels like they're busy putting out the fires they need to put out. We're kind of just left floating around. Being able to align the district vision and mission with the sites and being able to have all the [ACS] WASC plans; we should be working towards similar things."
- "I would say cabinet is very supportive…They understand the process. Most of them have been at school sites and I think they have a good balance between it being a learning experience and supporting the school, but also, it being an achievement based process where they want schools to have a good accreditation, a good turnout, a good comfortable feel that things were open, but that the schools achieved something."
- "The Director of Ed services is a former high school principal (three years ago) so he absolutely understands."
- "You know, it's mixed. I am looking across all my years at different districts. I think different districts all have a different take on what the [ACS] WASC process means to it. At my current district, both my old and my new superintendent have a high regard for [ACS] WASC, and I think understand the benefits of [ACS] WASC as far as working within schools."
- "They know the [ACS] WASC process. Many of them go out and still do a [ACS] WASC. They'll go out and do a [ACS] WASC visit."

Question 7B: How does each of these entities (governing board, district) support your school's focus on student learning and ongoing school improvement?
(Note: Question 7B is aligned with Survey Questions 17 and Evaluation Question 1)

Key Code Themes

- ACS WASC support by board and district (54)
- Examples of district support provided (37)
- District provides limited support (5)

1. ACS WASC support by board and district

Sub-Code

a) District support desired (3)

Related Quotes

- "I can understand why even some data support, data analysis support might be helpful."
- "Fair to say that in a district they're going to have the same [ACS] WASC issues, the [ACS] WASC action plan system but the same things they're trying to ... It would behoove people to say okay, let's put it all together and how do we as a district office provide support to these 4 schools or these 2 schools."
- "I think it would be great to have a district [ACS] WASC coordinator that their job is to take a look at and to be there to support the [ACS] WASC process in the schools…"

2. Examples of district support provided

Sub-Codes

a) Provides data for reports/data resources (5)

b) District leadership and school work together on the self-study (4)

Related Quotes

- "… if there's concerns or if there's things that need to be addressed, they make themselves available. I know that prior to our [ACS] WASC visit, our assistant superintendent of instruction visited our campus and shared because I wanted to know a little more about the district's vision for professional development."
- "After [ACS] WASC's last day we talked about the recommendations and they were here when the [ACS] WASC presented their findings."
- "It's, if you will, not just an [ACS] WASC for the site but there's also oversight from our central office people that are working in conjunction with site principals for the [ACS] WASC review, helping provide support for them through that process."
- "They're very supportive of us, they not only pay for all the expenses, they give one semester of giving either a release period or a stipend to an [ACS] WASC coordinator. They understand the time that's involved in just writing the report and putting it all together."

3. **District provides limited support**

Related Quotes:

- "Yeah. They come. We keep getting different directors, but the director did come ... The previous director came to the last visit and to be honest, it seemed like they were just there to see if we did well or not and if we did it's like, 'Okay. Here's your salute.'"
- "We should not be completely out in left field. Being able to have some of that type of input where we discuss it as administrators within our district and research sharing would definitely be a helpful thing, we don't currently have that."
- "As far as them supporting, they could certainly do a lot (emphasis) more. The district itself could do way more in helping the schools through the accreditation process."

Question 8: How has the ACS WASC accreditation process facilitated the engagement of parents in your school's educational program?
(Note: Question 8 is aligned with Survey Questions 17 and 21 and Evaluation Question 1)

Key Code Themes

- Parent engagement strategies used (55)
- Causes of limited parent involvement (34)
- Challenges for the school with parent engagement (12)
- Outcomes of parent engagement (12)
- ACS WASC process facilitates school focus on parent engagement (6)
- Limitations of ACS WASC process on parent engagement (6)

1. **Parent engagement strategies used**

Sub-Codes

a) Parent surveys (8)
b) Utilize established parent groups (8)
c) Parent center in the school (8)
d) Culturally responsive strategies (5)

Related Quotes

- "…we had existing parent committees and we used those members in a different way because we had [ACS] WASC…"
- "We've given them surveys; actually, we sent the surveys to everybody."
- "We try to do surveys around orientation."

- "…we've done a lot of education of parents about how to be involved, taking parent education pretty seriously, of just learning about the school, [and] the school system."
- "We have a translator in all of our meetings [and] we send everything in English and Spanish."
- "We've had a parent center for the first time, the parent center in the school. We have classes and workshops for parents."

2. Causes of limited parent involvement

Sub-Code

a) Parents lack of (or success with) a formal education (4)

Related Quotes

- "when you come in to talk with them about something or other or freshman registration, you can tell they're not very well-educated. "I got kicked out of [the school] when I was in the 10th grade and never finished."
- "We are a very ethnic school and many of our ethnic parents just believe that that's the school's function. They send their kids to school and they need to educate them and why do I need to be a part of that?
- "…it's an epidemic that we're all dealing with most part, the lack of parent involvement, especially at inner-city schools, but I don't know how to help the process."

3. Challenges of ACS WASC process on parent engagement

Sub-Codes

a) only a few parents involved in ACS WASC process (5)

b) hard to get other than the usually involved parents (4)

Related Quotes

- "I worked at a school with 4300 students. We had less than 20 families show up when [ACS] WASC came in."
- "I will tell you in my situation parental involvement is almost nonexistent. We try. In our last [ACS] WASC process, I think we had 2 parents involved."

4. Parent engagement outcomes

Sub-Code

a) Parent satisfaction/ownership of school and advocate for school (6)

Related Quotes

- "I think that's a real opportunity that [ACS] WASC gives us when we bring parents in. It's an eye opener for some of them. Then, they become our voice out in the community…"
- "It gave the parents the opportunity to see what it means to be a part of a self-study, how they can be a part of [school] change…and what they basically receive from their students."
- "So I think it's, again, just another way to leverage parents and to make them feel like they do have a really important role in the school. So I don't see anything but positive coming out of that."

5. Assessment evidence — ACS WASC process facilitates school focus on parent engagement

Sub-Code

a) Increased parent involvement (4)

Related Quotes

- "One of the best things that came, there was a lot of information that was shared…It was an eye opener also not only for our district but it drove us to set up a parent focus group… All of a sudden, the parents that are on this parent focus group are coming in with all this information. I get calls. I get emails. "Hey, we thought about this. We thought about that." I said, "Okay, I am compiling all this so when we meet." They're beginning to feel not only empowered but also they're becoming our voice out there too with other parents."

