

AMERICAN ACADEMY

for

LIBERAL EDUCATION

Secondary CHARTER SCHOOL STANDARDS FOR ACCREDITATION

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Introduction

The American Academy for Liberal Education (AALE) is the only organization explicitly authorized by the US Department of Education to accredit undergraduate liberal arts institutions and programs on a national basis. As the only national charter school accreditation agency in the country, AALE offers its certification to those schools showing the highest levels of commitment to liberal arts, academic excellence, and outstanding student achievement.

The following *Secondary Charter School Standards for Accreditation* have been derived from AALE's higher education standards. They also are extensions of our *Elementary Charter School Standards for Accreditation*. They are comprehensive in that they account for all educational and institutional components of secondary school operations. They are especially focused, however, on those elements that comprise and support high quality academic learning and achievement. A charter school engaged in AALE accreditation joins a select group of schools that consistently demonstrate characteristics that promote academic excellence, intellectual development, and outstanding achievement.

Any school accepted for AALE accreditation agrees to inform all stakeholders that it is engaged in the AALE accreditation process. It also agrees to make AALE's mailing address, e-mail address, website, and telephone number available to its stakeholders and constituents and to permit AALE to review stakeholder comments on matters related to the accreditation process.

Part I

Mission Standards

Overview

The Academy understands the mission of elementary and secondary school education to have four broad goals: instilling the habits and discipline of academic study; cultivating thoughtful and responsible persons and citizens; teaching the essential skills and knowledge needed for post-secondary studies and ultimately for the world of work; and promoting the love of learning for its own sake.

The Academy recognizes that, although schools will seek to achieve these broad goals in a variety of ways, they should do so within a mission framework that emphasizes a developmentally appropriate, rigorous, and well-balanced curriculum, that focuses on providing all students with an excellent yet distinctive education, and that stresses measurably high levels of student success in academic learning outcomes.

I.A: The school's mission statement reflects the importance and centrality of student academic outcomes and an education in the liberal arts and sciences that prepares students for an academically rigorous college program. It states the school's purpose and goals in these terms and in a manner that corresponds to the way in which the curriculum is actually organized and taught.

I.B: The school's mission statement supports the core elements of liberal education -- open inquiry, debate, and thoughtful exchange of ideas -- in an atmosphere free of dogma and indoctrination.

I.C: The school regularly reviews its mission statement or statement of purpose as part of its ongoing efforts to assess and improve its performance.

I.D: The school's educational objectives and program offerings are consistent with the school's mission, fulfill applicable state standards for public charter schools, and are appropriately rigorous and challenging.

Part II

Curriculum Standards

Overview

The Academy seeks to accredit schools that have crafted coherent and comprehensive curricula and promotion/graduation requirements that are aligned with academically rigorous standards, are developmentally appropriate, have preparation for a liberal arts college curriculum as an overarching goal, and are based on achieving and demonstrating high levels of proficiency in academic subjects consistent with the liberal arts and sciences.

The Academy's Curriculum Standards require schools to report on the ways their curricula and promotion/graduate requirements afford and guide all students through rigorous and substantial experiences in the breadth and depth of liberal learning.

For students with disabilities requiring an Individual Education Plan (IEP), see Part IV, "Special Education Standards."

II.A: The school's curriculum scope and sequence demonstrates that its courses and subjects prepare students for a rigorous liberal arts college curriculum, that the courses and subjects provide all students with developmentally appropriate liberal arts content, and that all students must meet academically rigorous and challenging requirements.

II.B: The school regularly reviews and revises its curriculum and associated academic requirements as part of its ongoing efforts to assess and improve its performance.

II.C: The school ensures that information about its curriculum, students' academic responsibilities, and the requirements for student promotion and graduation is truthfully, accurately, and systematically communicated to current and prospective students and their families by the school's staff and representatives.

II.D: The school ensures that promotion and recruitment materials and activities are clear, accurate, and contain the most current information about its curriculum, students' academic responsibilities, nature of student/teacher interaction, and the requirements for student promotion and graduation as well as data detailing enrollment, promotion, retention, and graduation rates (and where appropriate, college acceptance and job placement data). This information is made readily available to current and prospective students and their families and to the general public.

