SAIS Accreditation

VISIT REPORT
for

Valwood School
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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 accreditation 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 which 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.
Roster of Team Members

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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:

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

The study addresses four critical questions:

1. **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.
2. **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.
3. **PLAN: What is the plan to get there?** The PLAN should be based on an analysis of pertinent data, research of best practices, and alignment with generally-accepted expectations for student learning at schools with similar missions.
4. **RESULTS: How will the school know when it has accomplished its plan?** The RESULTS are documented evidence demonstrating successful implementation if strategies that resulted in accomplishment of the school’s mission and student achievement gains related to the school’s mission.
Valwood School is a Pre-Kindergarten through Twelfth Grade independent day school located in Hahira, Georgia near the city of Valdosta. A self-perpetuating board of trustees, currently consisting of twenty-two members, governs the school.

The public educational system in the immediate area of Hahira finds an elementary and middle school that are well-regarded and score well against their peers across the state in standard assessment performance. Area residents desiring to remain in the public system for high school generally attend one of two schools, Lowndes High School, a county system school, or Valdosta High School, which is operated by the city of Valdosta. Both schools, located approximately 20 minutes south of Valwood, are generally well regarded despite standardized test performance, which places them 178th and 299th out of 368 high schools in the state, respectively.

For families interested in high-quality, independent, preparatory education, Valwood is the sole choice in the immediate area. The school enjoys full accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and the Southern Association of Independent Schools (SAIS).

Mission Statement
The mission of Valwood School “is to instill in its students an enthusiasm for academic excellence, the foundations of strong character, and a commitment to serve others.”

The academic program strives to offer students a challenging curriculum based on high expectations and a close interaction between teacher and student. Valwood seeks to develop in its student’s intellectual curiosity and the ability to read with understanding, think critically, speak fluently, and write effectively.

Valwood also strives to build strong character in its students by requiring them to follow a code of honor based on fundamental values of integrity, honesty, and responsibility. The school encourages participation in programs outside the classroom designed to build strong character by developing confidence, independence, teamwork, and leadership.

Lastly, Valwood seeks to instill in its students an abiding commitment to service by fostering in them respect for others, compassion for those in need, an understanding of civic duty, and a responsibility to serve the communities in which they live.

History
Valwood School was chartered in 1968 and began classes in September of 1969 in an old public elementary school building on Central Avenue in downtown Valdosta. Classes were offered to students in grades 1-10.

In 1970, a kindergarten section and an eleventh grade section were added. In June 1972, Valwood School conducted its first full graduation exercise, and in the fall of 1973 moved 2.5 miles northwest to a new location on Gornto Road. The addition of a gymnasium/cafeteria complex completed the campus construction in 1973. In 1982, a Preschool was added and in the following year, an Extended Day program began. Goddard Field was named and lighted in 1989.
In the fall of 2000, the school received a gift of 45 acres of land from the Howard Dasher Company for the purpose of relocating the school to that site. Located on Old US Highway 41-North, approximately six miles northwest of the existing Gornto Road campus. Following approximately two years of development, the state-of-the-art campus was opened and welcomed its first students on August 26, 2002.
PROFILE

PROFILE: Where is the school today?

Valwood is a school rich in history and poised for growth under new leadership. There is an expectant air among the many dedicated faculty who appear ready to do whatever is necessary to improve an already fine school. The many students we spoke with seem authentically engaged in the life of their school and supportive of its unique mission and of one another.

Commendations:
The visiting team commends the school for:

• A remarkable job of celebrating the successes of its graduates and staff through the "Valwood Stories" profiles. The Stories are prominently and attractively displayed throughout the School and on the School's website. These "Stories" no doubt inspire students, affirm parents' choice of Valwood, and have the potential to attract new students and assist the School with development.

• The faculty who knows their students well and demonstrate a sincere appreciation and affection for them. Valwood students clearly value their relationships with faculty.

• Multiple examples of cooperative (team) teaching and collaboration among the faculty.

• Cultivating a climate that welcomes parental involvement. Ample evidence that parents are supportive of the school with their volunteerism is apparent in the lunchroom and elsewhere.

• The creation and maintenance of a spacious campus with excellent facilities that support learning, encourage participation in athletic activities, and allow for future growth.

• A high level of student engagement and participation in community events.

Recommendations:
The visiting team recommends the school consider:

• Examine the middle school co-curricular schedule that, at present, follows a lower school model and does not appear to provide sufficient time for the deeper learning middle school students are capable of.

