

## **A GUIDE FOR VISITING COMMITTEE MEMBERS SERVING ON AN ON-SITE SCHOOL ACCREDITATION VISIT**

### **PENNSYLVANIA ASSOCIATION OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS**

The purpose of Pennsylvania Association of Independent Schools shall be to represent and support member schools in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. It develops and offers services, which strengthen member schools. Pennsylvania Association of Independent Schools (PAIS) provides member schools in Pennsylvania and Delaware with a means to an independent school standards-based accreditation as one of its services. PAIS is a non-profit association approved by the Pennsylvania State Board of Education, officially recognized by the Pennsylvania State Board of Education and authorized to accredit independent private schools in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Schools accredited by PAIS in the Commonwealth are accredited in lieu of the Pennsylvania State Board of Private Academic Schools licensure. The PAIS Commission for Accreditation (CFA) exists to execute the accreditation process set by the PAIS Board of Directors. Its purpose is the periodic evaluation and accreditation of independent, not for-profit schools. The function of the periodic evaluation is to involve the entire school in a process of self examination as the school strives to provide excellence in education. Experience has shown that the process of thorough and honest self-study, followed by a professional peer review by teachers and administrators from other member schools, serves to provide schools with a fuller understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses and, therefore, enables member schools to become stronger.

### **THE EVALUATION AND ACCREDITATION PROCESS**

A school is evaluated by PAIS standards in light of the school's own philosophy. PAIS requires each member school to conduct an extensive self-study as part of the evaluation and accreditation process. The standards applied and the procedures to be followed are determined by the PAIS Board of Directors, published, and executed by the Commission for Accreditation (CFA). A committee of peer professionals from other member schools is appointed to visit each school for three and one-half days on its appointed cycle to review the school's self-study and to conduct its own on-site evaluation. The visiting evaluation committee writes a report that the CFA considers before determining its accreditation recommendation for the school. The Commission makes its recommendation to the PAIS Board of Directors for ratification. The PAIS Board of Directors may ratify the Commission's recommendation or may return the recommendation to the Commission for further deliberation or action. Joint accreditation with the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (MSA) requires the school to use the PAIS protocol, PAIS Evaluative Standards for Accreditation, for its self-study. A copy of the self-study and the report of the visiting committee is submitted and considered independently by the CFA and MSA for review and determination. The PAIS evaluation process strives to assist the school in identifying areas needing improvement or areas not meeting standards and codes. PAIS is dedicated to educational excellence and to ensuring safe environments for children. However, all PAIS staff and volunteers, including the CFA, the Executive Director, the chair and members of the visiting evaluation committee, and any other PAIS representative shall not be liable or responsible for negligence, omissions, or errors of the schools that PAIS evaluates or accredits. Similarly, neither the completion of a self-study using the PAIS Evaluative Standards for Accreditation nor an on-site visit by a visiting evaluation committee guarantees or ensures new or continuing PAIS accreditation.

### **GUIDELINES FOR PARTICIPATION**

#### **Self-Study & Evaluative Standards**

The standards, indicators and descriptions of good practice addressed in the self-study include: Philosophy and Mission, Governance, Administration, Financial Management, External Affairs, Program, Personnel, Health and Safety, and Physical Plant. A new protocol, being piloted by four schools during the 2022-23 accreditation cycle, contains a tenth section for school affiliation and an eleventh section

for strategic planning. These will be fully adopted by all schools for the 2023-24 accreditation cycle. Evaluative standards are rated by both the school and visiting committee for each area. Please take the time to review the Evaluative Standards for Accreditation located at [www.paispa.org](http://www.paispa.org) under the Accreditation tab.

#### Role of a Committee Member

PAIS depends on the professional and personal integrity of all its visiting committee members to conduct themselves in a professional and ethical manner. The confidentiality of all information and matters discussed during the on-site visit or written in the school's self-study is essential. The primary goals of a visiting evaluation committee are to assess whether the school does what it says it does and to determine the school's general health. Visiting committee members should not apply their own school's mission, programs and policies to the school being evaluated but rather view the school in light of its own mission and philosophy.

