

# An Evolution in K-12 School Accreditation

In a quest for relevance, regional accrediting bodies move away from counting school library books to plotting paths for continuous growth

BY LINDA CHION KENNEY

**G**regory Franklin, a superintendent in Orange County, Calif., has played an instrumental part in the formal accreditation process that for more than a century has been holding schools accountable to standards driven by the priorities of the day, from counting books stocked in the school library to ranking schools by standardized test scores to today's focus on building capacity for continuous improvement.

Speaking to the impact of accreditation, Franklin recounts a case involving a "very large public high school in California that was really letting its kids down. ... You could have pointed in every direction and found someone to blame. The instruction was poor, the leadership was poor and there was a lot of labor strife."

The visiting peer review team documented these deficiencies in its accreditation report for the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, something the school district should have addressed in its own self-analysis, Franklin says, "but sometimes dysfunction gets in the way of that."

A year later, the peer reviewers, including Franklin, returned to find most of the school's

leadership and some key faculty leaders had been replaced and a facilitator had been brought in "to get everybody rolling in the right direction," says the superintendent since 2011 of the 24,000-student Tustin, Calif., Unified School District. "I'm certain that improvement would not have happened without the accreditation process."

## Regaining Relevance

Today, Franklin chairs the pre-college arm of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, one of the nation's four independent and nonprofit accreditation agencies for elementary and secondary schools. (The three others are the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, the Middle States Association's Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Schools and Cognia, formerly known as AdvancED, which includes the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement, the Northwest Accreditation Commission and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement.)

Over time, the mechanisms of the accreditation process have remained constant, with com-



prehensive self-study reports and volunteer peer review visits followed by an accreditation report and determination that sometimes requires additional attention and review. Yet when it comes to what's measured and for what purpose, the accrediting agencies have had to evolve continually, adapting and adding standards and services in step with state mandates and school district needs.

Mark Elgart, president and CEO of Cognia and former chief executive of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, says accrediting bodies have had "long and hard debates" over the past two decades over how to remain relevant as states, driven by federal mandates, developed their own accountability systems based largely on high-stakes testing administered each spring. Lost in the process, however, was adequate attention to learning growth over time and the distinct needs of high-poverty schools and the students they serve.

"The problem with a test score [is] it doesn't address the underlying causes. It simply tells you the kids are not doing well," Elgart says. "It doesn't tell school officials what they need to change for kids to do better. It simply helps you

rank schools, and that's insufficient."

He contends the independent, nonprofit accrediting agencies focus largely on improving student learning and, when examining institutions, "it's not just about what they've done in their past, but also about their capacity to improve in the future."

### Students at Center

Before becoming an education consultant working with 40 superintendents across Florida, James Hamilton had first-hand experiences with accreditation as an assistant principal for curriculum, high school principal, assistant superintendent for instruction and deputy superintendent in Hillsborough County, Fla., the nation's seventh-largest school district.

"The emphasis used to be how many books you had, how much square footage you had, how many guidance counselors you had and your teacher-pupil ratio," Hamilton says. "Things like that were the key standards in the accreditation process, and quite frankly we didn't have the financial resources to do that K-12. So we accredited only high schools because we had to have students graduate with diplomas from accredited schools so they could be





**Middle school students in Tustin, Calif., competing in a robotics competition, have benefited from data analysis taking place during district accreditation.**

eligible for college admission and, as a corollary in many cases, financial aid.”

Over time, he observed the accreditation standards shifted to a more student-centric approach, focusing more “on what students are doing, as opposed to what we used to get them to do. Not only could we afford to measure that, we had a responsibility to measure that.”

Under this formulation, accreditation is a matter of accountability and community engagement beyond the schoolhouse doors, indicating to parents, business leaders and other local stakeholders “that there’s an external evaluation agency that provides a process by which the performance of schools is measured,” Hamilton says, “and that schools are certified if they meet the standards of that external agency.”

Hamilton likens the process to “peer review in the scientific community,” adding, “It gives the community some assurances, other than test-driven state accountability systems, that things that are supposed to be happening in schools are actually happening. That kids are engaged and learning the content they’re supposed to be learning. That they’re getting the social-emotional support that this world requires. And that the interaction and engagement with parents that should be happening, is happening.” (See related story on page 31.)