• Continue the present work of reconsidering teaching schedules so fewer faculty are required to teach across divisions.

• Conduct a comprehensive review of the administrative software needs of the school with a goal of consolidating the various databases and functions being presently used under a single unified database and task a single individual with responsibility for maintaining data integrity.

• Create additional opportunities and, if necessary, allocate more resources for faculty professional development. More fully leverage low (or no) cost opportunities such as visiting other schools and providing a forum for faculty to share best practices, new ideas, etc. during faculty meetings.

• Explore possibility of leveraging technology students at Wiregrass and/or VSU as an affordable means of providing hardware and software support.

• Expand the means by which academically at-risk students are aided beyond the present reliance on faculty providing individual tutoring outside the school day.

• Establish a schedule for acquiring textbooks or virtual texts/materials that will provide students with appropriate resources.
• Adopt an intentional process for committee review of each core content area – both curricular and pedagogical – and assess the degree to which each content area continues to meet the needs of the school.
• Establish a clear, firm deadline for re-enrollment that is consistent from year to year so that the school's enrollment can be more reliably forecasted. The school may wish to consider a substantial late fee for late enrollees. 
• Review all outsourced arrangements and contracts with third-party vendors, benchmarking as much as possible, and consider opportunities to renegotiate and bid for services.
VISION

VISION: *Where does the school want to go?*

The arrival of Dr. Pascavage has clearly breathed new life into the strategic vision of the school. This is readily apparent from the updated improvement plan. Valwood’s Board of Trustees appear to be active and willing partners in the creative vision set out by the Head of School and the school’s future is rich with possibility and opportunity.

Commendations:
The visiting team commends the school for:
- A Board of Trustees that is actively and appropriately engaged in the leadership of the school, supportive of Dr. Pascavage’s leadership, and united in their focus of ensuring that the mission of the School is successfully delivered.
- A Headmaster that demonstrates approachability and is attentive and responsive to the concerns of the student and parent communities.
- Expanding academic opportunities for students by providing access to the Georgia Virtual School & facilitating dual enrollment opportunities with Wiregrass Georgia Technical College.

Recommendations:
The visiting team recommends the school consider:
- Restructuring the instructional administration for greater efficacy and efficiency.
- Reevaluate the location and staffing of the Admission Office to ensure adequate visibility and representation.
- The recently revised school improvement plan should be narrowed from its present list of 94 items and focused into a strategic plan by attaching deliverable dates and identifying the resources (human and/or financial) required to fulfill them. Further, best practices suggest that a standing Board Committee should be tasked with bi-annual reports of progress toward those deliverables and the evaluation of the Head of School should be directly linked to the progress made toward those Board-approved objectives.
PLAN

PLAN: What is the plan to get there?

Valwood revised a prior (2006) Strategic Plan for the purposes of this visit. This effort succeeding in better reflecting the current conditions and aims of the school but also broadly expanded the number and scope of strategic goals. While the visiting committee agrees, in principle, with each of the 94 objectives of the revised plan, we believe it could be a far more effective instrument if its focus were narrowed and specific detail were added regarding resources required and deliverable dates.

Commendations:
The visiting team commends the school for:

- Updating the school's website with a modern, attractive look and feel that is easily navigable and regularly updated.
- Exploring the potential for strategic alliances with area colleges, universities, and other entities.
- Creating the “homework hour” in the lower school.
- Creating a schedule for middle school that places a sports period at end of day.
- A thoughtfully executed scope & sequence of the curriculum.
- Creating the opportunity for peer tutoring in chemistry - an idea that could be beneficial in other disciplines as well.

Recommendations:
The visiting team recommends the school consider:

- Review the admissions process and revise if necessary to ensure there is appropriate administrative input in decision making for mission appropriate students.
- Develop a school wide technology plan and engage an individual to oversee its implementation.
  - Thoughtfully integrate technology into teaching and learning.
  - Provide readily available instructional and non-instructional technology support.
  - Review the impact of the upper school iPad implementation will have on the number, configuration, and upgrade cycle of campus computers including those necessary for faculty to scale with students.
  - Conduct a review of the campus network to include the present and future adequacy of wireless and Internet access infrastructure.
  - Consider adding off campus technology use to the technology acceptable use policy.
  - Develop and communicate a plan that specifically articulates how (and in which subjects) students will be expected to utilize iPads in the upper school.
RESULTS

RESULTS: *How will the school know when it has accomplished its plan?*

Valwood now benefits from a seasoned, expert and creative leader who is supported fully and appropriately by an engaged Board. In just one year, the school has already begun to see a resurgence of interest in and excitement about what is being accomplished at Valwood. As Valwood graduates continue to distinguish themselves in the community and return (as several have) to enroll their own children, the legacy will continue to grow. As Valwood reaches outside of the campus to forge strategic partnerships with educational and civic organizations, even more of the greater Valdosta community will be exposed to the school and will, perhaps for the first time, be inclined to recommend it to others.

