



VISITING TEAM REPORT
for

Hill Country Christian School of Austin

Austin, TX

Mr. William McGee

Head of School

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Chair

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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

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School Snapshot

Mission

Mission Statement: Hill Country Christian School is a Christ-centered community that partners with Christian families to inspire and equip college-bound students to become lifelong learners, effective communicators, and servant-leaders who impact the world with the life-changing reality of Jesus Christ.

This mission serves as the filter through which all curricula, programs, services, strategic plans, admission decisions, and resource allocations pass. The board of trustees, administration, and faculty strive to ensure that all decisions and activities are mission-appropriate.

Reference: <http://www.hillcountrychristianschool.org/about-hill-country/mission/>

Brief History

Hill Country Christian School of Austin was established in 1996 as an independently governed ministry of Hill Country Bible Church. The elder board of HCBC and a subcommittee of staff and church members led the strategy to build a Christ-centered, Classical, college-preparatory private school to serve local families. Forty-nine students were enrolled in the inaugural year. In 1998, the school consolidated with Hill Country Christian Heritage School, and in 2000 the first graduating class walked the stage.

Since its founding, the school has grown exponentially, now serving 569 students in preschool through twelfth grade, while offering a comprehensive curriculum that includes numerous academic, athletic, and fine arts programs. The school operates on the 53 acre campus of Hill Country Bible Church/Austin, occupying approximately 100,000 square feet of the church facilities. The school uses every available classroom in the main building plus nine portable classrooms. Because the campus is at capacity and cannot accommodate future growth, the Board of Trustees has acquired 26 additional acres on which to build an Upper School campus.

Hill Country Christian School is organized into two divisions. The Lower School consists of 315 students in grades PK-5 and the Upper School consists of 254 students in grades 6-12. Each division is led by a respective principal. There are 94 full and part-time faculty and staff.

Reference: <http://www.hillcountrychristianschool.org/about-hill-country/mission/>

Leadership

Hill Country Christian School is governed by a twelve-member Board of Trustees comprised of ten current parents and two non-parents, one of whom currently serves as the chairman of the board. A simple majority of the board must be members of Hill Country Bible Church/Austin. Bylaws allow for the appointment of at-large members who are neither parents nor members of our affiliated church. The board is self-perpetuating and members are eligible to serve two consecutive three-year terms with two one-year extensions if approved by the board. A Committee on Trustees is responsible for identifying, cultivating, and nominating potential candidates for board membership. New trustees are given an extensive orientation at the beginning of their term.

Hill Country is managed by the Headmaster who serves as the chief executive officer of the school. The Head Master is the sole employee of the board and is responsible for hiring, evaluating, retaining, and dismissing all faculty and staff. A five-member Executive Leadership Team, comprised of the Lower School Principal, Upper School Principal, Executive Director of Advancement, Executive Director of Business Services, and Executive Director of Christian Life, assists the Head Master in the administration of the school.

Reference: Org Chart 2014-15; <http://www.hillcountrychristianschool.org/about-hill-country/board-of-trustees/>

Self Study

School leadership employed the strategic planning process to serve as its model for self study. The process commenced in June, 2014 with a board planning retreat designed to review and revise the school's mission, vision, and core values. This process was facilitated by an outside consultant, Dr. Charlie Phillips, Executive Director of the Maclellan Foundation. Following the adoption of new mission, vision, and core value statements, the school engaged various stakeholders to help determine its value narrative and identify the critical issues that deserve attention in the strategic planning process. Through focus groups of parents and teachers, and through an analysis of school-wide surveys administered over the last three years, the Board of Trustees and Executive Leadership Team have identified the major themes that will be addressed by the strategic plan. At its September 2015 meeting, the Board of Trustees adopted a new strategic plan containing outcome statements, strategic initiatives, and action plans. This new plan, entitled "Educating the Next Generation," will serve as the blueprint for school improvement over the next five years.

