

## REL Pacific Ask A REL Response

Educator Effectiveness  
September 2020

### Question:

**What are some evidence-based standards or criteria for accreditation in K–12 school systems?**

### Response:

Following an established REL Pacific research protocol, we conducted a web-based search for resources related to the evidence base for accreditation standards/criteria for K–12 school systems (see Methods section for search terms and resource selection criteria). We first prioritized studies in the Pacific and other Indigenous contexts for greater relevancy to our partners in the Pacific region; however, we included studies with more generalizable findings due to the limited amount of research available in these contexts.

References are listed in alphabetical order, not necessarily in order of relevance. Descriptions of the resources are quoted directly from the publication abstracts. We have not evaluated the quality of references and the resources provided in this response. We offer them only for your reference. Also, our search included the most commonly used research resources, but they are not comprehensive and other relevant references and resources may exist.

### Research References

Bae, S. (2018). Redesigning systems of school accountability: A multiple measures approach to accountability and support. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 26(8), 1–32.

<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1169485>

*From the abstract:* “The challenges facing our children in the 21st century are rapidly changing. As a result, schools bear a greater responsibility to prepare students for college, career, and life and must be held accountable for more than just testing and reporting on a narrow set of outcomes aimed at minimum levels of competency. Thus, scholars, educators, and reform advocates are calling for a more meaningful next phase of school accountability, one that promotes continuous support and improvement rather than mere compliance and efforts to avoid punishment (Center for American Progress & CCSSO, 2014; Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit, & Pittenger, 2014). This paper reviews state and district level accountability systems that incorporate a multiple measures approach to accountability and highlights the following features that represent redesigned systems of accountability: 1) broader set of outcome measures, 2) mix of state and local indicators, 3) measures of opportunities to learn, 4) data dashboards, and 5) School Quality Reviews. The paper concludes with guidance for policymakers and practitioners on ways to support the development and implementation of a multiple measures system of accountability so that school accountability becomes synonymous with responsibility for deeper learning and support for continuous improvement.”

Bernasconi, A. (2004). Current trends in the accreditation of K–12 schools: Cases in the United States, Australia, and Canada. *Journal of Education*, 185(3), 73–82. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ774576>; full text available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42744090?seq=1>

*From the abstract:* “Systems to periodically evaluate the performance of K–12 schools are, broadly speaking, of two kinds: ‘inspection,’ the paradigm of England's OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education); and ‘accreditation,’ originally developed nearly a century ago by what are now the U.S. regional accreditation agencies. In the past decade some important changes have been taking place in the accreditation model for K–12 schools in the United States, while at the same time countries such as Australia and Canada, heirs to the British inspection tradition, have begun to experiment with U.S.-like accreditation. In this article, the author describes some of the new developments in the U.S. regional and state accreditation processes. He examines a new model of school evaluation in Victoria, Australia, and a quite original example of accreditation, one that could perhaps be called a ‘post-accreditation’ prototype, in the Canadian province of British Columbia. The final section presents a summary of the trends that emerge from these cases.”

Burris, R. (2008). *An analysis of accreditation processes, quality control criteria, historical events, and student performance* (Publication No. 3566) [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Central Florida]. Showcase of Text, Archives, Research & Scholarship (STARS). <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd/3566/>

*From the abstract:* “The purpose of this study was to determine to what extent student performance has been influenced by historical events, legislative mandates, and accreditation processes. This study consists of comparing the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools accreditation processes with those of the Association of Christian Schools International. In completing this qualitative study, the following procedures were implemented: Related research was used to provide a background of the role that historical events, legislation, and accreditation processes have on student performance; data were collected to establish time line shifts in an historical perspective. The data collected included assessment, accountability, high school drop out rates, high school graduation rates, academic readiness for higher education, standardized testing, grade inflation, acceleration of dual enrollment and advanced placement courses, and national SAT and ACT averages. Data were also collected from historical record of accreditation processes, which included standards, teacher certification requirements, committee responsibilities, visiting team responsibilities, and self-study materials. As a result of content analysis, the researcher decided to focus on three key areas that were integral to the study. The three categories identified in the review of literature were used to analyze the content of these events and processes. The categories were: (a) Student Performance, (b) Historical Events, and (c) SACS and ACSI Accreditation Processes. The following results were obtained from this research. Findings indicated that a criterion-based accreditation process potentially results in more consistent student performance outcomes than an open-ended process.”

