

**COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**

November 5, 2014

TO: Karen Molchanow, Executive Director  
State Board of Education

FROM: Rita D. Perez, Acting Deputy Secretary  
Elementary and Secondary Education

SUBJECT: Recommendation of AdvancED to be an approved accrediting body for pre-K (nursery), kindergarten, elementary, and secondary private academic schools

AdvancED has applied to the State Board of Education for approval as an accreditation body for pre-K (nursery), kindergarten, elementary, and secondary private academic schools in lieu of such schools seeking renewal of licensure from the State Board of Private Academic Schools. Pennsylvania schools seeking accreditation from AdvancED must have previously fulfilled the requirements for private academic school licensure and been licensed in good standing for the previous two years.

The AdvancED application was examined by a team of professional staff in PDE's Division of Planning. The team's review consisted of an analysis of AdvancED's basic accreditation protocols and processes, including its self-study process, accreditation standards, complaint process, monitoring processes, and policy on background checks. Following its initial review, PDE responded to AdvancED with a detailed list of questions and request for clarification and additional documentation. AdvancED responded with answers to PDE's questions and provided the requested documentation. Based on its review of the application and the amplifying information received, our team found that AdvancED has strong accreditation protocols and procedures for reviewing initial applications, granting candidacy status, initial accreditation and renewal of accreditation. We also found that AdvancED also has adequate policies and procedures for ongoing monitoring of accreditation status and complaint processing. Our team rated the AdvancED application as "Good Quality" on all attributes of the accrediting body scoring rubric, with the exception that ratings of "Very Good Quality" were assigned to the attributes dealing with accreditation standards, fee schedule and candidate review process. Based on its review, PDE recommends that AdvancED be approved as an accrediting body for pre-K (nursery), kindergarten, elementary, and secondary private academic schools. The remainder of this memorandum provides an overview of the team's findings about the organization, and the basic components of its accreditation process and protocols.

*As approved by the State Board of Education on November 13, 2014*

## **Organization**

AdvancED is a non-profit parent accrediting organization with headquarters in Alpharetta, Georgia, and is made up of three component accrediting bodies (NCA CASI, NWAC and SACS CASI).<sup>1</sup> Although AdvancED operates as the parent corporate entity, each of the three bodies exists as a separate entity and can accredit schools anywhere in the Continental U.S. Schools in the Northeastern U.S., (e.g., Pennsylvania), are able to designate which of the three component accrediting bodies they wish to partner with for accreditation. Accrediting bodies under the AdvancED umbrella use a common accreditation protocol and set of standards. AdvancED's Northeast Regional Office in Bala Cynwyd, PA has primary responsibility for managing the accreditation of schools in Pennsylvania. All accreditation recommendations falling under the auspices of the regional office are reviewed by AdvancED's Northeast Regional Council and are forwarded to the AdvancED Accreditation Commission for official action. Commission actions are then reviewed and ratified by the AdvancED Board of Trustees.

AdvancED reportedly serves 30,000 public and private schools and school systems in the United States and internationally. It accredits schools and school systems in all fifty states and is recognized by statute in Alabama, Georgia, North Dakota and Wyoming as an accreditor of public K-12 schools. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Defense uses AdvancED as the accreditation body for its international schools.

## **Self-Study Process**

Our review found that AdvancED's accreditation processes place a strong emphasis on continuous school improvement. Schools seeking initial accreditation must demonstrate that they meet AdvancED's *Standards for Quality Schools* (SQ), have the capacity to support school improvement, and are committed to growth in student learning and organizational effectiveness. After completing an extensive application, each school completes a self-study using AdvancED's online *Adaptive System of School Improvement Support Tools* (ASSIST). ASSIST is a web based platform designed for continuous improvement development, performance assessment and accreditation. Schools use ASSIST to submit information, develop goals and continuous school improvement strategies, and to document their compliance with state regulations and AdvancED accreditation requirements. As part of the self-study process, students, teachers, parents and other stakeholders are afforded the opportunity to complete a survey through the ASSIST portal. The initial process of self-study may take up to two years to complete, and during the period of self-study, AdvancED's staff is in contact with the school to provide guidance and assistance.

## **Peer Review Site Visit**

After completion of the self-study, AdvancED conducts an internal readiness review to make sure that the school is ready for a peer review site visit (i.e., the *External Review*). The internal readiness review includes a review of the data and information collected from the school's use of

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<sup>1</sup> North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI); Northwestern Accrediting Commission (NWAC); and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI).

the ASSIST tool. If the readiness review team finds the information adequate, the school is notified and can schedule its peer review site visit. Applicant schools are given some flexibility to request the types of expertise possessed by members of their site visit peer review team so as to ensure a good fit with the school's philosophy and goals.