Reference: Strategic Planning Overview, SWOT Analysis--2015

Improvement

Several themes emerged from the various focus groups and constituent surveys. First, the school must build adequate facilities for our Upper School. There is a growing sense of frustration voiced by students, parents, faculty, and staff regarding the lack of permanent classrooms and program-specific facilities such as locker rooms, gymnasium, science labs, and a performing arts theater. Secondly, parents, students, and teachers have expressed the desire that more emphasis be placed on preparing students for 21st century skills, especially developing and strengthening our STEAM curriculum. Enhancing our career counseling and providing opportunities for career explorations have also been suggested. Thirdly, parents are encouraging the school to focus more resources on student discipleship, that is, helping students to grow in understanding, applying, and articulating their faith. Parents value our mentoring and chapel programs, as well as our emphasis on teaching good manners, respectful behavior, and Christ-like character. They would like to see even more resources dedicated to this end.

Reference: Parent Ambassador Feedback PPT; Lower School Faculty Feedback PPT; Upper School Faculty Feedback PPT; SWOT Analysis--2015

Introduction

Introduction and Overview of the Visit

The SAIS Visiting Team agreed unanimously that a sense of community permeated every aspect of HCCS and was the defining characteristic of the school's ethos. It was evident that all stakeholders, from the students to the parents to the teachers to the leadership, believed that HCCS is a community to which they belonged and were committed. This sense of community is promoted and kept alive by the intentional efforts of teachers and school leadership, and enhanced by the active engagement of parents in the Parent-Teacher Fellowship and booster clubs.

HCCS displays sound, positive, responsive, intentional and shared leadership. It is sound by nature of its experience/expertise bank. The headmaster, for example, is nationally recognized by peers as an exemplary educational leader. The personality of the leadership team is positive and warm. Parents and teachers testify to the open-door character of the school headmaster and leadership team. Simply put, constituents report that leadership listens. Even more, they respond quickly to concerns, ideas and questions. The headmaster is humble and not controlling. The head and his team calibrate decisions and actions to the strategic plan and possess a strong sense of vision and identity.

It is clear that the school's mission is understood and supported by the staff and administration as evidenced by not only their articulated passion to serve constituents, but also their demonstration thereof. Staff chooses to work in a limited and constraining facilities environment because they believe in the mission of the school and the impact that it has in the student and parent community. A key indicator of this impact is in the response of the student and parent community; they see beyond the limitations and duress of the current facilities situation and invest their trust in the expertise of the staff to deliver a unique, mission-focused experience that cannot be replicated in other competing schools.

It is evident that HCCS hires teachers who are committed to the school's mission. Although not the purview of the visiting team to conduct teacher evaluation, there was a sense among the team that the overall effectiveness of teachers is outstanding based on the classroom interactions that were witnessed. Additionally, the team felt that the faculty of HCCS are teachable and that the school's commitment to professional development for all teachers is highly commendable and evidence of HCCS's commitment to teaching excellence.

Based on the interviews and conversations that the team had while visiting HCCS, it appears that the self-study was appropriately inclusive of its stakeholders. All stakeholder groups were informed and willing to discuss their involvement in the process.

Area 1

Title

Hill Country will be a fully enrolled PK- 12 school whose families are united in support of the school's mission.

Description

Hill Country Christian School has as a primary goal an achieving an enrollment that allows its fulfilment of the school's mission at the highest level. This includes appropriate enrollment for financial sustainability as well as program sustainability. Having this as goal #1 is evidence of the deep commitment to this initiative and there is evidence that it is intentional and implementation of the goal is underway. Upon satisfactory completion of the goal, HCCS will likely be stronger and fulfil its mission to a higher degree.

Commendations

The visiting team commends the school for the following:

- The administration of Hill Country Christian School appropriately recognizes the necessity of reaching full enrollment, both in support of the mission of the school and in ensuring the financial viability of the school, and are taking the necessary steps to understand the overall enrollment picture.

Area 2

Title

Hill Country will actively and intentionally focus on growing, cultivating, and supporting our greatest resource--our teachers and staff.

Description

One of the greatest areas of strength witnessed by the visiting team was HCCS's commitment to teachers and their success in the classroom. Regular professional development times have been created on campus as well as a professional development allowance for each teacher; both are signs of the degree to which the school values their faculty and that much progress has been made toward accomplishment of this goal.

