



VISITING TEAM REPORT
for

Sumner Academy

Gallatin, TN

Mr. Steve Jackson

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10/26/2015 - 10/28/2015

A History of SAIS Accreditation

SAIS member schools are part of a remarkable history of quality assurance in education.

SAIS began its organizational life in 1903 as the "Mid-South Association of Independent Schools," providing training for teachers in private schools and some early public schools in the southeastern states. In 1953, another organization began as the Southern Association of Independent Schools, providing a forum for independent school administrators to work with public schools through SACS and to contribute to the larger interest in accreditation in the southeast. MAIS and SAIS merged in 1986 to form the present SAIS, with an emphasis on accreditations through SACS for independent schools and professional development for administrators, trustees, and teachers. Today, SAIS works to help both established and emerging schools approach these issues with creativity and innovation. Working at the state, regional, and national levels, SAIS serves and strengthens member schools through the promotion of the highest quality educational standards and ethical conduct.

The mission of SAIS is to provide leadership, accreditation services, and professional development resources that will strengthen member schools as they fulfill their missions. The focus of SAIS's interest when it began in 1953 was to develop and maintain relationships with the expanding organization of SACS in order to ensure significant input from independent schools into the exploding world of public school accreditation. The post-WWII years of baby booming, facility planning, teacher training, and legislative entitlement funding eclipsed the scope and role of private education in America close to the current level of service. Part of this history of negotiating standards in a predominantly public-school oriented world of education caused SAIS to embark on its own method of accreditation in the late '90s. The efforts resulted in the SAIS method of accreditation available to member schools.

SAIS has designed and implemented a significant program of accreditation to assist member schools as they develop and promote high quality education in this region. This method is based on a school's stated mission and its own unique approach to thorough and vigorous self-examination.

In today's world of accountability in schooling, accreditation serves as a critical component of a school's demonstrated effectiveness and ability to provide successful schooling for children. A school that is able to achieve accreditation demonstrates a commitment to a process that requires the school to meet a set of rigorous standards; to engage in a program of continuous school improvement; and to demonstrate quality assurance to its stakeholders through self-evaluation and peer-review. SAIS accreditation provides schools access to an integrated network of services and technical assistance that supports every school's ability to identify and meet its goals for improving student performance and the teaching and learning process.

SAIS accredited member schools are part of an international network of accredited schools that have demonstrated success in educating children. As such, SAIS accreditation is recognized throughout the world as a symbol of quality in education for students and teachers. To earn accreditation, schools must meet quality standards, be evaluated by an outside group of peer professionals, and implement a school plan focused on strategic improvement and student performance. Accreditation is voluntary and must be renewed each year.

The Review

A team representing SAIS conducted an on-site visit to review this school's self-study and standards compliance. The team was comprised of team members whose diverse independent school backgrounds provided an array of expertise. The visiting team sought the answers to these four critical questions within the framework of the school's self-study. The following pages contain the findings.

In conducting the on-site reviews, the visiting team was responsible for:

1. Assessing the adequacy of the self-study process;
2. Identifying strengths of the school deserving commendation;
3. Developing recommendations that may help to strengthen the programs of the school;
4. Assessing compliance with the standards of SAIS;
5. Developing a written report of the findings.

To fulfill the team's responsibilities, team members:

1. Reviewed documentation provided by the school;
2. Conducted interviews with board members, parents, school personnel, students, and community members;
3. Applied the standards for accreditation;
4. Developed a draft of commendations and recommendations;
5. Contributed to the content and focus of the written report;
6. Provided input as to the determination of accreditation.

The primary focus of the self-study process is to demonstrate the capacity of a school to meet the requirements for accreditation. A typical self-study consists of:

1. Analysis and response to accreditation standards;
2. Identification and demonstration of a continuous process of improvement;
3. Implementation of methods that provide for quality assurance

The study addresses four critical questions relative to each of the school's stated goals for improvement and mission fulfillment:

- **PROFILE:** Where is the school today? The PROFILE should include clear, comprehensive information reflecting current student performance data, stakeholder perspectives, community characteristics, and analysis of strengths and limitations in the areas of student learning and school performance.
- **VISION:** Where does the school want to go? The VISION is a clear, compelling purpose communicated through the school's vision and mission statements, beliefs, and core values.
- **PLAN:** What is the plan to get there? The PLAN should be based on an analysis of pertinent data, research of the best practices, and alignment with generally-accepted expectations for student learning at schools with similar missions.
- **RESULTS:** How will the school know when it has accomplished its plan? The RESULTS are documented evidence demonstrating successful implementation of strategies that resulted in accomplishment of the school's mission and student achievement gains related to the school's mission.