II.E: The school curriculum and curriculum materials ensure that students steadily increase their proficiency in the foundation subjects essential for a rigorous liberal arts college program, whether taught in a classroom, independently, or in tandem with other subjects (e.g., geography and world history). Further, there are certain foundation subjects that carry specific standards, as noted below:

1. Mathematics (including Arithmetic, Algebra, Geometry, and Trigonometry, with Calculus and Statistics preferably available)
2. Physical Sciences (Astronomy, Chemistry, and/or Physics, preferably with second-year courses available)

3. Biological Sciences (including historical sciences, i.e., Cosmology, Geology, Evolution)
4. Reading (including phonics)
5. Writing and Speech (including mastery of Standard English)
6. U.S. History and Government (including U.S. founding)
7. World History
8. Geography
9. Literature in English and in translation (including pre-20thcentury works)
10. Foreign Language (2 years required for high school diploma, but preferably beginning earlier)
11. The Arts (music performance; music history/appreciation; dance, art studio, art history, theater etc.)

Note: Where the curriculum contains instruction in other liberal arts disciplines besides those listed (e.g., economics, philosophy, psychology), these subjects are treated with the same emphasis as the above foundation subjects: promoting knowledge and skill development at sufficiently high levels to prepare students to study these subjects in an academically rigorous liberal arts college. For further discussion of curriculum and resources for K-12 liberal education, see two AALE publications, Sample Charter School Curriculum, and Characteristics of Exemplary Charter Schools.

II. F: Instruction is developmentally appropriate and stresses analysis, student engagement, and problem solving.

II.G: The school provides directly -- or through collaborative efforts -- extracurricular experiences that enrich, enhance, and are integrated with students' lessons in foundation and other subjects.

Part III

Assessment Standards

Overview

The true measure of the quality and effectiveness of a school is its ability to foster the academic and intellectual development of skilled, knowledgeable students who will contribute as members of their communities. The Academy believes that student learning should be evaluated in verifiable ways that align with the school's curriculum and instruction. Therefore, in addition to fulfilling all applicable state and federal (i.e., No Child Left Behind) testing and achievement requirements, the assessment methods and instruments used should measure the depth and breadth of skills and knowledge acquired, as well as the development of the intellectual abilities and characteristics associated with the continued study of liberal arts and sciences.

Accordingly, the Academy's Assessment Standards ask schools to show how they gather evidence that their educational programs actually foster academic growth and promote the characteristics of academic excellence in their students including the ability to reason and communicate effectively, possession of a certain depth and breadth of knowledge, love of learning, and an inclination to inquire.

III.A: The school has a testing program with both diagnostic and performance outcome components that is carried out systematically at least twice during the year in order to identify student needs, to guide instruction accordingly, and also to measure individual student achievement and academic growth.

III.B: The school systematically evaluates student learning (knowledge acquisition and skill development) according to rigorous learning standards and testing requirements in the subjects outlined in the section, Curriculum Standards II.A-II.G. Strong preference is given to administering the same standardized, national norm-referenced assessment from year to year, for reliable comparisons of performance and schools are strongly encouraged to employ multiple assessments in addition to those mandated by their state education agency for triangulation and for increased validity of results.

III.C: The school routinely uses student assessment data to adjust and improve instruction and to examine how well it enables the school to meet its own educational goals -- including curriculum, instruction, assessment, and the alignment of the three -- and also to improve its performance.

III.E: The school demonstrates consistent growth in student academic achievement outcomes disaggregated to show progress among all student demographic and developmental sub-groups.

III.F: The school ensures that students, families, and faculty clearly understand the school's educational goals, its achievement objectives for students, and the methods used to measure and report student achievement. The school informs students and their families of the results of student evaluations and assessments on a regular basis (preferably monthly).

III.F: The school leadership and the school faculty are responsible for the evaluation of student learning and achievement and for the use of evaluation data for accountability as well as for adjustments and improvements in curriculum, instruction and school operations.

III.G: Where appropriate, the school supports students in local and national competitions that promote and demonstrate academic achievement and excellence.

Part IV

Special Education and Remedial Education Standards

Overview

The Academy seeks to accredit schools that have crafted coherent and comprehensive curricula and promotion/graduation requirements that are developmentally appropriate, have preparation for an academically rigorous college curriculum as an overarching goal, and are based on achieving and demonstrating high levels of proficiency in the liberal arts. The school curriculum, promotion/graduation requirements, and student achievement goals should not be significantly modified for its students with special needs or in need of remediation. Rather the school should demonstrate how these essential aspects are *tailored* for the unique remedial, developmental, or physical needs of these students.

The Academy's Special Education Standards require schools to report on the ways their curricula and promotion/graduate requirements afford students with unique remedial, developmental, or physical needs with rigorous and substantial experiences in the breadth and depth of liberal learning.