6. Limitations of ACS WASC process on parent engagement

Sub-Code

a) ACS WASC doesn't facilitate, it just recommends (6)

Related Quotes

- "It provided an opportunity and platform for us to really build a greater connection with our parent base, and involve them at a greater level, and it definitely, through the self-study process, created opportunities for parents to come in and learn more about what's going on in our school, and have a voice in what's going on at our school."
- "[ACS] WASC is nothing other than a requirement for us. Right now I think the push for [school] is coming from LCAP. We have to incorporate our stakeholders, get input, get surveys because that's our money attached to it. We do that one first. Then we were able to use that information and put it into [ACS] WASC."

Comparative Analysis of Five Scales and Interviews

In this section, the findings are presented from an integrative analysis of the five scales and their related themes from the interviews. As discussed earlier, the five scales emerged from the Nonlinear Principal Components Analysis (NCPCA), which allowed the reduction of the total number of survey items to smaller, conceptually aligned clusters. After careful review, each cluster (i.e., "scale") was given a title, which captures the essential "concept" embedded within the collection of survey items in the cluster. Because Scale 1 (accreditation outcomes) was the first scale to emerge from the NLPCA and therefore explains the largest amount of the total variance across the five scales the evaluation team wanted to see how it related to the sub-items in Scales 2–5. They also wanted to identify and describe related interview responses to help deepen the understanding of the principals' perceptions. Given the comparatively small number of principals interviewed, the purpose was not to extrapolate interview statements broadly, but to offer "color commentary" (to use a sports metaphor).

This analysis also provides a more nuanced and coherent interpretation of the interrelationships among scales since important concepts and their meanings across scales may sometimes overlap (e.g., as is common in education research, each scale is not absolutely discrete from the others).

Accreditation Outcomes (Scale 1) and Site-Level Accreditation Benefits (Scale 2).

Principals highly value ACS WASC/CDE accreditation, especially in terms of how data are used to strengthen student and adult (professional) learning (survey items 18A–18G), and at a macro (school) level, how the ACS WASC/CDE accreditation process enhances school improvement and student learning (items 10, 11). However, while principals see the benefits of engaging in the ACS WASC/CDE accreditation process, interviews revealed that some would like more attention given to the accreditation outcomes.

The qualitative results (open-ended survey and interview data) indicated strong support for the outcomes of the ACS WASC accreditation process — specifically, promoting stakeholder accountability; reminding schools to regularly examine their educational programs, processes, and data; fostering schools' capacity for internal reflection; maintaining a focus on the educational program, and promoting school accountability. In terms of benefits, principals report that the accreditation process strengthens the role of the principal in effecting change at the school-site level. They also noted the importance of leadership for the successful implementation of the ACS WASC Accreditation Cycle of Quality. Several quotes captured the essence of the qualitative data around the benefits of engaging in ACS WASC accreditation:

- "I think the biggest value really comes from the fact that everyone needs to be involved in it."
- "ACS WASC allows the school to…really see…how effective we are and areas where we need to improve, areas where we shine, areas where we do best."

- "…it validates the things that are working and really highlights strengths in areas of sound practice, and it shines a light on areas where we could continue to grow, and creates a mechanism to support that growth."
- "I think the biggest benefit from [ACS] WASC is it keeps the school on a focus…it became a living document for us…"

The qualitative data also suggest that some principals struggled with the amount of time invested in the ACS WASC accreditation process in relation to these benefits. For example, a few noted other inquiry processes, like the Single Plan for Student Achievement (SPSA) and the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP), were more important for school improvement (*note: in these cases, the principals were unaware that SPSA and ACS WASC are closely aligned and not competing processes).*

Some principals raised process-related concerns that could be easily addressed by making the process more "user-friendly." For example, reducing the use of academic language and redundancies in the self-study report template, networking with other schools who have successfully implemented the accreditation process, standardizing the focus and conduct of visiting committees, and ensuring that the composition of the visiting committee matches the type of school (especially if the school is an alternative/continuation school or delivers an independent study or online educational program). As one principal noted, "Yes, the general process promotes reflection and growth. But, the specific process is very academic and is not user-friendly. A more user-friendly process would allow for greater buy-in by all stakeholders into the reflection and growth cycle."

Interview feedback regarding the data-related elements of Scale 1 was mixed. For example, regarding the use of data generally (Interview question 4B), one principal stated, "We're constantly looking for the newest form of data and then redirecting the path based on that data." However, during the interviews, most principals did not clearly articulate how (or how systematically) their schools used data to strengthen teaching and learning. There were several exceptional examples of the use of data around student and adult learning. One interviewee remarked how his/her district grounded district activities in the ACS WASC accreditation process, and in fact, data generated by the district was regularly distributed to all schools.

Across the 20 interviewees, few principals interviewed spoke directly to the training or coaching of teachers, and those that did often touched on the subject indirectly. One principal commented on how the accreditation process informed the way in which he worked with teachers to improve instruction (Interview Question 1A): "Knowing that [ACS] WASC was coming I was much more attuned to the way academic discourse was taking place in the classroom. Not only was I more aware of it, but I made sure the teachers knew that I was looking for the steps, so they became more aware of it."

Accreditation Outcomes (Scale 1) and School Engagement with Action Plan Implementation (Scale 3).

A central tenet of the ACS WASC accreditation model is the full and comprehensive engagement of stakeholders at both the individual and organizational levels. The challenge for a school is to regularly assess the degree of involvement of all relevant stakeholders (e.g., school site, parents, community members, district office personnel, and the district board of education). It is expected that stakeholders have a hand in reviewing and monitoring the actions and the data that impact student learning (including the supporting program and operations). Stakeholders are also expected to be involved in refinements to the schoolwide action plan informed by the analysis of multiple sources and types of data/evidence. From this perspective, the fully engaged school establishes both individual opportunities and organizational structures, systems, and process to participate in and facilitate ongoing school improvement efforts.

The data related to Scales 1 and 3 suggest that principals with positive attitudes towards accreditation outcomes related to the use of data (Scale 1) as well as to the broader outcomes of ACS WASC accreditation also report higher levels of their schools' engagement with schoolwide action plan implementation (Scale 3, Questions 19A–19D). At the same time, principals report challenges with the systematic use of evidence to improve student learning, updating of the schoolwide action plan, and adherence to the plan in terms of assessment data collection (Scale 3, Questions 15A, 15C, 15E).