Commendations

The visiting team commends the school for the following:

- The staff development program, focused and intentional staff meetings, and its mission focused, internally driven, reorientation of school schedule to facilitate this development.
- The intentional support of faculty through professional development allowance, teaching tools such as the mobile TV monitors, and pockets of innovative class room design (i.e. yearbook, graphic art, and apologetics classroom)

Recommendations

The visiting team recommends that the school consider:

- Undertaking strategic and intentional planning as the school moves forward to create new programs and campus facilities separate from the "mother ship" of the Hill Country Bible Church.
- Engaging in research and possibly independent consultation into establishing salaries that are competitive in the local market and based on comparative data with local public and private schools and informed by proportional data with local compensation realities.

Area 3

Title

Hill Country will deliver a Christ-centered education to students, promoting the concept of imago Dei, the belief that all persons bear God's image, and that they reflect Him in every area of their lives. We will teach from a holistic approach and address areas of mind, body, and spirit to develop capable young men and women who will lead and serve others with Christ as the center-point of their lives.

Description

Hill Country Christian School exhibits its commitment to this goal in a variety of ways including its integrated curriculum that is aligned with the school's mission, reinforcement of this value in teacher preparation, and commitment to partner with parents on their child's spiritual growth. Progress is being made on the development of the "Hill Country Way," a guiding document that will serve to further this goal.

Commendations

The visiting team commends the school for the following:

- The intentional integration of a Biblical world view through each subject area by using a common text (Engaging God's World) and integrating into the subject area.
- The focus on communication skills for students through Speech Meets and rhetoric sequence in high school.

Recommendations

The visiting team recommends the school consider the following:

- Ensuring that communication skill development occurs across the spectrum of lower school to upper school.
- Exploring a model of chamber music groups to facilitate an instrumental music program, clearly define arts, engage art faculty and experts in the design of the new building, and view the arts as co-curricular rather than extracurricular given the mention of STEAM and value of holistic development of students.

Area 4

Title

The Hill Country community will be a family of Christ followers who honor Jesus by authentically pursuing one another, foster an environment of belonging among staff, faculty, students, and parents, and live missionally within our community and beyond.

Description

The covenant enrollment contract with families, faculty hiring criteria, and chapels reflect the Hill Country Christian School ethos and spirituality of the Church community. Also, the school curriculum appears to accurately reflect the schools' Biblical worldview. HCCS holds true to its published "classical education" curriculum with special note of the primary speech and the four-year high school track that includes courses in logic, philosophy, and rhetoric leading to the culminating senior thesis. HCCS is also intentional in the effort to integrate biblical world view though each subject area by using a common text (Engaging God's World) and integrating into the subject area.

Commendations

The visiting team commends the school for the following:

- The visible coherence between the stated mission of the school and the observed program and ethos of the school.

Area 5

Title

Hill Country will develop and steward a multi-faceted sustainable model and resource plan that enables the school to fulfill its mission and maximize its tuition-value proposition.

Description

The Hill Country Christian School leadership is very cognizant of the need to work toward a sustainable financial model. Although the tuition has been maintained at a low level, there is recognition that the “right price” should be a goal and that the long-term sustainability of the school is the ultimate goal. There is ample evidence that the school's leadership has been working hard to understand and to be intentional about continued development of a strong financial model to take HCCS into its next iteration as a school.

Commendations

The visiting team commends the school for the following:

- Providing 'good value' for families in its balance between tuition and services provided.
- The management of the school's finances and turning budget deficits into surpluses while streamlining how parents and donors may support the work of the school.

Recommendations

The visiting team recommends that the school consider the following:

- Engaging in an intentional and data informed strategic financial plan, to ensure the accomplishment of goals and future sustainability, to include a study of appropriate staff levels to fulfill the schools mission as well as to identify the appropriate level of tuition.

Summary and Conclusion

Summary

The visiting team would like to thank the Hill Country Christian School community for welcoming us to share in the life of the school; in particular, Mr. McGee and his highly competent leadership team along with the joyous and competent faculty. We all departed HCCS feeling that the students who attend are being served at a very high level and that their futures are brighter because of the influences made by the staff. We are also better educators after spending time at HCCS.

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.