IV.A: The school maintains diagnostic, instructional, and support service structures and processes for insuring that its students with remedial needs, learning disabilities, or physical/emotional disabilities increase their proficiency in the content knowledge and skills of the liberal arts and sciences foundation subjects described in the curriculum.

IV.B: Students with diagnosed learning disabilities have Individual Education Plans (IEPs) that include clearly stated educational goals for all appropriate curriculum content, specific developmentally appropriate instructional strategies, procedures for the accurate assessment of student progress, and feedback systems for regular adjustment. Student IEPs are amenable to the AALE Curriculum Standards.

IV.C: Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are evaluated at least twice each year to gauge effectiveness in meeting student needs, as these change, and IEPs are revised appropriately to reflect changes.

IV.D: The school employs instructional, grouping, or other strategies that provide assistance to its students with remedial needs (i.e., lacking grade-level content knowledge and skill in the liberal arts and sciences foundation subjects described in the curriculum).

IV.E: The school employs assessment and tracking systems to monitor the progress of its students with remedial needs and maintains timetables and benchmarks to bring these students to grade-level.

IV.F: The school has a system for providing support services that enable its students with learning or physical/emotional disabilities to engage in all appropriate school activities.

Part V

Teacher Quality Standards

Overview

The quality and effectiveness of a school is tightly linked to the quality of its teachers and their capacity to deliver high quality instruction in the classroom. It is their skill, talent, and dedication as they interact with students that enable a school to foster the academic and intellectual development of skilled, knowledgeable students who will contribute as members of their communities. The Academy believes that student learning relies on highly qualified, effective teachers who can translate their knowledge of liberal arts and sciences content and their understanding of pedagogy into engaging classroom instruction. For schools with distance learning programs, teachers also must possess the technological knowledge and skills required to employ distance education technologies.

Accordingly, the Academy's Teacher Quality Standards ask schools to show that they recruit and employ highly qualified teachers (according to the stipulations of No Child Left Behind and the demands of a college preparatory liberal arts curriculum); that they routinely evaluate teacher performance based on criteria linked to instructional excellence and effectiveness; and that they provide teachers with on-going professional development to promote instructional excellence and effectiveness.

V.A: The teachers are principally responsible for student academic performance and for the quality and rigor of instructional activities and events associated with implementing the school curriculum and its educational objectives and more broadly, the guidance, mentoring, and oversight required for the formation of the habits and discipline of academic study and development of essential liberal arts and sciences knowledge and skills in both distance learning and classroom environments.

V.B: The school recruits and employs teachers who are highly qualified to carry out the school's educational objectives and programs; who are properly prepared to teach the subjects and content they are assigned; who demonstrate effective pedagogy in classroom instruction; and who have the technological knowledge and skills to deliver distance education.

Note: Because of the variability across the country in the requirements for obtaining teacher certification or licensure, the AALE Teacher Quality standards do not require that a school's teachers hold formal licensure or certification. Teachers must meet federal criteria for "highly qualified" as stipulated in No Child Left Behind, however, and they should demonstrate qualifications consistent with both the specific subjects they teach and with the broader demands of preparing students to meet the school's academic requirements. For example:

- 1. Distinguished undergraduate record in a broad variety of liberal arts subjects*
- 2. Major, concentration, minor, or significant coursework in the liberal arts subjects being taught*
- 3. Graduate coursework and/or degree(s) in the liberal arts subjects being taught*
- 4. High score on a relevant and rigorous test in the liberal arts subjects being taught (e.g., Graduate Record Examination Subject Area Test)*
- 5. Significant professional experience teaching or conducting research in the liberal arts subjects being taught*

V.C: The school employs published policies, criteria, and procedures for observing all instructional staff in the classroom as a way to promote teaching excellence and effectiveness and to guide professional development. Formal observations of every instructional staff member are conducted at least twice each year.

V.D: The school employs published policies, procedures, and criteria (e.g., student academic performance, data from classroom observations, use of effective instructional or management strategies, etc.) for formal evaluations of all staff and conducts these evaluations at least twice each year. Staff evaluation information is used for personnel decisions and to guide professional development.

V.E: The school has published personnel policies and procedures that are provided to all staff and are made available to families and the general public.

V.F: The school meets all local, state, and federal laws and regulations governing child care employees, conducts appropriate criminal background checks of all staff, and maintains documentation of background check and academic credentials for all staff, both full-time and part-time. Published procedures for obtaining information from these documents are made available to families.

V.G: The school provides opportunities and incentives for the professional development of its staff and ensures that all teachers receive ongoing training in classroom instructional strategies and in their academic areas that is sufficient to enable them to stay highly qualified and proficient in the subjects they teach.