#### Committee Composition

Visiting evaluation committees consist of teachers and administrators, both experienced and inexperienced with regard to their participation on prior evaluation committees. The committee has a chair and a vice chair. Often there is a PAIS Commissioner appointed to the committee. The committee includes professionals from a wide range of school types. Every effort is made to match the expertise and experience of the evaluators to the needs and structure of the school being evaluated. PAIS appoints all visiting committee members and most come from PAIS accredited independent schools. If the evaluation is a joint evaluation, at least one committee member will ensure that MSA, AMS, AWSNA, etc. standards have been met through the PAIS evaluation process.

#### Time Commitment of Committee Members

On-site school visits are three and one-half days. They usually begin on Sunday afternoon and conclude sometime by noon on Wednesday. Committee members are expected to be available for the entire time, including evening sessions, and to stay in the overnight accommodations arranged by the school for the visiting committee.

#### Expenses

The school being evaluated is responsible for all travel expenses for the visiting committee members. Schools will arrange for housing and meals. Some schools may arrange transportation; some will ask committee members to make their own travel arrangements. If committee members make their own travel arrangements, receipts for expenses incurred should be saved and submitted with an expense report to the school. Personal expenses are the responsibility of the committee member.

#### Communication

Committee members will receive communications from the PAIS office, the chair of the visiting committee, and the school leading up to the visit. If committee members have questions, they should contact either the PAIS office ([jharvey@paispa.org](mailto:jharvey@paispa.org) or 570-592-2282) or the chair of the visiting committee rather than the school.

### VISITING COMMITTEE MEMBER RESPONSIBILITIES

Before the school visit, committee members should read all the information sent to them by the school or the chair of the visiting committee including the self-study from the school. During the visit, committee members will be expected to determine if the standards are met as they visit classes, observe activities, attend meetings with school personnel, talk to students, and interview school personnel. Committee work sessions may take place during day and evening hours as they collaborate on the written report document. Committee members are responsible for writing segments of the visiting committee's report and presenting it to the entire committee for discussion and approval. Upon conclusion of the visit, the chair of the visiting committee will present an oral report to the school community. Committee members may stay for the oral report upon direction of the committee chair. Committee members are expected to conduct themselves in a professional manner. It is important to remain diplomatic and remember that it is the school that decides the steps to take in making changes and/or improvements. Committee members must not attempt to solve the school's problems. Committee members are not consultants: they are informed observers.

## Interviews with School Personnel

- Questions should be neutral and open-ended, not framed as a concern or a problem so as not to put the interviewee on the defensive.
- Committee members should encourage the interviewees to elaborate on the subject. ▪ Be cautious in assigning reliability to information related by a dissatisfied member of the school community.
- Discuss the situation with the chair of the visiting committee.
- Do not give any signs of approval or disapproval regarding the information given. Do not agree or disagree with the interviewee.
- Meet in as quiet and private a location as possible; however, do not plan to meet school personnel in the visiting committee meeting room.
- Be gracious and appreciative, thanking the interviewee at both the beginning and end of the discussion.

## Classroom Visits

When observing classes, committee members should plan to stay in the room for at least 10-15 minutes of the class; a busy schedule may not allow for visitors to remain in class for the entire meeting time. A class visit should have no more than two observers at a time. While in the room, observers should not take notes, as this can be very distracting to the teacher and students.

## Committee Member's Contributions to the Written Report

Upon the conclusion of the visit to the school, the chair will assemble a written report. The report is a compilation of the input from all of the visiting committee members. Each visiting committee member will be responsible for at least one section of the report that is to be completed before the committee member departs. Most committee members bring their own laptop computers to the visit.

## Confidentiality

All committee members must respect the confidential nature of the evaluation process. Information gathered from the school's self-study and other materials, discussions with school personnel and other committee members, notes and observations, recommendations and commendations, the visiting committee's written report, and the visiting committee's recommendations to PAIS (and MSA, if applicable) are confidential. Committee members must be careful not to discuss aspects of the evaluation outside the committee's meeting room(s) so that they might be overheard. All school materials and visiting committee working documents must be left in the committee meeting room upon the conclusion of the visit. The chair of the visiting committee will dispose of the materials as appropriate, both printed and electronic.

**ROLE OF THE VISITING COMMITTEE IN THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS** The visiting committee does not accredit the school. It provides valuable information, insight, and recommendations that enable the PAIS Commission for Accreditation or the Commissioners of Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools to make informed and appropriate decisions. The visiting committee chair will make a recommendation to the PAIS Commission for Accreditation concerning the school's accreditation on behalf of the visiting committee.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

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