AdvancED peer review teams consist of educators possessing a range of expertise, each of which must first complete AdvancED's required site visit training. During the site visit, the peer review team interviews students, teachers, parents and other stakeholders (members of these groups were surveyed as part of the self-study). The team reviews state compliance requirements, facility requirements and conducts a curriculum review. AdvancED has developed a classroom observation tool known as the *Effective Learning Environment Observation Tool* (ELEOT), which is used by peer review team members to document the classroom learning environment as the team observes classroom lessons. ELEOT was recently updated in 2013. The items on the ELEOT are aligned to the AdvancED SQ standards and indicators. ELEOT supports the AdvancED protocol/process in gathering information and helps to corroborate the team's findings based on data and interviews. The results may be cited in the narrative sections of the team's report. AdvancED training for peer review team members prepares each team member to review all of the evidence in relation to rubric definitions of performance level ratings within the ELEOT tool. A school's curricular needs, including teaching tools and resources, are addressed by through its use of the ASSIST and ELEOT tools.

### **Standards Review**

AdvancED's detailed and thorough *Standards for Quality Schools* or SQ, outline basic principles and expectations in five categories: Purpose and Direction; Governance and Leadership; Teaching and Assessing for Learning; Resources and Support Systems; and Using Results for Continuous Improvement. Each set of standards has *Indicators of Effectiveness* that are rated using a rubric during the peer review team's site visit.

The peer review team site visit results in a composite score, called the *Index of Education Quality* (IEQ), which combines the ratings given for the various performance indicators within each of the SQ standards, as well as evaluative criteria from both the student performance and stakeholder feedback diagnostic tools. The IEQ composite score is segmented into three sub-scores covering three domains of performance: (1) impact of teaching and learning on student performance; (2) leadership capacity to govern; and (3) use of resources to support and optimize learning. The IEQ is then used to determine whether a candidate school should be granted accreditation or whether it should remain in candidacy status and be subjected to continued monitoring until ready for subsequent review. Schools cannot remain in candidacy status for more than two years, and those that do not document progress leading to an IEQ performance level of 3 or higher are dropped from the accreditation track but may apply for reinstatement within one year. After a year has passed, a dropped school must reapply following the same procedure required of new applicants. Schools with scores of 3 or above, but which do not meet all established criteria, are placed "under review" and receive frequent monitoring.

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## **Monitoring**

The ASSIST tool is used to conduct regular monitoring of an individual school's accreditation status, based on information the school provides periodically through updates in ASSIST. Each school receives an annual progress report which includes its accreditation status, summary of findings, directives to guide next steps, and recommendations to ensure a continued commitment to improvement.

A school classified as being "under review" is given an opportunity to come into full compliance with all accreditation requirements and increase its IEQ score on the performance standards. Schools are required to document their progress in the "*Required Actions*" portion of ASSIST and must host a follow-up monitoring visit by AdvancED representatives within one year. All institutions are required to implement at least one required action to support improvement, regardless of their IEQ score. Schools that do not document process leading to performance levels of 3 or higher will be dropped from accreditation.

## **Complaints**

AdvancED has a stated complaint policy similar to those of other accrediting bodies. The policy requires that complaints be submitted in writing, including the complainant's name, address, phone number and other pertinent contact information. Complaints should also include a description of the circumstances and relevant supporting information. The name and contact information of the person at the school who was contacted in an attempt to resolve the issue should also be included. The complainant must give permission for AdvancED representatives to access records concerning the complainant if such records are not available to the public.

The severity and/or frequency of a complaint has material bearing on the action taken by AdvancED. Isolated and individual grievances are typically not adjudicated by the accrediting body and are handled at the school level. Schools have thirty days to respond to complaints, and must provide a copy of their response to the AdvancED regional office, which may conduct an investigation if warranted. Complaints regarding child abuse, sexual harassment or discrimination will immediately be forwarded to the appropriate authorities. Unsigned complaints are forwarded to the head of school for disposition. Findings of the regional office's investigation will be reported to the appropriate AdvancED Council or the AdvancED Accreditation Commission for appropriate action.

AdvancED's managing regional offices regularly monitor the accreditation status of a school to verify if there are any complaints, changes or new information added a peer review team's report and/or to a Special Review Team's report. If AdvancED suspects the existence of violations or a pattern of violations that could possibly interfere with the school's ability to meet its accreditation standards and policies, it may authorize an investigation. During the investigation, if AdvancED determines that a complaint was not handled properly by the school, the external review team or a special investigation team will be assigned to visit the school to conduct a special review and make a recommendation regarding the school's accreditation status. Investigation findings may result in a school's accreditation status being changed.

### **Background Clearances**

AdvancED's Northeast Regional Office is responsible for monitoring and ensuring that its accredited schools in the region are in compliance with all state, local, and federal laws regarding criminal background and child abuse clearances before those schools can be recommended for accreditation. Any deficiencies discovered during the peer review site visit are documented in the team's report as official actions that must be addressed.