Part VI

Educational Resources Standards

Overview

Educational resources are important for schools seeking to promote high levels of student success in academic outcomes. They can support and enhance curriculum and instruction and can provide students with an array of educational tools to help them learn and excel.

The Academy acknowledges that often limited financial resources and poorly equipped facilities work to inhibit charter schools from having as many educational resources as they would like. Nonetheless, AALE standards require that students have access to certain key educational resources and at a level sufficiently substantive to support and enhance their learning.

VI.A: The school provides its students with sufficient access to library, research, reference, and information resources in hard copy, electronic, multimedia, or other easily used formats and that these resources are used to support and enhance education programs and classroom instruction.

VI.B: The school provides its students with sufficient access to computer equipment and facilities adequate to its educational program.

VI.C: The school regularly evaluates the adequacy of its information resources and technology (hardware, software, connectivity) for supporting and enhancing educational programs and classroom instruction and updates appropriately.

VI.D: Where technology is used by students, the school employs appropriate safeguards to prevent them from accessing non-authorized Web locations or participating in non-authorized use of technology hardware, software, and networks.

VI.E: The long range planning, budgeting, and policy development processes reflect the importance of maintaining adequate levels of support for equipment, facilities, staff, and other resources associated with the educational program.

Part VII

Organization and Governance Standards

Overview

Charter schools are unique entities in that they can be seen as both an educational enterprise and a business venture. Therefore, their organizational and governance structures and processes should reflect benchmark principles and practices derived from both the public and private sectors.

The Academy requires that charter schools demonstrate that effective, efficient, and ethical oversight, management, operation, and public disclosure procedures and structures are in place and that they function in accordance with the laws, regulations, and contracts in force for the charter school.

VII.A: The school is a public school chartered by and operating under the auspices of a legal charter authorizer. It complies with the charter stipulations and with all applicable local, state, and federal requirements and regulations. Among them are the following:

1. Has no religious affiliation and does not promote religious beliefs;
2. Maintains open admissions;
3. Tracks and reports student demographic data;
4. Provides free and reduced meals to qualifying students;
5. Provides special education by appropriate classification(s);
6. Conforms to state or local student testing requirements and maintains records of test results as required;
7. Conducts staff criminal and credential background checks and maintains records of staff credentials and qualifications;
8. Provides legally required number of hours of instruction;
9. Maintains student promotion, retention, and graduation records;
10. Other requirements not specified here.

VII.B: The terms of the charter clearly delineate the relationship of the school to its charter-granting authority and articulate how the school will be accountable for meeting the performance goals stated in the charter.

VII.C: Through its catalog, student handbook, Web site, or other communication media the school clearly and accurately describes:

1. Application, registration, and admissions procedures;
2. Promotion and graduation requirements and responsibilities
3. Policies regarding discipline, suspension, probation, dismissal, and readmission;
4. Policies regarding proper use of computers, computer software, computer networks, and the like;
5. Policies regarding the collection and retention of student academic records;
6. Procedures for lodging appeals or complaints.

This information is provided to faculty, students, and their families; and it also is available to prospective students and their families as well as the community.

VII.D: The school demonstrates a record of stability in leadership and governance.

VII.E: The school's administrative and instructional organization and staffing are appropriate to school's mission, size, grade level composition, and complexity and they are adequate for meeting its performance goals.

VII.F: The school's administrative officers have the necessary credentials, experience, professional training, or demonstrated competence to fulfill their responsibilities.

VII.G: The terms of the charter and/or foundational documents clearly define the duties and responsibilities of the school's governing board and CEO. These terms also specify the number of board members, length of their service, rotation and renewal policies and procedures, organization and committee structures, and frequency of meetings.

VII.H: The school maintains truthful, accurate, and current records and informational materials listing the names and credentials of the members of its governing board. This information is made available to the public.

VII.I: The board carries out its duties and responsibilities as a group. No member or committee acts in place of the board except by formal delegation of authority.

VII.J: The board reviews, evaluates, and approves the school's long-range strategic plans and ensures that such plans conform to the school's charter, educational objectives, resources, and capabilities.

VII.K: The board reviews, evaluates, and approves the school's financial plans, annual budgets and regular fiscal audits. If the board employs an education management organization, this organization provides board members with financial statements for review and evaluation at least once per quarter.

VII.L: The board conducts regular evaluations of the school in relation to its academic performance goals and administrative performance goals according to published procedures. Where appropriate the board seeks the input and advice of relevant constituencies such as administrators, teachers, parents, students, or members of community.