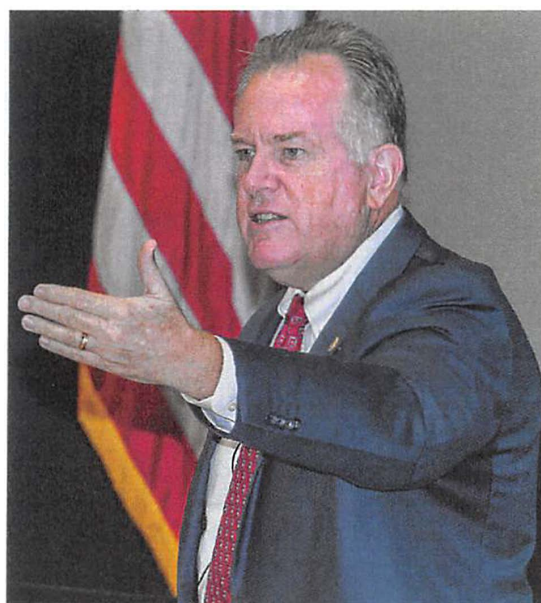
### **Districtwide Model**

According to a 2018 report by *Education Next*, a journal sponsored by the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University, about 20 states require public schools to be accredited by an outside body. The field of

accreditation clients has expanded somewhat in recent years to include private, parochial, charter, international and virtual schools.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, the long-standing accreditation agencies started breaking off their preK-12 divisions from their higher education counterparts and have since expanded their reach to states beyond their traditional, regional boundaries. Services have expanded to include professional development and special certifications, such as for STEM and early childhood education, and in concert with other interest-driven professional bodies such as the National Catholic Educational Association.

Methodological advancements, ushered in by new technologies, have brought data-driven improvements. This especially is the case at Cognia, which works to generate easily digested data that can be used by educators to improve student preparation for life after high school graduation. The holistic standards address student engagement, social-emotional well-being and college and career readiness. Accreditation surveys have become more comprehensive, involving parents, business leaders, students and teachers. In some cases, entire districts are being accredited to ensure a unified effort across the school system’s primary and secondary schools.



**Superintendent Gregory Franklin in Tustin, Calif., chairs the Western Association of Schools and Colleges’ school accreditation division.**

# The Value of Being a Peer Reviewer

**G**eorge Edwards remembers the first time he went on a school accreditation peer review visit as headmaster of a high school in New Hampshire that was beginning its own accreditation process with a self-reflection review.

"I called the New England Association for Schools and Colleges and volunteered to be a visitor," says Edwards, now director of the regional body's Commission on Public Schools. "I really enjoyed that first visit. It was good professional development, and I liked giving back and helping other schools improve."

The multiday peer review visit is the core of the accreditation process, the step that follows the school's comprehensive self-study. The accrediting commission uses the examiners' on-site observations along with the self-examination to decide whether accreditation is warranted, denied or approved with stipulation.

## Personal Benefits

The four major accreditation bodies that review elementary and secondary schools rely on experienced educators to serve on the peer review panels whose members typically spend two to four days visiting schools and talking to students, teachers, parents and administrators. The host organization is responsible for site-visit expenses but not for the time of peer reviewers, who volunteer their services.

"It's been said it's the best professional development you can get," says Barry Groves, a former superintendent in California who now works as president of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges Accrediting Commission for Schools, which manages accreditation for 98 percent of the schools in California and Hawaii. "You visit schools and learn the neat things they're doing. I'm naturally a teacher, so I loved working with the schools to share ideas and see their options



**Lisa McCauley (right), president of the Middle States Association Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Schools, believes peer reviews during an accreditation process are valuable for all parties.**

they have for school improvement."

Lisa McCauley is president of the Middle States Association Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Schools, which handles accreditation in a region that historically ran from New York to Delaware but now includes 39 states. McCauley says she believes in the powerful value of peer reviews for all parties.

