

# **AMERICAN ACADEMY for LIBERAL EDUCATION CHARTER SCHOOL ACCREDITATION**

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## **Q. WHAT IS SCHOOL ACCREDITATION?**

Accreditation is both a process and an outcome. It is an accountability process that includes self-assessment and third-party objective assessment to determine the level of a school's excellence. It is an outcome because it results in validation that a school's educational programs and support systems are of the highest quality. Thus a school (or school designer) seeks accreditation to demonstrate a willingness to embrace accountability by engaging in the process and also to demonstrate educational excellence, and thus substantiate the school's value and worth to the public it serves.

## **Q. WHY SHOULD A CHARTER SCHOOL SEEK ACCREDITATION?**

The 2001 reauthorization of the nation's Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known as No Child Left Behind, made it very clear that high educational standards and accountability were the currency of American education for all schools – including charter schools. If No Child Left Behind is the recognized currency of high standards and accountability, accreditation is the recognized gold standard as it validates that a school is an educational institution that meets high standards and is accountable. Therefore, accreditation should be an essential part of charter school planning and development primarily because it is an essential part of what authorizers look for in a charter school application. This gold standard of high standards and accountability also is what charter authorizers and state and local education agencies look for when evaluating charter school performance. Lastly, it is what families look for.

## **Q. WHO BENEFITS FROM ACCREDITATION?**

Everyone. In addition to demonstrating a willingness to embrace accountability and validate excellence, accreditation serves as a way to manage the school improvement process through regular assessment, planning, implementation, monitoring, and reassessment. By focusing on program and support system assessment using both internal standards of operation and the external standards of the accrediting agency, accreditation allows school leaders to engage the entire community in school improvement processes that typically result in innovation, reform, and improved student outcomes.

## **Q. WHEN SHOULD A CHARTER SCHOOL THINK ABOUT ACCREDITATION?**

Charter schools should include attention to accreditation standards when writing the initial charter application, thereby building in accountability processes and also addressing all areas of school excellence from the start. Accreditation validates the fact that everything a school is and does is based on attaining high educational standards; that it holds itself and its students accountable to those high standards; and that it provides its students with an educational experience that enables them to reach these high standards. By thinking in terms of accreditation during the earliest states of design, charter schools will insure that they maintain a laser-like focus on high educational standards and accountability as they develop programs and support systems.

## **Q. HOW CAN ACCREDITATION BE BUILT INTO A CHARTER SCHOOL DESIGN PROCESS?**

The best way to build accreditation into a charter school design process is to view it as a way to frame accountability and the conduct of strategic planning: using accreditation standards to guide development of essential program elements and using the accreditation process- particularly the self-study and expert review process- to carry out that development. Despite the importance of high standards, many of those launching into the charter school design phase have difficulty formulating and describing realistic ones for their schools and even more difficulty developing manageable school-wide accountability systems that link to high standards. Fortunately, for those experiencing such difficulty there is a lifeline, a way to establish realistic high standards and a manageable accountability system for those standards. It is accreditation.

## **Q. WHAT ARE THE CRITERIA USED TO EVALUATE CHARTER SCHOOLS?**

The standards themselves cover many aspects of the services a charter school delivers and they reflect research and best practice as these describe what constitutes educational excellence.

The standards most accreditation agencies use to assess schools typically mirror the standards charter school authorizers use to determine whether to grant a charter or not. This is not a coincidence as the standards both accrediting and authorizing agencies use are derived from research and best practice describing what makes a school both effective and a high-quality viable educational enterprise. Thus the standards employed by both accreditation and authorizing agencies focus on the following aspects of schooling and examine the degree to which these aspects demonstrate high quality and effectiveness:

Mission	Educational Resources
Curriculum	Organization and Governance
Assessment	Financial Management
Special Education	Student Services (co-curricular, food and health services safety, counseling, etc.)
Teacher Quality	Financial Management

These are the American Academy for Liberal Education standards (2006), but they are similar to standards published by other accreditation agencies as well. Regardless of their source, accreditation standards and the indicators associated with them very often are aligned closely with the requirements a charter authorizer calls for in a charter application. They also are often aligned with the standards that many authorizers use to assess the effectiveness of charter schools already in operation.

## **WHAT ACCREDITATION STANDARDS AND PROCESSES ARE BEST TO USE?**

There are no “best” accreditation standards and processes. Among those used by various accreditation agencies there are differences in scope, breadth, and emphasis, however; and charter school designers should select ones that result in the school design they want and the student outcomes they expect to achieve. They also should select ones that match their planning needs, skills and capabilities, and time frames.

## **WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES IN ACCREDITATION STANDARDS AND PROCESSES?**

Although most accreditation agencies follow similar processes, there are differences, some subtle, some significant. The first difference, whether the accreditation is local, state-wide, regional, or national, can be a significant difference. Because with accreditation comes membership affiliation with the accrediting agency and thus a connection to all the schools it accredits, many charter schools prefer national accreditation as it connects them to charter schools across the country. In addition, they feel that national accreditation has more value than local, state or regional accreditation since the standards they meet are nationally recognized standards.

