



## **Commission on Membership and Accreditation**

# **The Accreditation Process**

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# Introduction

The accreditation process followed by the Connecticut Association of Independent Schools (CAIS) owes a great deal to concepts, procedures and documents developed over many years by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC). In addition, more recently, CAIS has benefitted from its membership in the International Council on Advancement of Independent School Accreditation (ICAISA), formerly the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) Commission on Accreditation in the development of its documents and policies.

In addition to the CAIS Accreditation Process, the CAIS Manual for School Accreditation and the Handbooks for Visiting Committees and Visiting Committee Chairs are the principal tools for schools and visiting team members. These documents are needed by schools undergoing evaluation and by all visiting team members.

# Membership and Accreditation

## Membership in CAIS

Membership is open to any elementary or secondary school that is not-for-profit, nondiscriminatory, fiscally sound and has an appropriate system of governance that ensures the School stays true to its mission.

Any non-public school in the State of Connecticut may apply to be a CAIS Institutional Member or a Recognized Candidate for Accreditation (RCA) if the following conditions are met:

- The School has been in successful operation for three or more years.
- The School offers four or more grade levels or their equivalent in age groups.
- Ten or more of the School's enrolled students are seven or more years of age when the school year begins.
- The School can provide conclusive evidence that its admission practices are in keeping with applicable state and federal laws regarding discrimination.
- The School is currently accredited\* by either CAIS or by NEASC.

*\*Applicable to Institutional Member applicants.*

## NEASC Schools

NEASC accredited schools applying for CAIS Institutional Membership should accompany a letter of application with a letter authorizing NEASC to transmit membership confirmation and a copy of the School's most recent NEASC Visiting Team Report to CAIS. Upon receipt of this documentation, the letter of application will be transmitted to the CAIS Board of Directors for action at its next scheduled meeting.

## **Recognized Candidates for Accreditation:**

Schools applying to be initially accredited by CAIS must complete the prescribed CAIS process within three (3) years of their receipt of Recognized Candidate for Accreditation (RCA) status. If the School applies to be accredited by CAIS, an accreditation fee, the amount of which is determined by the Board of Directors, will be assessed along with the annual fee for membership just prior to the academic year during which the CAIS visit is scheduled. This fee is payable along with the annual fee by September 1<sup>st</sup>.

During each academic year of its term of up to three years as an RCA, an applicant school will be asked to take part in all CAIS activities, and will be assessed dues for support of the Association on the same basis as Members of CAIS. Details of fee schedules may be obtained from the CAIS Office.

Personnel from RCA schools may attend all meetings of the Association, including the Annual Meeting, but may not vote on matters put before Commissions or the Annual Meeting. A school which is a CAIS RCA may announce this fact, but *must not* in any way imply that this status constitutes CAIS accreditation. Approval or "membership" with RCA status is not full accreditation. the School must understand that until the School is fully accredited, it does not qualify for recognition by all other agencies.

Unless a special waiver has been granted by the CMA, a school that does not gain CAIS Accreditation within three years of becoming a RCA must withdraw from its relationship with CAIS and wait an additional three years before re-applying for RCA status.

## **CAIS Accreditation**

The CAIS Standards for Accreditation are the basis for decisions in the accreditation process of the Association. The standards are found in the CAIS Manual for School Accreditation.

The Visiting Team Report for a school being evaluated by CAIS is reviewed and approved or disapproved by the CMA. Details of this peer review process are given in the sections that follow.

CAIS accreditation is granted with the formal understanding that the School's mission, program, governance, administration, and conditions of operation at the time of evaluation will remain substantially in place thereafter. However, over time changes of one or another sort may in fact need to be considered or undertaken if the School is to remain effective and viable. In order to adapt responsibly to this reality, and to its public responsibility as an accreditor, CAIS requires that any such “substantive change,” whether contemplated or completed, in the basic characteristics of an accredited school must be reported directly and promptly to the CAIS Executive Director (examples of such “substantive changes” are published each year in the *CAIS Directory*). It is the responsibility of the Executive Director to notify the CMA when members report substantive change. The CMA will then determine whether such changes merit a notation in the School's file, more detailed review, or a full re-evaluation of the School's membership.