Self-study reviews by teachers and administrators take up to 18 months, and "many schools are very hard on themselves," McCauley says. The peer reviewers often point out the positives of what they've seen, along with the challenges. "That's what growth is," she adds. "That's improvement."

## Balanced Pictures

With thousands of trained, volunteer peer reviewers, the process allows for a "balanced, objective and apolitical" review of improvement efforts while building the capacity for change, says Mark Elgart, president and CEO of Cognia, which accredits

more than 25,000 schools and education institutions nationwide.

"This a benefit of accreditation," Elgart says. "We don't just focus on what they're not doing. We identify what they're doing well and encourage them to keep doing that. We identify where they need improvements and give them direction."

Accrediting agencies use their membership pools to secure peer reviewers, says Edwards, who has served more than 30 times as a reviewer, giving "context and perspective" to educators who often "are very isolated in their work." Being a peer reviewer, he adds, "gives you an opportunity to see how another school in another community educates their students."

School system administrators interested in serving as peer reviewers should contact their accreditation agency. See the directory on page 33.

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Cognia made a major move in the direction of districtwide accreditation in response to the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2002. "Superintendents before then were largely political educational leaders in the community, but they were not held accountable for individual student achievement in the way they are today," Elgart

says. "We created district accreditation, where we accredited the whole district in a systemic process, and we involved all the schools, the district central administration and the school board."

The first system in the country to achieve district accreditation was the Fulton County, Ga., Public Schools in 2004. Now, 77 percent of



Cognia's accredited public schools are part of the district model.

### Offering Assurance

The evolution in K-12 accreditation is apparent to others leading the once tradition-bound accrediting agencies.

"Probably the biggest shift for us over the past 10 years has been to focus as much on school improvement and being an agency that drives growth over time as it is focused on accountability," says Cameron Staples, CEO of the nation's oldest education accrediting body, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, founded in 1885. It today accredits 700 public schools, 600 independent schools and 300 schools overseas.

"We still concern ourselves with the core elements of a good school in terms of health and

safety, the curriculum and obviously the teaching and learning that occurs," Staples says. "But we find our value as an accreditor is in both helping schools set goals and improvement plans, and to monitor those plans, holding them accountable to our standards." (See related story below.)

Barry Groves, president of the Western region's Accrediting Commission for Schools, which works with 5,200 schools, says the high-stakes nature of accreditation nationwide historically was viewed as a prerequisite for students' admission to college and eligibility for federal financial aid. This was true during his nine years as a superintendent in Northern California during which time he observed the evolution of school accreditation when the process first counted "the number of earthquake and fire drills" taking place in the schools, he says.

## District-Level Accreditation Lands in Falmouth

The coastal Maine community of Falmouth runs a school system considered well above average on state standards, and *Forbes* magazine once named it a "Top City to Live and Learn."

But to superintendent Geoff Bruno, the three schools in the Falmouth district often acted as separate entities, despite their location at the same address. He recognized the lost opportunity for synergy to make the learning experiences even better for the 2,200 students.

To commence that process, Bruno turned to the external reviewing agency that had accredited Falmouth High School since 1955: the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. But that had carried its own frustrations.

"The challenge for us is that when the high school would go through its own two-year self-study, it was like they dropped off the face of the earth," Bruno says. "All three schools are on one campus, and I started to consider going through accreditation as a whole school community."

### A Unified Study

That led the superintendent to contract with the New England accrediting

body to undertake a districtwide accreditation process, making Falmouth the first district-level review in the six-state NEASC region. The process, beginning in spring 2018, applied one set of standards across Falmouth's elementary, middle and high schools.

Falmouth engaged in a unified study of self-reflection and assessment with a committee composed of students, teachers, parents, administrators, school board members and other community members. Asked to consider the "vision of a graduate," they examined the schools' pursuit of such goals as college and career readiness and social and emotional well-being, according to George Edwards, who directs the accreditation agency's Commission on Public Schools.

"It's not just teachers in grades 9 through 12 collaborating on accreditation," says Bruno, superintendent since 2014 in the suburb north of Portland. "It's also your elementary and middle school staffs, and that's really powerful."