By definition, "systematic" requires regularity, order, and reliable processes. This disparity between positive outcomes, engagement with action plan implementation, and challenges with the systematic use of evidence could be attributed to the complex and often turbulent conditions in schools that compete for attention among various stakeholders, especially principals. With the many demands faced by schools and principals the capacity of a school and its stakeholders to maintain stable and coherent protocols for school improvement initiatives provides an ongoing challenge. Although both questions involve action plan implementation, the evaluation team wondered whether the word "systematic" may have caused survey respondents to pause (e.g., perhaps they were more comfortable describing the use of data in more general terms). The interview data supports the assertion that schools struggle with developing processes that support the systematic use of data for school improvement processes. The way that principals tend to think about data is illustrated by the following quotes:

- "We're constantly looking for the newest form of data and then redirecting our path based on that data."
- "I create a yearly plan so we are actually in the process of doing that right now with my teacher leadership body where we look at the [ACS] WASC plan, we highlight what it is we feel we have begun tackling, and then we develop next year's goals based on the larger [ACS] WASC goals but kind of chunking off some of the smaller action steps and making those goals for the following year."

In relation to Scale 1 (Accreditation Outcomes) and the use of data, many of the interviewees described the challenges faced with the transition away from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) toward its successor, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), and in particular the lack of standardized accountability data to replace the data used under NLCB (e.g., California High School Exit Exam [CAHSEE] and Standardized Testing and Reporting [STAR] data). As one principal stated, "…now that the STAR test is gone and the CAHSEE is gone. Those are two huge data points that people have been focusing on for 12 or 15 years…[we've] looked at our smarted balanced data from the last year…it's too early [to understand how we're doing…]."

Across the interviews the topic of using data to inform action plans and ongoing school improvement elicited a variety of responses. While a few principals gave concrete descriptions of the structures, systems, and processes used to gather, examine, interpret, and apply data from an organizational perspective, many were unable to do so. The challenge for principals was not being aware of, or even attempting to analyze, data pertaining to student learning, but rather, doing these things in systematic, structured, and routinized ways.

Accreditation Outcomes (Scale 1) and District and Other Non-Instructional Stakeholder Engagement in Schoolwide Action Plan Implementation (Scale 4).

The relationship between Scales 4 and 5 indicate that principals (i.e., survey respondents) with positive attitudes toward accreditation outcomes, especially those related to the use of data to enhance student and adult (professional) learning) report lower engagement of district and other non-instructional stakeholders in action plan implementation. Similarly, those who report higher levels of engagement of these stakeholders are not as positive regarding accreditation outcomes.

An examination of the interview (qualitative) data indicated that non-instructional stakeholders as a whole, and in particular, the district staff, were very supportive of principals and schools in their engagement with the accreditation process, especially during site-visits (Interview Question 7A and 7B). Several districts regularly provided data to schools that could be used for ongoing school operations, improvement, and in support of the ACS WASC/CDE self-study process. Several principals also reported district supported release time for those involved in the ACS WASC self-study as well as simulated self-study visits. Most principals reported that district staff members understood that the ACS WASC/CDE accreditation is a school improvement process. Several principals provided examples in which district staff members regularly served on ACS WASC visiting committees in other school districts. However, principals also stated that district staff members rarely served on their school's self-study committees. In terms of financial support of the accreditation process, the majority of interviewees reported that the study is part of the school's budget, not the district's. Notably, several principals expressed a desire for additional district-level articulation and support.

- "I think it would be great to have a district [ACS] WASC coordinator that their job is to take a look at and to be there to support the [ACS] WASC process in the schools…"

- "It's not just a [ACS] WASC for the site but there's also oversight from our central office people that are working in conjunction with site principals for the [ACS] WASC review, helping provide support for them through that process."

District school boards, like district staff, also support schools in their focus on student learning and ongoing improvement (Interview Questions 7A and 7B). However, the interview data indicate that principals experience difficulty in commenting on whether their district board members fully understood the school improvement focus of ACS WASC accreditation. More specifically, their ability to answer these interview questions depended upon their level of and experience with the board (which varied considerably).

Finally, in terms of parents, the interview data (Interview Question #8) strongly underscored the principals' acknowledgement of the importance of parent engagement, especially in terms of implementing school improvement efforts. While principals reported that parents were involved in the self-study process, it was an ongoing challenge to involve them meaningfully in other important facets of the educational program. Overall, principals did not report that the ACS WASC accreditation process facilitated the ongoing engagement of parents over the six-year span of an accreditation cycle.

When asked about how they assessed parent engagement in a systematic way, the annual parent survey was mentioned by some principals. However, most principals did not have a particularly robust process for assessing the number of parents engaged in school educational programs or in what ways. Regardless, principals recognized the importance of parent engagement. One stated, "…It [ACS WASC] was an eye opener also not only for our district but it drove us to set up a parent focus group… All of a sudden, the parents that are on this parent focus group are coming in with all this information. I get calls. I get emails. 'Hey, we thought about this. We thought about that.' I said, 'Okay, I am compiling all this so when we meet.' They're beginning to feel not only empowered but also they're becoming our voice out there too with other parents."

Accreditation Outcomes (Scale 1) and Site and Instructional Stakeholder Involvement in Action Plan Implementation (Scale 5).

Here, as with Scale 4, the ACS WASC accreditation process requires the comprehensive and meaningful engagement of relevant within school and out-of-school stakeholders. The development of the self-study, schoolwide action plan, follow-up activities after the site visit by ACS WASC representatives, and ongoing school improvement efforts should be a collective and collaborative endeavor from all school and school community stakeholders. While Scale 4 included stakeholders who were not part of the daily operations of school sites, Scale 5 included stakeholders who are central to the daily operation of schools: teachers, administrators, and parents. Like Scale 4, the relationship (correlation) between the two scales is small and positive.

As a group, the principals (survey respondents) demonstrated little variability when comparing Scale 1 and Scale 5 scores (see Appendix D). Principals from charter schools reported greater engagement of site and instructional stakeholders in relation to accreditation outcomes than did

survey respondents who were working at their school during their most recent ACS WASC/CDE visit.