Center on Standards and Assessments Implementation. (2016). *Scan of measures used in states' accountability and accreditation systems*. Author. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED588500>

*From the abstract:* “This memorandum presents results from a scan of states' accountability and accreditation systems, focusing on measures of student achievement and outcomes that are associated with school improvement. Particular attention was given to indicators that can lead to increased student achievement and school quality other than state assessments. The data in the table were collected from states' Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESSA) waiver flexibility requests and departments of education websites. Common across all 50 states and the District of

Columbia is the use of 'state assessments' and 'graduation rates' as indicators of student learning in state accountability systems. Nearly half ( $n=23$ ) of the states include 'attendance rates' as an accountability measure. Additionally, present across at least 30 states is an emphasis on 'college and career readiness,' as measured by participation and performance on college entrance (e.g., ACT, SAT, WorkKeys, and college placement) and advanced course (e.g., Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate) assessments; dropout rate; postsecondary enrollment; concurrent enrollment/dual credit; attainment of industry credits; and percentage of students requiring remediation in college. While student-related indicators are the focus in state accountability systems, other measures incorporated in a few states' accountability systems include: (1) School climate/culture (Georgia, New Mexico, and Illinois); (2) Community/student engagement (New Mexico and Texas); (3) Program reviews (Alabama and Kentucky); and (4) Principal/teacher evaluations (Alabama, Kentucky, and Michigan)."

Eaton, J. S. (2011). *U.S. Accreditation: Meeting the challenges of accountability and student achievement. Evaluation in Higher Education*, 5(1), 1–20. <https://www.chea.org/us-accreditation-meeting-challenges-accountability-and-student-achievement>

*From the abstract:* "Accountability and student achievement have posed major challenges to U.S. accreditation for the last decade. The responses to these challenges have been shaped not only by the origins, values and structure of accreditation, but also by the fundamental features of U.S. higher education with its history of decentralization, diversity and complexity. This paper offers brief profiles of U.S. higher education and accreditation as well as describing their complicated relationships with the federal government. The profiles provide the context for consideration of how U.S. accreditation has addressed both accountability and attention to student achievement, meeting these challenges within the framework of its longstanding values, processes and practices."

Elgart, M. A. (2017). *Meeting the promise of continuous improvement: Insights from the AdvancED continuous improvement system and observations of effective schools*. Advance Education Inc. <https://www.advanc-ed.org/sites/default/files/documents/CISWhitePaper.pdf>

*From the abstract:* "The term continuous improvement has been part of the lexicon of school improvement for decades. From state accountability systems and district and school improvement plans to teacher and classroom protocols, continuous improvement practices have been replicated at various levels of scale throughout our educational system. Yet all evidence suggests this universally recognized practice has failed to fulfill its promise. That is particularly true in high poverty schools, where the ZIP code remains as strong a predictor of student success as it was a half century ago, before school improvement gained prominence. This whitepaper examines some of the reasons why, despite the common use of continuous improvement language and practices, school and system efforts often fall short. It then describes the key components of successful continuous improvement implementation in a school setting and introduces the AdvancED® Continuous Improvement System, including its research-based elements and processes. And, as described in the summary of findings below, it shows how AdvancED's work conducting external engagement reviews and observations of more than 250,000 classrooms demonstrates strong relationships between effective continuous improvement practices and high performance."

Ewell, P. (2012). *Recent trends and practices in accreditation: Implications for the development of standards for Council for the Accreditation of Education Programs (CAEP)*. CAEP. <http://caepnet.org/~media/Files/caep/accreditation-resources/recent-trends-accreditation.pdf>

*From the abstract:* “The Council for the Accreditation of Education Programs (CAEP)—the professional accreditation organization for teacher education programs in the U.S.—has charged a high level Commission with the development of new standards for accreditation to govern the programs that it accredits. CAEP is the product of an amalgamation of two earlier accrediting organizations—the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC). To support the process developing new standards, CAEP has asked Dr. Peter Ewell of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) to prepare this background paper on recent trends and promising practices in accreditation.”

Provezis, S. J. (2010). *Regional accreditation and learning outcomes assessment: Mapping the territory* (Publication No. 16260) [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign].

<https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/2142/16260>

*From the abstract:* “This case study examined the intersection of collegiate-level student learning outcomes assessment with regional accreditation to understand how regional accreditation policies and practices leverage student learning outcomes efforts on US college campuses. To that end, the standards of each of the regional accreditation agencies were carefully reviewed and representatives from the regional accreditation agencies (with the exception of NWCCU) were interviewed. In addition, data was gathered from a Council for Regional Accreditation Commissions (C-RAC) and National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) Symposium on student learning outcomes assessment, in October 2009. The information gathered from the documents, interviews, and the symposium were reviewed and analyzed for emergent themes. These themes reveal similarities and differences between the accreditors, primarily in their stated expectations for defining, assessing, and using outcomes; for prescribing practices; for transparency; for faculty engagement; for accreditation follow-ups; and for student learning outcomes assessment resources. It is the contention of this study that learning outcomes assessment is janus-faced in its dual emphasis on improvement and accountability, and that these two concerns remain in irresolvable tension within the accreditation process. The regional accreditation agencies are in many ways more similar than different in regards to their expectations for learning outcomes assessment. Even so, they have their own ‘habitus’ or set of practices that are influenced by the region. Their involvement in C-RAC and their adherence to the Principles set forth by this organization helps structure the field, so the logic of accreditation practice is the result of regions sharing and discussing strategies, making these strategies transferrable--or transposable.”