After Falmouth completed its self-study, NEASC staff and trained peer reviewers assembled as the six-member collaborative conference visiting team. Over two days in February 2019, the examiners watched classroom instruc-

tion and met with students, parents, teachers and school leadership to share observations and evidence before they summarized findings and recommendations in a report to the Falmouth school board in May 2019.

NEASC issued full accreditation standing to the district.

### Connective Strategies

Falmouth uses the accreditation report to guide professional development and continuous growth. Teachers and principals address the newly adopted New England agency's standards for learning culture, student learning, professional practices, learning support and learning resources.

This systemic perspective, from elementary through high school "unifies your approach," Bruno says. "It gave us a framework for fleshing out real priorities that play out differently in each school, yet pointed out also those things we need to keep coming back to as a district."

Although some states and regional agencies confer accreditation on the district itself, NEASC's approach is to "accredit every school in the process, so it's districtwide in that respect," says Cameron Staples, NEASC's chief executive. "The real key for us is connecting [school improvement] strategies from one school to another. Starting with smaller districts, we're looking at ways to apply that to larger ones."

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Geoff Bruno

# Accrediting Agency Overview

## Cognia

[www.Cognia.org](http://www.Cognia.org)

Formerly known as AdvancED, includes the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement, the Northwest Accreditation Commission and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement. Cognia also accredits schools outside these regions and worldwide.



### PUBLIC SCHOOLS/INSTITUTIONS ACCREDITED

**18,135 total number of schools**

- ▶ 5,004 high schools
- ▶ 2,708 middle schools
- ▶ 8,129 elementary schools
- ▶ 65 education service agencies
- ▶ 909 districts with districtwide accreditation

## Middle States Association Commissions

**on Elementary and Secondary Schools**

[www.msa-cess.org](http://www.msa-cess.org)

**Middle States Accreditation**



Historic coverage area includes New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland and Washington, D.C., but accredits schools in 39 states, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

### PUBLIC SCHOOLS/INSTITUTIONS ACCREDITED

**459 total number of schools**

- ▶ 36 elementary and middle schools
- ▶ 18 middle schools and high schools
- ▶ 64 elementary schools
- ▶ 33 middle schools only
- ▶ 225 high schools only
- ▶ 6 Pre-K-12 schools with postsecondary programs
- ▶ 15 districts with districtwide accreditation

## New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Public Schools

[www.cps.neasc.org](http://www.cps.neasc.org)

Historic coverage area includes Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont. Also accredits overseas.



### PUBLIC SCHOOLS/INSTITUTIONS ACCREDITED

**725 elementary, middle, high and career and technical/vocational schools**

## Western Association of Schools and Colleges' Accrediting Commission for Schools

[www.acswasc.org](http://www.acswasc.org)

Fully Accredited by



Historical coverage area includes California and Hawaii. Accredits about 98 percent of the schools in California and Hawaii. Also has a national and global footprint.

### PUBLIC SCHOOLS/INSTITUTIONS ACCREDITED

**5,020 total number of schools**

- ▶ 2,451 high schools
- ▶ 282 middle schools
- ▶ 1,070 elementary schools
- ▶ 3 districts with districtwide accreditation

Today, accreditation is a more valuable resource, with Groves noting, "It provides protocols and tools to improve education for all students, whereas before it was just a compliance checklist document."

Lisa McCauley, president of the Middle States Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Education, views accreditation now as assurance that schools will "meet standards using a process for growth and improvement" and that the days of the "one-size fits-all approach" are gone from accreditation reviews. "Every school is unique and you can't just say it's a pass or fail," she says. "You need a personalized approach and more flexibility."

As for Franklin, the veteran Tustin, Calif., superintendent who chairs the Western region's

Accrediting Commission for Schools, accreditation has become a vital element of school improvement.

"When I first started, it was very process-oriented," he says. "You could describe your process without have to worry too much if it was working, which wasn't very helpful." Now, he adds, with a focus on "improvement plans coming out of a very thorough review of data analysis, looking at student achievement and taking stock of what parents and students are saying, you would be crazy not to make that a part of your improvement process." ■

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