VII.M: The school establishes opportunities and structures that substantively involve student's families, non-teaching staff, and the wider community in educational and non-education school activities.

VII.N: The school has an appropriate written policy regarding conflicts of interest applicable to members of the governing board and administrative staff.

Part VIII

Financial Management Standards

Overview

The Academy recognizes that charter schools face a wide range of financial challenges and costs that non-charter public schools do not. Moreover, AALE acknowledges that the income and cash flow needed by many charter schools to cover these costs is often slow and unpredictable. Therefore, it is vitally important that charter schools manage their financial resources prudently and conscientiously.

AALE requires a charter school to have a certain level of financial stability and income predictability. The Academy also requires charter schools with distance education programs to demonstrate on-going financial support sufficient to ensure continuation of these programs.

VIII.A: The school ensures that it has sufficient financial resources to support all of its programs and activities. The school's recent financial history indicates that it is financially stable and able to support all its functions in a continuous manner consistent with present standards and with its mission and educational objectives.

VIII.B: The school prepares detailed annual budgets and uses a budget control process that ensures the budgetary plans of the governing board and the chief executive officer are implemented. Financial reports are submitted for board review and approval on a quarterly basis, at least, but preferably on a monthly basis.

VIII.C: The school employs an independent and certified public accountant to conduct annual financial audits, which are submitted to the Academy each year as well as to appropriate local, state or federal agencies as required.

VIII.D: The school uses an accounting system that follows the generally accepted principles of institutional accounting.

VIII.E: The school has policies and procedures that allow public access to financial reports.

VIII.F: The school ensures that financial reports and related information and materials are truthful, accurate, and current.

Part IX

Student Services Standards

Overview

Although the primary responsibility of a charter school is to provide instructional services designed to ensure that students receive an education meeting the four broad goals detailed above (Part I: Mission), the Academy believes that a liberal arts educational experience should include other services as well. First and foremost among these other services are establishing and maintaining a safe and secure learning environment; but there are others that promote effective education and contribute to positive learning outcomes.

In accrediting charter schools, the Academy looks for certain essential student services and also examines the extent to which a school makes certain that its student services are of the highest quality and that they reflect and support the school's mission and goals.

IX.A: The school provides all students with services that are essential for effective implementation of its educational program and also for positive learning outcomes either directly or through designated providers. These are:

1. A safe and secure learning environment
2. Health services
3. Counseling services
4. Other services required by local, state, or federal regulations.

IX.B: The school provides additional student services – as resources permit --that are consistent with its mission and that reflect the needs of its students, for example:

1. Food services including free and reduced meals
2. Tutoring services
3. Language acquisition instruction

These services are offered to all students who qualify and the qualification criteria are published and distributed to all students and families and also are publicly available.

IX.C: The school regularly reviews and assesses the extent and adequacy of the student services offered to determine their cost effectiveness and whether they reflect and support the school mission and its educational objectives, meet the needs of students, and are of the highest quality.

IX.D: To the extent (if any) that the school provides opportunity for organized athletics, it ensures that its athletics programs adhere to officially approved, written statement of policy consistent with the school's mission and educational objectives. Academic policies, requirements, and expectations are the same for students involved in competitive athletics as for other students.

Part X

Facilities Standards

Overview

The Academy requires that charter school facilities (including furniture and equipment) are appropriate for the age of the students enrolled attending and for the size and grade levels of the school. It also requires that these facilities conform to applicable codes and regulations for occupancy, health, safety, fire, and so forth, that they support the physical demands of the school's curriculum and instruction, and that they promote the academic and intellectual development of its students.

X.A: The school provides an educational setting and atmosphere for its students that are conducive to inquiry, discussion, learning, and academic achievement.

X.B: The school meets local, state, and federal occupancy, health, fire, safety regulations as well as other regulations applicable to use as a school.

X.C: The number and size of classrooms and other instructional and common areas are appropriate for the age, grade level, and number of students enrolled in the school as well as for the number of students per class.

X.D: The school facilities are furnished and equipped appropriately for the age, grade level, and number of students and the furniture and equipment match the requirements of the school's educational objectives, curriculum, and applicable support services and extracurricular activities.

X.E: The school regularly assesses its facilities (including furniture and equipment) for wear and tear and to determine its adequacy in relation to student and program needs and upgrades, replaces, repairs, and enhances where necessary.

Appendices

Any additional support documents, materials, commentary, or explanations the applicant charter school believes will be of value for the panel of site visitors, the Charter School Board of Review, or the American Academy for Liberal Education Board of Trustees to review should be added here. Each document should be labeled as a separate appendix.