In terms of the qualitative results, interviewees reported that a key challenge with teachers is developing their trust in the data. As one principal stated, “One of the things that I’m working with…is trying to get teachers to first trust data and not shy away from it.” With teachers who trust and are comfortable working with data, principals reported a regular review of data in their action plans, especially during the fall and spring of each academic year. According to one principal of a large comprehensive high school, “…one of the last meetings of the year…doing a year in review…we go back and look at…where we are…a lot of that is data…what do we know about what we’ve tried to do and how do we see that in terms of student outcomes because we spend a lot of time in our work as adults trying to figure out what that work is and what we are trying to do…linking it back to what we see in terms of our effect on kids…”

VI. DISCUSSION

Overview

The development of the ACS WASC Principal Survey represents the first known attempt to gather empirical data with the intent of developing a conceptual framework and theory around preK-12 accreditation, and specifically, a model that captures the operation of the ACS WASC Accreditation Cycle of Quality at the school-site level. Through the use of *Nonlinear Principal Components Analyses* (NLPCA), five constructs were identified: Accreditation Outcomes (Scale 1), Site Level Accreditation Benefits (Scale 2), School Engagement in Schoolwide Action Plan Implementation (Scale 3), District and other Non-Instructional Stakeholder Engagement in Schoolwide Action Plan Implementation (Scale 4), and School Site and Instructional Stakeholder Engagement in Schoolwide Action Plan Implementation (Scale 5). The survey results were integrated with interview data to further explain or illuminate the survey results.

The results of this study are intended to drive changes to the accreditation process and policies with an aim toward the improvement of the ACS WASC *FOL* model in order to answer two guiding questions — how are the students achieving? Is the school doing everything possible to support high achievement for all of its students? It is also the goal of this study to provide state and federal policy makers and the public with information about the ACS WASC accreditation process derived through an independent investigation.

From an applied evaluation research perspective, the results indicate the need to further refine the key constructs that emerged from NLPCA, both conceptually and in terms of the scaling used to assess important constructs such as stakeholder engagement, accreditation benefits, accreditation purposes, and the use of data to inform planning for and implementing school improvements. The primary reason for using NLPCA was based on the need to reduce (and cluster) the overall number of survey items into a smaller set of items that represented the information in the survey and to accommodate the mixed nature of the ACS WASC Principal Survey data (which contained nominal, multiple nominal, and ordinal data). Important steps in the refinement of the five constructs identified in this study will be based not only on the qualitative (interview) data, but also, the administration of this survey to other major ACS WASC stakeholder groups. An evaluation question arises: If the survey is administered to other stakeholder groups, will a similar component (factor) structure be found? If not, what are the implications for the next steps in the development of an empirically-based foundation for the ACS WASC Accreditation Cycle of Quality?

Three Evaluation Questions: Key Points and Discussion

At the onset of this study, the three evaluation questions (see below) were created to both shape and guide the research. All survey, interview, and analytical protocols were created with these three questions in mind. However, because the study was designed to be "exploratory," the

evaluation team understood that the conduct of the research and its findings could illuminate different emphases, unconsidered pathways of inquiry, and the alignment of data that might not conform to the initial expectations. Nevertheless, as the evaluation team considered the various types of information that emerged from the analyses, they were able to draw inferences from them in relation to each of the three evaluation questions.

Evaluation Question One

How do ACS WASC-accredited schools use the ACS WASC principles as tools to implement ongoing cycles of inquiry that address these questions, which currently appear on the ACS WASC FOL Status Worksheet as Questions #1 and #2:

- **1A**: How are schools structuring their cycle of inquiry so that all students achieve the desired schoolwide learner outcomes and the essential academic standards that prepare students to be globally competent (e.g., college and career ready)?
- **1B**: Is the school doing everything possible to support the defined high-quality learning, that is, how does the ACS WASC accreditation process influence the school's work around the following essential tools of the ACS WASC accreditation process?

  a. Development of school processes and procedures that support student learning.
  b. The refinement of the vision, mission, and schoolwide learner outcomes.
  c. Development of a constructive school culture that engenders professional collaboration.
  d. Development and support of effective communication structures and systems within schools.
  e. Development of a broad-based planning, implementation, and monitoring process.
  f. Development, implementation, and monitoring of the schoolwide improvement plan.
  g. Evaluation of collegial strategies used to implement innovations.

Key Points:

- Influence of the principal is critical
- Understanding and applying cycles of inquiry
- Building a collaborative school culture

Discussion:

Analysis of the interview data revealed that principals answered this question using the following logic: Because of the accreditation process, I as a principal, was able to implement aspects [influence] of the process, and that this implementation leads to the 'value' or benefits of engaging in the ACS WASC accreditation process. The influence of principal leadership on all aspects of the success of the ACS WASC accreditation model at the school-site level is one of

the most important findings of this study. It is not surprising given the considerable body of research that underscores the important relationship between leadership and school improvement. Seven of the 20 interviewees provided examples of how the ACS WASC process strengthened their role as the principal by:

- Helping to provide essential knowledge of the school
- Providing an opportunity to shape change
- Enhancing the support of stakeholders by pointing to the requirements of an ACS WASC accreditation
- Enhancing school accountability
- Assisting them in developing a process of inquiry at the school
- Providing leverage to empower the staff to accomplish their work
- Providing a template from which to examine the educational program
- Shaping their perspectives on how to accomplish school change.

The research shows that most principals are aware of the philosophy, criteria, and protocols (e.g., "tools") contained in the ACS WASC accreditation model and the importance of aligning these with continuous schoolwide improvement efforts. They understand that establishing ongoing cycles of inquiry is a critical step toward facilitating continuous schoolwide improvement that, in turn, supports high-quality learning for all students. One principal put it, "Schools are constantly in this cycle of how we review what we're doing, what data should we look at, how should we look at the data, [and] who should be looking at the data." While principals broadly understood and supported the concept of inquiry cycles, we found only bits of evidence from the survey and interview responses that they possessed a clear sense of what the specific steps of inquiry were (e.g., some were much better able to articulate what a cycle in inquiry represented than others).

In particular, principals felt that implementing ongoing cycles of inquiry came through the gathering, examination, and use of multiple sources of data about the school and student learning (Scale 1). In addition, a school's use of data was stimulated by the development of a culture of collaboration, self-reflection, meaningful dialogue, and shared decision-making (Scale 2). And, through the development of a vibrant, purposeful, and inclusive professional workplace, teachers and other key stakeholders would be encouraged to become directly and meaningfully engaged in the accreditation process and its follow up activities (Scales 1, 3, 5). One principal put it this way, "Building that data reflection piece and putting an inquiry cycle in place with people realizing it…makes it important." Another principal described the relationship between ongoing inquiry and collaboration — "How we keep it current is by making sure that in our collaborations throughout the year, we continue to answer those questions that were posed in our self-study and those recommendations that were made through the [ACS] WASC committee."