Roster of Team Members

Chair

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School Snapshot

Mission

Mission & Beliefs

Our mission is to discover and cultivate each child's unique abilities.

We believe in nurturing a love of learning and encouraging the pursuit of excellence in all areas.

We believe in teaching with patience, compassion, and understanding in an academically-challenging and culturally-stimulating environment.

We believe in valuing the differences each student brings to our classroom.

We believe in collaborating with parents and the greater community to enhance our educational program.

We believe in creating and promoting an emotionally and physically safe environment.

We believe in fostering social and personal responsibility.

We are committed to implementing these beliefs with vision, passion, and dedication.

Reaffirmed August 6, 2014

Brief History

Sumner Academy is an independent day school for girls and boys, governed by an incorporated Board of Trustees, and located in Gallatin, Tennessee. The school offers a program of instruction from pre-kindergarten through grade eight.

The Academy opened in September of 1973, initially utilizing a beautiful, shady campus and a large two-story brick house, known as the Old Fitt's Place, west of downtown Gallatin on Nashville Pike. In September of 1975, the school moved to a new three-building, twenty-acre complex located on Nichols Lane in Gallatin. In the fall of 1999, a new building containing a cafetorium, offices and classrooms was added to the campus and an additional fifteen acres were purchased.

Sumner Academy has been accredited by SACS/AdvancED since 1985 and completed the last five-year review cycle during the fall of 2010. During the 2005 cycle, the accreditation was expanded to also include Southern

Association of Independent Schools. Teachers and staff continually acquaint themselves with SAIS/AdvancED requirements for continuing as part of the professional faculty, staff or administration of a SAIS/AdvancED educational institution.

Leadership

Sumner Academy has a headmaster who serves at the pleasure of the Board of Trustees. There are three directors; Lindy Dillehay, Director of the Lower School, Johnna Hutchison, Director of the Middle School, and DeAnna Ball Director of Related Arts. The school is divided into communities in the following manner; pre-kindergarten and kindergarten - community I, first and second grades - community II, third and fourth grades - community III, the middle school which covers fifth through eighth grades, and, the related arts teachers make up a community. Each of these learning communities have a coordinator as well. The learning community coordinators help in planning field studies, programs, and other events throughout the school year.

Self Study

After a workshop at the SAIS headquarters, the headmaster was convinced that the best route to determining where we are and where we needed to go was through the self study process.

Sumner Academy conducted the SAIS Value Narrative Survey from November 17, 2014 through November 30, 2014. There were 106 respondents which included; 54 parents, 23 faculty, 18 alumni, and 11 trustees. Our students were given a similar survey in March, 2015. After analysis by the faculty and staff as well as the Board of Trustees, the following conclusions were drawn:

- (1) the overall 72% promoter score was a positive and telling indicator of overall positive school climate;
- (2) the marked difference between the importance score for technology (4.25) and the performance score (3.36) needed to be addressed immediately;
- (3) safety had the second lowest congruency (82.07) and was highly valued in terms of both emotional and physical care and concern by four stakeholder groups;
- (4) academic rigor was rated in the top one or two positions by four stakeholder groups (parents, trustees, alumni, faculty), but not as highly valued in regards to importance;
- (5) travel opportunities (our adventure education program) exceeded the importance levels (120 by parents, 104.88 by trustees, 104.40 by faculty).

Improvement

Sumner Academy seeks to:

- (1) increase enrollment;
- (2) assess, research and align all curricular areas for all subjects from pre-kindergarten through the eighth grade.

Introduction

Introduction and Overview of the Visit

The SAIS visiting team was warmly received by the Sumner Academy community. All constituent groups were open and forthright in sharing their insights into the culture of the school. In addition to the material provided through the SAIS portal, documentation was provided for each team member electronically on a thumb drive. The team met with the board of the school and all stakeholder groups including parents, students, alumni and teachers. The administrative leadership team explained the process for the self-study and answered questions about the two goals set forth in the plan. The visiting team had the opportunity to tour the school and visit class sessions, observing instruction and learning.

