

AN INITIAL EVALUATION OF THE ACS WASC ACCREDITATION CYCLE OF QUALITY FOR SCHOOLS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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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 and supplementary education programs worldwide. Specifically, ACS WASC works with schools located 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 re-assessed in relation to 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:

- 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?

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 1994–95, 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 the process. The feedback from schools has continually reinforced the following key points of 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.

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?

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, the 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 policymakers 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 effect meaningful and durable change in schools, and they lack the backbone needed to make tough accountability decisions (Wilson, 1999). Dr. 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 public's 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 policymakers.

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? That is, how does a school

know that all students are achieving? 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 was the ACS WASC accreditation process as implemented at the school site level and examined through the ACS WASC *Focus on Learning* 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: this included comprehensive, charter, alternative/continuation, independent study, juvenile, and online comprehensive. Of the nearly 2,100 high schools included in 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 710 principals.

Next, interviews were conducted with 30 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 researchers who scheduled a one-hour interview at the convenience of the interviewees.

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 developmental evaluation (DE) framework guided the design and implementation of this study (Patton, McKegg, & Wehipeihana, 2016). Although many evaluation approaches exist, DE 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 have been 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 agree/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 facilitates the examination of multiple types of data (evidence) about students and schools by the stakeholders (predominantly teachers and administrators). The use of data is particularly important in the analysis/evaluation and the planning and implementation stages of the self-study that ultimately leads to an identification of strengths and growth areas within the instructional programs; this results in an updated schoolwide action plan. However, some schools indicated that it has been 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 visiting 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%** reported "high" or "somewhat high" engagement in *assessing* the data that is gathered due to implementation of the schoolwide action plan and **74.5%** reported similar levels of engagement in monitoring the plan in relation to impact on student learning.
- Similarly, **68.6%** reported 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 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 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 the 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 reported that the highest levels of engagement in *planning and implementation* involved credentialed teachers 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; **87.3%** implementation
- Community members: **75.9%** planning; **67.7%** implementation.

In the interviews, principals reported 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 reported 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 reported 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 reported 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 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 [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 reported a range of involvement of district staff and board in *planning* and *implementing* school improvements. In terms of engaging in *planning*, principals reported:

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

The examination of interview data indicated that the district staff is 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 WASC coordinator whose job is to take

a look at and to be there to support the WASC process in the schools." Another stated: "It's not just a WASC for the site but there's also oversight from our central office people that are working in conjunction with site principals for the 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 their level of 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 re-assessment 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 the school's principal and co-administrators and the

nature of their 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 in 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 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, "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 matter greatly 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 the specific steps of analytic inquiry. The schools involved in the study provided responses that indicated that there was a strong 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 expressed 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 more aligned with the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP). 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 and positive 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 closed-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 reflective 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 for further examination, study, revision, and refinements. The 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 policymakers, 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., through 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 a 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 entitled *Coherence, The Right Drivers in Action for Schools, District, Systems* has reinforced the transforming

attributes of the ACS WASC *Focus on Learning* 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, and 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. In essence, 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.

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See the complete report for additional references.

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