CAIS is a Recognized Accrediting Agency in the State of Connecticut. As previously noted, schools with RCA status may not be recognized by all agencies. Schools granted Accreditation by CAIS are extended coterminous School Approval by the State Board of Education pending receipt of the Report of the Visiting Committee and subsequent action by the State Board of Education.

# The Accreditation Process

## I. Steps in the CAIS Process of Evaluation and Accreditation

- [New applicants only] Written application to become a Recognized Candidate for Accreditation (RCA) is addressed by the Head of School to the CAIS Executive Director. This report is accompanied by informational documents about the School and financial reports (Form 990) for the School's three most recent fiscal years.

- [New applicants only] A visit to the applicant school is made by the Executive Director or the Director of Membership to assess the School's qualifications and brief the Head of School, Board Chair, and others regarding the accreditation process and resources of the association.

- [New applicants only] A written report of this visit is presented to the CMA at its next scheduled meeting. The CMA recommends RCA status to the CAIS Board of Directors. Subsequent to a positive vote, the applicant school is invited to participate in activities of the association and will be assessed annual dues on the same basis as institutional members (schools that are granted RCA status after an academic year begins will be assessed on a *pro rata* basis for the balance of that year).

- [All applicants] At least ten months before the end of the three (3) year RCA period, or during the ninth year following a member school's last decennial evaluation, an on-site evaluation by a peer Visiting Team will be scheduled by the Executive Director in consultation with the Director of Membership and the Head of the School to be evaluated. At this time, the Head of the School to be evaluated should appoint a Self Study Coordinator and ensure that this person is furnished all appropriate manuals and other working documents.

- [All applicants] All schools which are awaiting a scheduled CAIS accreditation visit must arrange to have one of the following documents for the last full fiscal year prior to the fiscal year during which the School will be visited: a full opinion audit; an independent auditor's review of the

School's finances with a management letter; a Diocesan report on school finances; or a report from a Religious Order. This report must be provided to the Chair of the Visiting Team and the Executive Director of CAIS. All schools must also request that a written review of the institution's compliance with applicable state fire, building safety and health regulations be conducted by the appropriate officials in their town during the six month period prior to the visit. Absence of an appropriate audit or of appropriate fire / safety / health reports will prohibit the CMA from taking any action regarding CAIS accreditation of the School.

- [All applicants] The Executive Director or Director of Membership will visit the School and meet with faculty, administration, trustees and any others who need to be briefed on the CAIS accreditation process. The Director of Membership will be on call thereafter to guide those who are leading the Self Study procedure.

- [All applicants] Approximately six (6) months prior to the scheduled visit of the Visiting Team, the Director of Membership appoints the members of the Visiting Team, and announces its membership to the applicant school. In addition to members from other schools, a representative of the State Department of Education is invited but not required to participate on a CAIS team. This person serves under the direction of the team's Chair as a full member..

- [All applicants] Well before the visit occurs, the Chair of the Visiting Team visits the Head of the School to be accredited, to be briefed on the School's plans for accommodating the Visiting Team and to prepare a draft schedule for the visit.

- [All applicants] The School completes its Self Study, prepared in accordance with the CAIS Manual on Accreditation at least six weeks prior to the scheduled time of arrival of the Visiting Team. One (1) copy is mailed to each Visiting Team member, one (1) copy to the CAIS Executive Director and one (1) copy to the CAIS Director of Membership for review.

- [All applicants] The Executive Director determines that the submitted Self Study is fundamentally complete and responsive to

instructions. If deficiencies exist, they may request expansion or clarification of the Self Study, or may determine that a scheduled visit will be postponed if time is not sufficient for corrective action to take place. The School will be notified within 72 hours of any changes to be made and may then send the report to the full Visiting Team. Other, supplementary and confidential documents as specified in the Accreditation Manual are shared at this time with the Visiting Team Chair and the CAIS Executive Director.

- [All applicants] A visit to the School is conducted by the Visiting Team, and concludes with an exit interview between the Head of the School and the Chair. A preliminary draft report is then prepared by the Chair and sent to the Executive Director and the Director of Membership within two (2) weeks.