In essence, the ACS WASC process helped provide a framework that schools could use to create structures for engaging in meaningful collaboration and dialogue, to initiate objective investigations into the processes and outcomes of school programs, and to base decisions on how to best advance powerful teaching and learning for all students.

Principals were also aware of the importance of schoolwide learning objectives and standards, including the concepts of college and career readiness and global competence. To this point, one principal commented, "…another thing that came out of the self-study is a real focus on writing across the curriculum, which dovetails with common core, and we are looking at a way for doing schoolwide writing and then grading." Another principal spoke to the alignment of [ACS] WASC and LCAP, "…the way I've been looking at it the LCAP, the eight areas of the LCAP and the self-review sections of [ACS] WASC there's a lot of overlaps in between."

Evaluation Question Two

How does the ACS WASC *Focus on Learning* (*FOL*) accreditation process influence school improvement? Specifically:

- **2A:** What is the relationship between the implementation of the ACS WASC *Focus on Learning* (*FOL*) accreditation process and ongoing school improvement?
- **2B:** Further, to what extent was the ACS WASC accreditation process effective through its influence on the following:
    a. Development of school evaluation processes and procedures that support student learning?
    b. The refinement of the vision, mission and schoolwide learner outcomes as the foundation for student achievement and school improvement?
    c. Development of a constructive school culture that engenders professional collaboration across the school and its stakeholders in pursuit of successful learning for all students?
    d. Development and support of effective communication structures and systems within the school and between the school, the district office, and the community
    e. Development of a broad-based planning, implementation and monitoring process that fosters ongoing schoolwide improvement efforts related to student learning?
    f. Development, implementation and monitoring of the schoolwide improvement plan (i.e., the SPSA aligned to the LCAP)?
    g. Evaluation of collegial strategies used to implement innovations?

Key Points:

- ACS WASC provides useful tools that promote,
    - Use of multiple sources of data
    - A collaborative school culture
    - The engagement of stakeholders
    - Stakeholder motivation
    - The importance of using data systematically

Discussion:

Information from all five scales helps illuminate the relationship between the accreditation process and ongoing school improvement efforts. For example, in Scale 1 the evaluation team learned that ACS WASC provides useful "tools" and protocols that can help principals organize and conduct a rigorous self-study process that culminates in a schoolwide action plan. In addition, Scale 1 revealed that the use of data by a school in concert with efforts to support the school's leadership in pursuit of the mission, vision, and goals of the school matters a great deal in terms of moving a school forward. In Scale 2 the importance of creating a collaborative workplace culture emerged as an important vehicle to engage (and commit) key stakeholders in collective and meaningful improvement efforts. Scales 4 and 5 revealed how ACS WASC supports the engagement of key stakeholders with the school and outside of the school. Not surprisingly, principals supported the engagement of teachers, classified staff, parents, and community members in the ACS WASC process. However, many principals also expressed interest in the involvement of district office staff and board members in the planning and implementation phases of school improvement. This finding emerged from both survey and interview data.

In addition, survey responses contained in Scales 1 and 2 revealed the importance of ACS WASC in supporting the principals' efforts to provide focused and meaningful professional development to teachers and staff. One principal commented on how the ACS WASC process encouraged the school "to use staff development time to actually train ourselves, and all [of us] as a staff read the work" related to student learning outcomes.

Importantly, during interviews the accreditation process was mentioned by some principals as a motivating, or stimulating, force that helped to focus and galvanize a school in pursuit of powerful teaching and learning for all students. As one principal described it, "It's valued and respected and a kind of certified accountability piece that teachers, staff members, [and] anybody can't argue with because of [its] track record and process." Another principal remarked, "[ACS] WASC really does help the school focus on what's important to meeting the needs of students."

While ACS WASC emphasizes the use of multiple data sources to guide school improvement efforts, using data systematically is a challenge…as one principal put it, "It's been part of that

challenge where 'Let's build a structure and look at what's missing,' which is the reflection and then the data analysis and using those pieces as key fundamental driving forces." She went on to say, "one of my intentional goals was not to mention [ACS] WASC but to start building the structures I needed for [ACS] WASC to be successful and for us to be able to reflect."

While the findings from this study do not strongly support the *systematic* use of data by schools, some principals made the point that the accreditation process helped promote systems thinking. One principal stated, "The self-study gave everybody an opportunity to look at all the systems that we provide the schools as a bigger picture and analyze all the services from climate to instruction to assessment."

The evaluation team found it interesting (and important) that in some of the interviews and comments made by principals on the survey, while accreditation was deemed a valued and important process, ongoing improvement is something that schools should be doing with or without ACS WASC. For example, one principal commented, "Stuff changes all the time…if we're doing this right, then it's an ongoing process." Similarly, another stated, "Truthfully, if [ACS] WASC went away…I don't think it would make any difference in what we're doing. It's so embedded in what we do." While we do not know how, or if, the ACS WASC model influenced the perspectives of these principal, it is very possible that over the past 50 years its persistent focus on school improvement has made a deep impression on the professional culture and the way school professionals think about their work.

Evaluation Question Three

How are the effects of participation in the ACS WASC accreditation processes apparent at the school-site level? Specifically,

> **3A:** What is the long-term effect of ACS WASC accreditation processes on schoolwide improvement and improved student learning? In addition,
>
> **3B:** To what extent did the ACS WASC principles or tools support the long-term implementation of the following:
>
> a. The school's capacity to diagnose organizational strengths and weaknesses and identify opportunities for growth
>
> b. Implement appropriate self-corrective strategies and initiatives?
>
> c. A culture of collaboration, shared decision-making, and self-reflection among staff and important school stakeholders?
>
> h. A culture of collaboration, shared decision-making, and self-reflection among staff and important school stakeholders?
>
> a. A schoolwide action plan that is based upon a shared vision for successful student learning and global competence (i.e., college and career ready)?

d. Student achievement of the schoolwide learner outcomes and the academic standards?

e. An ongoing learning community and professional development for all staff in support of powerful teaching and learning for all students?

f. Organizational systems, policies, and procedures that focus all fiscal, material, and human resources toward the attainment of successful learning for all students?

g. The school sustainability of ACS WASC-initiated improvement over time (despite a variety of external forces (e.g., changes in leadership, teaching staff, and other key stakeholders); through various district, state, and/or federal reform/policy initiatives, and changes in community demographics and economic factors).

Key Points:

- Effects are based on principal perceptions only
- Improved staff training, student interventions, teaching practices
- Helpfulness of ACS WASC visiting committees
- Engenders positive organizational conditions and processes.