Wilkerson, J. R. (2017). Navigating similarities and differences in national and international accreditation standards: A proposed approach using US agency requirements. *Quality Assurance in Education: An International Perspective*, 25(2), 126–145. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1136920>

*From the abstract:* “Purpose: Understanding and navigating the differences in standards, and the roots and rationales underlying accreditation reviews, is necessary for all institutions that seek multiple accreditations. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate a method to assist institutional-level leaders and assessment practitioners analyze and align these differences in various national or international agency requirements, to develop a framework for assessment and data collection. The proposed method is demonstrated by using multiple accreditors' standards from the USA. Design/methodology/approach: Guided by a set of process questions, a review and content analysis of national standards and 12 accreditation agency requirements from the USA was conducted using Web-based, documentary sources. An operational definition of institutional quality was derived based on the core themes that emerged. Examples of evidence matched to each core theme were

outlined to suggest an assessment framework. The 12 US agency requirements were compared and contrasted with the core themes and validated. Findings: In the USA, recognition requirements set by two national bodies, the US Department of Education and Council of Higher Education Accreditation, drive the standards applied by various agencies that accredit institutions and programs. Six themes emerged from their requirements, serving as a core framework for designing institutional assessment systems. The themes are student achievement and continuous improvement; curriculum quality; faculty; facilities, equipment and supplies; fiscal and administrative capacity; and student support services, admissions and information-gathering systems. While the 12 sampled accreditation agencies generally used these core themes, divergences were found in how they treated the themes in published requirements. Practical implications: Where multiple US or other accreditations are sought, the approach recommended could facilitate the work of institutional accreditation leaders and practitioners in establishing assessment systems that reduce redundancy while also maximizing efficiency in assessment and data collection. Originality/value: There is little guidance in the literature on how institutional leaders and practitioners confronting the challenges of accreditation can negotiate multiple, and sometimes conflicting, sets of requirements. This paper demonstrates a possible solution strategy. Outside the general utility of the demonstrated method, the findings and core assessment framework produced could be useful for institutions seeking accreditation through the agencies in the study sample, in both the USA and overseas.”

*Note: REL Pacific was unable to locate a free link to the full-text version of this resource. Although REL Pacific tries to provide publicly available resources whenever possible, this resource may be of sufficient interest to the reader to warrant finding it through university or public library systems.*

## Methods

### *Keywords and Search Strings*

The following keywords and search strings were used to search the reference databases and other sources:

- "Accreditation" AND "rigor"
- "Accreditation" AND "rigor" AND "standards" OR "criteria"
- "rigorous" AND/OR "evidence-based" "school accreditation standards"
- rigorous accreditation standards
- accreditation standards development
- "accreditation" AND development of educational accountability
- development of K–12 educational accreditation standards
- connection between evidence and accreditation standards
- "accreditation" and "methodology" and "rigor"
- “high school accreditation”

### *Databases and Resources*

We searched ERIC, a free online library of over 1.6 million citations of education research sponsored by the Institute of Education Sciences, for relevant resources. Additionally, we searched the academic databases ProQuest, Google Scholar, and the commercial search engine Google. Finally, we searched the websites of various regional or national accrediting associations for any relevant research on the evidence based of their accreditation standards or criteria.

## *Reference Search and Selection Criteria*

REL Pacific searched ERIC and other academic journal databases for studies that were published in English-language peer-reviewed research journals within the last 20 years. During the search, we discovered that the topics of accreditation and school improvement for K–12 schools were often the subjects of dissertations. Even then, most of the research on these topics was focused on secondary schools. As this question has a small research base, we additionally relied on dissertations, relevant educational magazines, and organization websites, utilizing resource harvesting to discover additional studies. These topics' relationship has a stronger research base at the tertiary level; we elected to include a few studies to demonstrate its breadth. Sources included in this document were last accessed in August 2020.

REL Pacific prioritized documents that are accessible online and publicly available, and prioritized references that provide practical information based on peer-reviewed research for the education leaders who requested this Ask A REL.<sup>1</sup> For questions with small or nonexistent research bases, we may rely on, for example, white papers, guides, reviews in non-peer-reviewed journals, interviews with content specialists, and organization websites. Additional methodological priorities/considerations given in the review and selection of the references were:

- Study types—randomized control trials, quasi experiments, surveys, descriptive data analyses, literature reviews, etc.
- Target population, sample size, study duration, etc.
- Limitations, generalizability of the findings and conclusions, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> This memorandum is one in a series of quick-turnaround responses to specific questions posed by education stakeholders in the Pacific Region (American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Guam, Hawai'i, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau), which is served by the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL Pacific) at McREL International. This memorandum was prepared by REL Pacific under a contract with the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES), Contract ED-IES-17-C-0010, administered by McREL International. Its content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.