- [All applicants] The Executive Director and/or Director of Membership review the preliminary draft report to ensure that it complies with basic instructions and then forwards a confidential copy of the draft to the Head of the School being evaluated so that it can be reviewed for factual accuracy only. (This document is not a final draft, and is subject to further editing and possible CMA revision; so it should not be circulated or seen by any others at the School.) The corrected report is then edited by CAIS staff and distributed to each member of the CMA

- [All applicants] The CMA considers the Report of the Visiting Team at its next scheduled meeting. The CMA may at this time recommend that the Board take any of the following actions:

- A vote of accreditation (or re-accreditation) for a period of five years, which is renewable for a second five years at the end of that period;
- Accreditation for a defined shorter period;
- Accreditation subject to probation or warning;
- Denial of membership, with specific recommendations regarding future eligibility or re-application.



- [All applicants] The decision of the CMA, with a copy of the Report of the Visiting Team, is sent to the School’s Board Chair and to the Head of School.

- [All applicants] The Executive Director delivers three (3) copies of the final Report of the Visiting Team to the Head of the School and Chair of its Board of Trustees in a meeting. The School is thereafter at liberty to reproduce this document for its own use.

- [All applicants] Any appeal for a review of the CMA’s decision on membership is to be communicated directly to the President of the CAIS Board of Directors. The Board will conduct any appeals process according to its established procedures.

- [All applicants] A letter reporting action taken by the Board of Directors, and a copy of the Report of the Visiting Team, are transmitted to the liaison officer at the Connecticut State Board of Education. Since CAIS is a State-recognized Accrediting Agency, State approval is coterminous with CAIS accreditation.

- [All CAIS accredited schools] It is the responsibility of the CMA to encourage full use of the accreditation process, and to monitor the status of all schools accredited by CAIS. Their monitoring activity includes at least the following activities:

1. Each year, a “reminder” letter is sent to each Head of School regarding the School's responsibility to give prompt notice of substantive changes in mission, program, governance, administration or operations;
2. Two (2) years after a school is evaluated by a CAIS Visiting Team, the Head of School must submit a letter to the CAIS Executive Director and the Director of Membership which outlines steps the School has taken or may be planning in response to the Visiting Team's **major recommendations**.

3. Five (5) years after evaluation, the Head of School must submit a letter summarizing the School's actual and planned responses to **all** of the report's recommendations. In the same letter, the Head is asked to brief CAIS on any other major changes and developments that are underway or foreseen. One or more representatives from the CMA will then visit briefly with the Head of the School to observe and discuss matters presented in this letter. Note that this brief visit is not an "evaluation" and is not meant to assess the School in any way analogous to a decennial accreditation. The role of this visitor is that of a communicator and facilitator who is on hand to help the School make full use of the CAIS accreditation process and to keep the CMA current on how the School sees itself progressing in this regard.
4. In special circumstances where a major and substantive change appears in the judgment of the CMA to be underway at a CAIS accredited school, and to be a cause for concern, an interim review or reporting process may be ordered. This may include anything from an explanatory letter to an on-site visit or a formal review of accreditation.
5. If in the judgment of the CMA there is insufficient response by an accredited school to any aspect of these monitoring processes, it may recommend to the CAIS Board of Directors that it conduct a formal hearing with representatives of the School, which could result in a restatement of the term or conditions of CAIS accreditation, or in termination of accreditation.

## **II. Operational Guidelines for Membership and Accreditation Activities**

- The CAIS Board of Directors receives recommendations from the CMA regarding the conduct of evaluation and accreditation procedures, including the granting of status as an RCA.
- Membership in CAIS is determined by a majority vote of the CMA and a report is given to the Board.

- Members of the CMA are appointed for renewable three-year terms by the Executive Director, with the concurrence of the Chair of the Commission. Members are understood to be professionals who serve at a wide range of CAIS schools. The Chair of the CMA is appointed by the Board of Directors upon nomination by the Executive Director. Members of the Commission may not act in a manner which might present a conflict of interest (such as, for instance, review of a school where they are employed or which a member of their family is employed or attends).

- The Executive Director and the Director of Membership staff and supervise the activities of the CMA. Either may act in an ex-officio capacity for the CMA or the Board of Directors as needed. The Executive Director is appointed to assess and collect evaluation fees prior to the year of evaluation, per the instructions of the Board.

- In light of legal constraints and Federal and State laws relating to public disclosure, the Board of Directors has delegated authority to the CMA to edit the Report of the Visiting Team as may seem to be necessary. In such cases, the Executive Director may act as the agent of the Board and/or the CMA.