Discussion:

In answering this question, it is important to keep in mind that given the design of this study the interpretation of the term "effect" can only be understood through the perceptual lenses of California high school principals. However, many of the answers to this question can be found in Scale 1, which looked specifically at the outcomes of the ACS WASC accreditation process. Specifically, principals had very positive perceptions about the impact of ACS WASC on five factors; 1) helping the school use data to improve the training and coaching of teachers and staff, 2) improving teaching practices, 3) assessments of student learning, 4) various student interventions, and 5) student learning.

In Scale 2, the evaluation team saw the importance of the ACS WASC visiting committee members in terms of their feedback and guidance relating to the self-study, improvement plans, and other relevant school systems and processes. The visiting committee was also noted for its encouragement and help in providing a positive mindset about accreditation among teachers and staff.

Scale 3 illuminated how ACS WASC can benefit schools through fostering engagement by the school as an organization in assessing data to refine action plans, monitor the progress of school improvement efforts, and stimulate the implementation of action plans. In other words, the strategies and actions taken by the school to provide the organizational conditions for the accreditation process can have both a stimulative and positive effect.

In sum, while the effects of participating in the ACS WASC process can be examined on the disaggregated level (e.g., though the analysis of particular features and functions of a school),

they should also be considered in the aggregate. Aristotle once said, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts." The researchers suspect that this is particularly true when one considers the full impact of the ACS WASC accreditation process. While such vital factors as leadership, using data, stakeholder engagement, professional collaboration, school improvement planning, and so on, are critically important elements of a successfully accredited school, only when taken together can there be an appreciation of the synergy that exists among them and their unique contributions to each school. To use a popular analogy, understanding the quality of a school requires both bird's eye and ground level perspectives. As such, policy makers and practitioners should always keep in mind that no two schools are exactly alike on any number of important variables related to effectiveness, and that accreditation is not a "guarantee" of a school's quality. Rather, it is primarily an empirically grounded process for guiding and facilitating ongoing organizational renewal and development that is aligned with a school's core values, mission, vision, and its ultimate goal to provide powerful teaching and learning experiences for every student.

Interpretive Analysis and Implications

In this section, the evaluation team draws from both the quantitative and qualitative findings to provide what they believe represents the critical attributes of the ACS WASC accreditation process (e.g., the "Big Picture"). The analysis is intentionally interpretive and based on the evaluation team' knowledge of the ACS WASC process, principals' perceptions, and the conceptual/theoretical bases of school accreditation.

- ✓ **ACS WASC is a strong accreditation model that is widely respected by California high school principals.**

While a few principals expressed concerns about the complexity of the accreditation process and the time required to complete it, virtually all principals acknowledged that ACS WASC was an important school review and improvement process that has had a deep impact on schools.

While accreditation is not designed to guarantee a school's quality, it does provide a framework that if followed with fidelity by participating schools exemplifies important attributes of effective schools. This is a particularly important point. The "power" of the ACS WASC accreditation process lies as much with the strength and commitment to its implementation by a school as it does with the model itself. This is generally true with most types of organizational change processes. The protocols and strategies of change initiatives are only as effective as the rigor of, and commitment to, their implementation.

Public schools operate in an era of intense public and political scrutiny. Likewise, attention to the importance of accreditation as a mechanism for school improvement and reform is increasing (particularly in higher education). It is the belief that while such attention can lead to legitimate and needed refinements to accreditation processes, it should not oversubscribe to the notion that accrediting agencies are somehow ultimately responsible for, or the ultimate arbitrators of, school reform policy. Accreditors can, and should, be held accountable for two things: their

ability to provide, a) an empirically sound framework that can be efficiently and effectively applied by schools to foster ongoing school improvement and b) strategies and tools that support schools in their application of accreditation protocols.

- ✓ **ACS WASC accreditation fosters school conditions for high-quality student learning and ongoing improvement through data analysis, reflection, inquiry, and discussion.**

The research underscored the centrality of data-informed inquiry to school improvement processes. This idea has become part of the "vocabulary" of accredited schools. Moreover, in the ACS WASC accreditation model the "target" is not the process of inquiry but its outcomes. In other words, what evidence does a school have that it has improved teaching and learning for all students and to what extent has that emerged through a thoughtful, rational and systematic examination of multiple sources of information about student learning and the organizational conditions that support it. However, rational inquiry alone does not satisfy the accreditation purpose. Only when conducted as part of a collective effort by multiple school and community stakeholders does inquiry "work" under the ACS WASC model.

Accreditation is designed to be a "social" activity and not one that is entrusted to the singular engagement of the principal or even the limited engagement of a few selected educators. Some of the principals interviewed told stories of accreditation plans hastily developed by a teacher designated by the principal as "[ACS] WASC Coordinator," or an assistant principal. Some also described schoolwide action plans that merely gather dust on the principal's bookshelf until the eve of the next accreditation report or site visit. To work, accreditation has to become an organic and deeply embedded component of a school's "organizational ecology." It must become part of a school's "DNA" (e.g., foundational, indelible, generative). Accreditation does not work when treated as a transient, external, and disruptive interloper into the normal affairs of a school.

Finally, most principals indicated that the accreditation process created a sense of urgency among school stakeholders. As such it served as a call to action that helped to motivate, mobilize, and coalesce efforts around the accreditation process.

- ✓ **ACS WASC accreditation provides a framework for schools to regularly examine programs, processes, and data around school goals and learning standards.**

The accreditation model is anchored upon the mission, vision, and goals of a school. These factors can, and do, vary from school to school. As such, accreditation is purposefully designed to be an adaptive rather than a "one-size-fits-all" process (e.g., this concept was discussed earlier in the section on developmental evaluation). It is expected that the basis upon which a school establishes its self-study and schoolwide action plan will be unique to the needs and characteristics of that school. This reinforces the description of the ACS WASC accreditation model as a framework and not a prescription or a formula. It is intentionally designed to provide schools with sufficient "degrees of freedom" to address their unique needs, circumstances, and environments (while in alignment with the school's established standards for teaching and learning).

Importantly, ACS WASC encourages regular (ongoing) self-examinations by a school. Again, this concept aligns with the definition of "organizational ecology" (e.g., ecologies are continually evolving and adaptive). Deep and enduring improvements in organizations are rarely episodic, nor are they haphazard. Rather, they become part of a routine and iterative (or cyclical) process of diagnosing, planning, implementing, evaluating, and revising.