Another difference between accreditation agencies is what their standards emphasize. Most accreditation standards cover similar aspects of schooling; however, some accreditation agencies focus more on the nature and rigor of the academic program than others, so they tend to have more and higher academic standards, include stronger considerations of course content, stress curriculum/assessment alignment, and the like. These standards tend to be more tightly linked to academic success in college. Also, some accreditation agencies strongly emphasize particular types of academic programs in their standards- for example, college preparation or special education.

Still another difference is the level of school staff effort required to complete the accreditation process (i.e., the self-study and expert review). Some accreditation processes are lengthy and complex for the school, requiring staff to assemble documents, make presentations, coordinate interviews with key stake holders, and so forth. In other cases the emphasis is on understanding program and program delivery and thus the accreditation process is less concerned with documentation and more interested in observation and interview. Finally, of course the cost of accreditation is sometimes a major difference; cost determined in terms of not only dollars but also of school staff time and energy.

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## **Q. DOES AALE ACCREDIT SCHOOLS AT THE ELEMENTARY, MIDDLE, OR HIGH SCHOOL LEVEL?**

AALE accredits charter schools at all grade levels.

## **Q. HOW LONG DOES THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS TAKE?**

AALE accreditation can be completed in six months but also can take one to two years. It depends at which stage a school enters the process.

## **Q. WHO ARE THE AALE SITE VISITORS?**

AALE draws its site reviewers from a diverse pool of experts with charter school experience. The site team, normally composed of four persons, includes: 1) at least one seasoned classroom teacher, principal, or school leader usually from another charter school; 2) an expert who knows the local or state context of the charter school; 3) an expert in curriculum, instruction, or assessment ; and 4) a prominent researcher, education reformer, or foundation officer. Our site teams bring a broader perspective and more value than one finds in a traditional “peer review”. In addition AALE works closely with the school to build a site team whose experiences and qualifications best match the mission of the schools.

## **Q. IS AALE RECOGNIZED BY THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT?**

Yes, since 1995 the U.S. Department of Education has recognized AALE and further, authorized it to be the only organization to accredit undergraduate liberal arts institutions and programs on a national basis.

## **Q. WHAT IS MEANT BY THE WORD “LIBERAL” IN “AMERICAN ACADEMY FOR LIBERAL EDUCATION”? ARE YOU PROMOTING A LIBERAL POLITICAL AGENDA?**

The term “liberal” refers to liberal *education*, which for AALE simply means “education for free citizens.” AALE promotes the study of the liberal arts and sciences -- that is, the academic subjects of history, mathematics, languages, and physical and social sciences – and devotes its accreditation engagements to schools that emphasize liberal arts education. AALE is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit 501c3 organization.

## **Q. IS IT POSSIBLE FOR A SCHOOL TO SEEK BOTH AALE AND REGIONAL ACCREDITATION?**

Yes. AALE provides full accreditation and often works with other accreditation organizations to offer joint accreditation.

## **Q. WHEN SHOULD A SCHOOL BEGIN THE AALE ACCREDITATION PROCESS?**

A school can begin the AALE accreditation process at its earliest stages of development by engaging AALE to provide any number of pre-accreditation services that AALE offers to assist charter schools. These services will help charter schools develop programs and capacities that will enable them to meet our standards and become fully accredited by AALE. These services are offered by AALE staff and consultants for charter schools at any of four different stages in their development- from pre-charter application through school accreditation.

These stages, the level and type of AALE service provided, and the outcome for charter schools, by stage, are:

### Stage 1: Accreditation Candidate--Program design and planning

- For schools in the earliest planning stages, from pre-charter applicants to schools in their first six months of operation.
- Receive *AALE Design Certification* for their school plan.
- Focus on mission, curriculum breadth and depth, qualifications of instructional staff, quality of instructional delivery, alignment of curriculum, instruction and assessment, feasibility of governance structures and student support systems.

### Stage 2: Pre-Accreditation—Early implementation

- For schools in the early stages of operation, between six months and one year.
- Receive AALE formative evaluation report with recommendations.
- Focus on implementation of stated design elements as described in plan and match between plan and school operations.

### Stage 3: Provisional Accreditation – Program Certification

- For schools that have been operating between one and two years
- Receive *AALE Program Certification*
- Focus on student outcomes in relationship to quality of mission, curriculum breadth and depth, qualifications of instructional staff, quality of instructional delivery, alignment of curriculum, instruction, assessment, feasibility of governance structures and student support services.

### Stage 4: Full Accreditation

- For schools that have been in operation for more than two years.
- Receive *AALE Five- Year Accreditation*.
- Focus on the AALE accreditation standards and process.

## **Q. HOW DOES A SCHOOL BEGIN THE AALE ACCREDITATION PROCESS?**

To begin the AALE accreditation process a charter school should contact AALE's Charter School Programs office at (202) 452-8611 and ask for an application package, which includes pre-application and application forms. This package also is available on the AALE Charter School Program Web site, [www.aalecharters.org](http://www.aalecharters.org). Email inquiries should be sent to [jdamico@aale.org](mailto:jdamico@aale.org) or [mcotter@aale.org](mailto:mcotter@aale.org).