Commendations:
The visiting team commends the school for:

- It’s strategic forethought in adopting a tuition strategy through 2014-15 and pro-actively communicating to families of the school to allow them to anticipate and plan for the increases.
- The Headmaster and Board of Trustees developing a thoughtful, long-range 5-year forecast and budget.
- Allowing faculty to participate in affordable professional development by visiting other schools in the region.
- Creating and sustaining a rigorous commitment to the development of exceptional writing skills as a hallmark characteristic of a Valwood graduate.

Recommendations:
The visiting team recommends the school consider:

- Develop a deliberate program for re-recruiting students in 5th and 8th grades.
- More effectively leverage parents as ambassadors through the addition of a parent marketing committee, a Board of Visitors, or similar organization which can meet regularly with the Headmaster, Director of Marketing and Director of Admission to support and extend the school’s reach into the community.
- Increase marketing and promotion to raise awareness of Valwood in the greater Valdosta community and surrounding areas.
- Consider seeking out a more intentional feeder school relationship with local schools.
- Establish and communicate a clearly defined compensation plan for faculty members.
- Consider revising and recasting the five-year budget to reflect multiple enrollment scenarios including no increase in enrollment.
- As enrollment goals are attained and finances allow, consider increased professional development and travel to association conferences for faculty, administrators, and the Headmaster; and fund and maintain a PPRSM (Physical Plant Replacement and Special Maintenance) account.
Valwood School occupies a unique position in its community - a position that creates incredible opportunities and also unique challenges. As the only independent, PK-12 preparatory school in the area, Valwood is not only the logical choice for parents seeking a school an attentive, preparatory environment, it is, in fact, the only choice.

For over four decades, Valwood has succeeded in educating students well for college and for life. The many stories of accomplished alumni fill the walls of the spacious campus. Graduates who pursued education as a career have now returned home to teach a new generation of Valwood Valiants. Several parents who attended Valwood, are now returning to campus with children of their own, desiring the same experience for their sons and daughters that they once enjoyed. Though the campus has expanded and many faces have changed, Valwood’s commitment to a diverse, inclusive and attentive environment has not waivered.

Valwood has now entered a new season of leadership under a Head of School with creativity and capability that has breathed new life into an already vibrant community. Whether student, parent, employee or Board member, there is an unavoidable enthusiasm for the school’s direction under Dr. Pascavage. His insight into best practices elsewhere is keenly moderated by an awareness for the uniqueness of the Valdosta community. It is clear that he has not set out to remake Valwood in the image of an Atlanta-centric independent school but rather he has taken (and is taking) time to understand how Valwood can grow and improve while retaining its heritage and deepening its ties with the community as opposed to ostracizing itself from it.

As exceptional as these early reports of Dr. Pascavage’s leadership are, there are also signs that he may be at risk for over-extending himself. This is problematic for the obvious risks of burnout and premature departure from the school but also for the lack of opportunity for subordinate leadership to be challenged and developed through the delegation of responsibilities. In many corners of the school, there appears to be an unspoken expectation that Dr. Pascavage will be the “hero” who rescues them from years of inattentive leadership. And given his expertise and passion, it would not be difficult to slip, intentionally or otherwise, into that role. However, in order for Valwood to thrive and reach its full potential, there must be a depth of competent leadership that extends beyond the walls of the Head’s office. Valwood and, more to the point, Dr. Pascavage, likely faces some immediate decisions with regard to the administrative leadership as he considers the structure and skillsets needed to fulfill the expansive vision he has for the school and make good on the promise to “…instill in its students an enthusiasm for academic excellence, the foundations of strong character, and a commitment to serve others.”
CONCLUSION

The visiting team wishes to express appreciation to Dr. Pascavage and his staff, the Board of Trustees, the parents and all other Valwood stakeholders for their efforts in preparing for the review team’s visit and for their gracious hospitality during our stay. Though the preparation of the self-study document lacked the depth and timeliness that would be typical, the committee acknowledges the unique challenges that occurred in the months preceding the visit and in the final analysis, the information provided was sufficient to ascertain compliance with the standards and provided credible responses to the four critical questions.

The visiting team finds:

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