The interviews with various stakeholder groups revealed common themes, providing a clear understanding of the nurturing, encouraging environment that pervades Sumner Academy. All groups mentioned the positive family atmosphere of the school. The visiting team heard many passionate testimonials to the loving environment of the school. The stakeholders appreciate the emphasis on encouraging the whole child: independent, well-mannered, confident, and poised. Feedback from local secondary institutions indicates that graduates from Sumner Academy are well prepared and ready to meet the academic challenges that lie ahead.

The faculty and staff are fully invested in the school, taking on multiple roles. Team members were impressed with how flexible all staff members are, wearing many hats. Administrators teach classes. The parents are joyful contributors to the school, sharing their time and talent abundantly. There is a team approach to the administration of the school at every level. The board is committed to establishing a financial foundation for the school in a strategic manner.

Area 1

Title

Increase enrollment

Description

Sumner Academy plans to increase enrollment through admission management, retention, research and marketing.

Commendations

The visiting team commends the school for the following:

- Identifying the need for areas of improvement.
- Assembling teams of faculty and staff to create an action plan with specific tasks and goals.
- Recognizing areas of improvement within their defined admissions process.
- Inviting the community on campus through various means such as Walk-in Wednesdays, open houses, and admissions fairs.
- Utilizing social media to connect to alumni.
- Updating the web site to market the school.
- Improving the school's curb appeal through the efforts of parent volunteer groups.

Recommendations

The visiting team recommends that the school consider the following:

- Identifying ways to improve processes of tracking alumni.
- Investigating methods for gathering data on admissions and retention to recognize trends over time.
- Prioritizing tasks, create timelines, and assign responsible parties for the action items in the enrollment plan.
- Defining core messages that will be universally used to celebrate and promote the school.
- Communicating the successes of current students as well as graduates to attract new students and preserve retention.

Area 2

Title

Assess, research and align all curricular areas for all subjects from pre-kindergarten through the eighth grade

Description

Sumner Academy has developed a cohesive curriculum plan from Pre-K through eighth grade, consisting of assessing, examining, evaluating, and updating the academic program.

Commendations

The visiting commends the school for the following:

- Having a solid reputation in the community for academic preparedness.
- Preparing students with skills to succeed at the next level.
- Taking steps to initiate and implement the plan by observing other schools and attending national conferences.
- Looking at more project-based, pedagogical methods through the development of a school garden.
- Recognizing a need for an improved instructional technology plan throughout the curriculum.
- Identifying the need to use achievement test scores to assess and improve academic programs.

Recommendations

The visiting team recommends that the school consider:

- Prioritizing tasks, create time lines, and assign responsible parties for each action item in the Curriculum Plan.
- Creating and implementing an instructional technology plan.
- Setting realistic short-term goals for your technology program.
- Focusing on technology infrastructure improvements before adopting new technologies on campus.
- Investigating additional opportunities for faculty to collaborate on curriculum.

Area 3

Title

Additional reflections from the team

Commendations

The visiting team commends the school for the following:

- The Headmaster in providing leadership in the organizational structure at various levels of the school.
- The Headmaster and the board for creating Sustainable Sumner, a footprint for strategic planning.
- The Board for recognizing there exists a time of adjustment due to changes in leadership and for the ability to make hard decisions during a period of transition.
- The Faculty and staff for their flexibility and positive attitude in taking on additional responsibilities.

Recommendations

The visiting team recommends the school consider the following:

- That all stakeholder groups communicate more consistently.
- That governance and leadership investigate resources available to independent schools as a guide for strategic planning and fiduciary responsibilities.
- That the governance and leadership continue to monitor the reserve maintenance plan in order to remain in compliance with Standards.
- That the school evaluate use of current facilities to ensure appeal to new families and to determine appropriate use for future enrollment and curriculum needs.

Summary and Conclusion

Summary

The visiting team would like to thank Steve Jackson, Head of School for the hospitality extended to us. We recognized the team spirit exhibited by faculty and staff as well as their pride and passion for Sumner Academy. The Board is committed to the fiscal viability and growth of the school. All stakeholders describe the academy as family, and the feelings are genuine and heartfelt. Parents and alumni alike sing the praises of how prepared graduates are for the next level of schooling in this competitive world. Congratulations to the faculty for developing confident, independent students of character.

Conclusion

The visiting team finds:

1. That the school is in compliance with all standards of the SAIS and AdvancED/SACS accreditation process.
2. That the self-study conducted by the school meets the standard of quality and thoroughness required by the SAIS accreditation process and answers the four critical questions as outlined in the Guidebook.
3. That the school is unanimously recommended for SAIS and for AdvancED/SACS accreditation.