- ✓ **ACS WASC accreditation helps a school build a professional culture to support the schoolwide action plan.**

While the concept of organizational culture is well established in the literature and research on schools, it remains a vital ingredient of the ACS WASC accreditation philosophy. Culture extends beyond mere collaboration, dialogue, or collective reflection. Under the ACS WASC model, it refers to a deeper set of values, beliefs, and practices that permeate a school and its stakeholders, programs, and practices. Culture is "durable." That is, while it may evolve over time, its essential values and core principles endure, even during changes in leadership, teachers, parents, staff, or students. In some senses, it is analogous to an organizational "brand" (e.g., this is who we are, what we stand for, what we strive to achieve, and how we intend to get there). Several principals interviewed for this study commented that when the school deeply embraces the ACS WASC process, it can both transform and/or reinforce its professional culture, and most importantly, a culture that relentlessly strives to improve teaching and learning for all students.

- ✓ **ACS WASC validates a school's efforts to improve.**

As commented above, the accreditation process is not a guarantee of school quality or effectiveness. However, it is widely regarded by principals as a mechanism through which a school and its community can make clear and accurate judgments about the strengths and needs of the school in terms of its efforts to engage in ongoing improvement and, most important, provide all students with powerful and equitable teaching and learning. From the accrediting agency's perspective, the process is primarily formative in nature. A status of accreditation is reflective of a school's ability to engage in forthright, rigorous, strategic, collaborative, and continuous inquiry. It is not a "grade," or "score." ACS WASC does not look for perfection; rather it looks to see if a school engages in systematic, purposeful, and standards-based programs and practices. While most principals appear to understand this dynamic, it is less clear that the formative nature of accreditation is as equally understood by teachers, staff, parents, or community members.

In addition, the study provided important insights into areas and processes that merit further consideration by ACS WASC.

- Increase ongoing and multiple support to schools in the self-study and follow-up processes and assist schools in operationalizing the use of data through ongoing inquiry beyond the planning and implementation phases.
- Work with districts and school boards to promote and support the understanding that accreditation is an ongoing and formative school improvement process.

- Ensure the ACS WASC process supports the alignment and integration of the SPSA and LCAP.
- Continue to review and refine the self-study and follow-up criteria to ensure streamlined, effective and efficient processes based on the ACS WASC principles and design elements.
- Seek ways to promote and support greater parent and community involvement in the school's improvement efforts.
- Continue to strengthen the processes for the selection, placement, and work of the visiting committees.
- Consider how the results of this study may prove helpful as ACS WASC interacts with state and federal policy makers, school district leaders, and school-site principals.
- Continue to engage in ongoing assessment and evaluation as a regional accrediting body through rigorous and longitudinal evaluation-based research.

Conclusions and Implications

Effective school-site leadership is crucial to the successful implementation of the ACS WASC accreditation process in complex and diverse school settings and environments.

It is important for policymakers, practitioners, and the public to understand that the principles and design elements of the ACS WASC accreditation model provide a process through which a school assesses multiple types of data to determine if the program and operations support the desired high-quality student learning. This leads to planning, implementation and reassessment of the schoolwide action plan in an ongoing school improvement process. Because the contexts and circumstances (e.g., resources, demographics, politics, environments, type of school, teacher quality, etc.) can and will vary dramatically from one school to another, the ACS WASC model was constructed to be adaptable to such differences. The capacity of the model to facilitate strategies and approaches to support improved learning and teaching in all schools will vary. Such variance can, to an important degree be influenced by the qualities and characteristics of a school's principal and co-administrators and the nature of his/her relationship with school district officials.

The importance of leadership on the successful implementation (and follow through) of the ACS WASC accreditation process cannot be overstated. Simply put, in the absence of a principal who is both knowledgeable about and committed to the principles of the accreditation process, the chances of its success are greatly diminished (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2011; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).

The ACS WASC accreditation process supports principals with a data-informed school change framework.

The influence of the principal's leadership on all aspects of the success of the ACS WASC accreditation model at the school-site level is one of the most important findings of this study. This is not surprising given the considerable body of research that underscores the important relationship between leadership and school improvement. Several principals offered examples of how the ACS WASC process strengthens their leadership role, by:

- Providing essential knowledge of the school
- Giving them an opportunity and a framework to shape school change
- Gaining the support and engagement of stakeholders for ACS WASC accreditation
- Enhancing school transparency and accountability
- Helping them develop a process of inquiry at the school
- Giving them leverage to motivate and empower the staff to accomplish their work
- Providing a template from which to examine the educational program.

Politically, ACS WASC can provide an important lever that the principal can use to foster engagement from various stakeholders. As one principal plainly stated, "…one of the benefits is that it's a requirement — it forces the issue." Another principal commented, "…I go back and look at the [ACS] WASC goals and use that as a way to move forward with reform. That's where my political part comes from."

The ACS WASC process provides a structure for school stakeholder a) to engage in meaningful collaboration and dialogue, b) to initiate investigations into the processes and outcomes of school programs, and c) to base decisions on how to best advance powerful learning and teaching for all students.

ACS WASC accreditation is widely regarded by California public high school principals as an important and valuable process for stimulating and guiding schoolwide improvements that support effective learning and teaching for all students. As one principal described, "It's valued and respected and a kind of certified accountability piece that teachers, staff members, [and] anybody can't argue with because of [its] track record and process." Another principal remarked, "[ACS] WASC really does help the school focus on what's important to meeting the needs of students."

The ACS WASC accreditation process promotes the use of data (and other types of evidence) to strengthen the training of teachers in the use of instructional practices and assessments of student learning. In addition, principals believe that the accreditation process has positive effects on student learning through continuous school improvement activities and interventions.

As one principal put it, “Schools are constantly in this cycle of how we review what we’re doing, what data should we look at, how should we look at the data, [and] who should be looking at the data.” Also, the use of data by a school in concert with efforts to support the school’s leadership in the pursuit of the mission, vision, and goals of the school matters a great deal in terms of moving a school forward.

As a group, principals believe that ACS WASC accreditation supports their efforts to provide focused and meaningful professional development for teachers and staff. One principal commented on how the ACS WASC process encouraged the school “to use staff development time to actually train ourselves…to read the work” (related to student learning outcomes).

The application of structured and systematic processes for analyzing and evaluating school and student data and using the results to improve student learning is uneven across the schools examined in this study.

This research shows that most principals are aware of the criteria, and processes contained in the ACS WASC accreditation inquiry model and how they can support schoolwide improvement efforts. They understand that establishing ongoing structures and processes for analyzing and evaluating data is a critical step toward facilitating continuous schoolwide improvement that, in turn, supports high-quality learning for all students.

However, while principals broadly understand and support the concept of such structures and processes, the survey and interview responses showed limited evidence that they possess a clear sense of what the specific steps of analytic inquiry are. The schools involved in the study provided responses that indicated that there was a stronger use of analytic processes to guide the development of the self-study and in preparing a schoolwide action plan. However, the consistent application of procedures for analyzing, evaluating, and using data becomes increasingly challenging during the follow-up monitoring and adjusting of the schoolwide action plan.

Many interviewees freely admitted that the process is ad hoc, irregular, and not as systematic as they would prefer. Others mentioned that their process for using data doesn’t revolve around ACS WASC. Principals generally understand the importance of using multiple sources of data to advance school improvement efforts, yet some appear to struggle with aligning student assessment data in accordance with the schoolwide action plan. Several interviewees express a desire to network with schools that have successfully implemented and used the ACS WASC accreditation process.

Some principals shared that the ACS WASC *Focus on Learning* process could be more streamlined, less redundant and even more aligned with the Local Control Accountability Plan. The results reinforced that accreditation is widely regarded as a valued activity, but there is room for refinement. One principal stated, “A more user-friendly process would allow for greater buy-in by all stakeholders into the reflection and growth cycle.”

Moreover, the survey and interview results noted that for some schools articulation with the Single Plan for Student Achievement (SPSA) and the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) is uneven. Some schools are still not clear that the SPSA is the schoolwide action plan to which the ACS WASC self-study findings are integrated. In addition, some survey respondents noted that there is a challenge in aligning the ACS WASC school process with the district's LCAP procedures and assessments.

Interviewees would like more frequent informal "check-ins" with ACS WASC regarding the annual implementation of the action plan using "coaches" or another type of input that can be used to improve action plan implementation and the use of data prior to the self-study.

Moreover, interviewees want networking opportunities with other ACS WASC-accredited schools — for example, visiting or interacting with "model" schools with positive accreditation outcomes as well as their implementation of the ACS WASC accreditation process.

Principals appreciate support for ACS WASC accreditation from their district offices; however, the amount and types of support for ACS WASC accreditation varies considerably between districts.

Some principals cite high levels of cooperation and support from their district office leaders; others however have little or no interaction with district officials. In general, principals would like to see more district engagement in providing school and student data, fiscal resources, personnel training, and other forms of administrative support.

While most principals would like to see closer articulation between school districts and schools, it is important that district support for the accreditation process is ongoing rather than episodic.

Most principals express positive attitudes towards visiting committees.

For example, one interviewee stated, "I thought that the feedback was very positive, which we appreciated and helped us feel good about the visit, because it's by nature kind of a tense experience. It was aligned with what we had said, which I appreciated. The areas that we felt we needed to improve, they also felt we needed to improve, so there weren't any surprises or "gotchas." At the same time, principals from charter schools or those from alternative schools were more likely to comment on the need for ACS WASC to ensure a match between the composition of the committee and the nature of the school.

There were some survey respondents who describe their visit as "confrontational" and that the mindsets of visiting committee members are important. One principal said: "I like the process, but found the visit and the team that came to us a little close-minded." Another said: "Sometimes the visiting educators bring their own biases to the process and do not provide objective feedback or are thoroughly engaged in the entire school."

Related to committee composition, respondents describe the need to ensure that the visiting committee approaches the self-study visit fully grounded in the lens of the ACS WASC accreditation process versus emphasizing their own views for how school improvement might occur.

The Big Picture: Future Direction and Opportunities for ACS WASC Action

The "big picture" findings are that ACS WASC:

- Has a strong accreditation model that is widely respected
- Fosters school conditions for high-quality student learning and ongoing improvement through data analysis, reflection, inquiry, and discussion
- Provides a process for regularly examining programs, processes, and data around school goals
- Builds a professional culture to support the schoolwide action plan
- Validates a school's efforts to improve.

The ACS WASC Accreditation Cycle of Quality addresses the basic aspects of school change and transformation through its design elements.

In addition, the study provided important insights into future direction in which areas and processes need to be further examined, studied, revised and refined. These opportunities for ACS WASC are summarized below:

- Increase ongoing and multiple support to schools in the self-study and follow-up processes, and operationalize the use of data in an ongoing inquiry mode beyond the planning and implementation phases (e.g., monitoring and using assessment evidence to change practices and refine school goals).
- Work with districts and school boards on the understanding of accreditation as an ongoing school improvement process.
- Ensure the ACS WASC process facilitates alignment of the SPSA and LCAP.
- Facilitate a further review and refinement of the self-study and follow-up processes to ensure a more streamlined, effective and efficient process based on the ACS WASC principles and design elements.
- Facilitate through the process greater parent and community involvement in the school's improvement efforts.
- Move forward with strengthening a consistent process for the work of the visiting committees.
- Consider how the results of this study may prove helpful as ACS WASC interacts with state and federal policy makers, school district leaders, and school-site principals.

- Continue to engage in ongoing assessment and evaluation as a regional accrediting body through rigorous and longitudinal evaluation-based research.

Limitations of the Study

It is important to remind the reader that this study was exploratory. Its data, findings, and analysis are predicated solely on the perceptions of California high school principals. Because of these factors, the evaluation team cannot make empirical claims regarding the causal, measurable, or demonstrable impact of ACS WASC on a school. Neither can the evaluation team extrapolate from the findings information that could be attributed to other important stakeholders (e.g., teachers, staff, parents, community members, students, district office staff). It should be noted that a comprehensive analysis of ACS WASC will require additional study on these and other important factors and issues through the application of multiple research methods.

Finally, schools and their stakeholders are complex, dynamic, and turbulent entities, and subject to unpredictable and often uncontrollable influences. As such, any study that applies quantitative and/or qualitative methods to examine schools and their participants can only provide a partial portrait of how schools work and why. Simply put, there are innumerable latent variables that come to bear on schools and their stakeholders and that can never be accurately or consistently accounted for in a single study.

This study provides methodologically rigorous findings regarding the perceptions of California high school principals that can be confidently generalized to the whole population of high school principals in the state. Moreover, it provides reliable and empirically accurate information about the relationship between ACS WASC and California high schools that can be used to stimulate additional research and policy development by ACS WASC and other educational agencies.

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