

# Developing a Plan for Continuous School Improvement

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## **Executive Summary**

The purpose of this paper is to encourage Muslim schools to develop their own plans for continuous ongoing improvement in school quality through the use of the standards for accreditation. Three types of schools will benefit from this presentation:

- A) Brand new schools (or those considering a startup)
- B) Established schools seeking direction on how to set goals and improve quality
- C) Schools considering accreditation

While the accreditation process will be given due attention in this presentation, the aim will be generalized to development of the kind of overall improvement process needed in every school regardless of its level of readiness for accreditation.

Heavy emphasis will be placed on how utilizing the standards offered by accrediting organizations provide tangible objective goals that are general enough to give structure and guidance to school improvement efforts without infringing on the unique mission and character of the institution.

The last component of this presentation will be about the critical need for involvement of all stakeholders in any school improvement process. Neither top down, nor Principal centered improvement efforts will endure in the long term. Continuous improvement must permeate the entire organization and become part of its culture. Mechanisms must be solidly in place that will facilitate the ongoing policy of school improvement regardless of who is in the driver's seat.

In sum, this presentation will offer a simplified practical strategy for developing and adopting a procedure for continuous improvement. In doing so, Muslim schools will enjoy a culture of ongoing development and become "accreditable" institutions that meet widely agreed upon standards for non-public schools.

## **Introduction**

"Continuous school improvement" is among the latest buzzword phrases in education circles today. Rather than the focus being all about "arriving somewhere", the spirit behind continuous school improvement is about the process of embracing change and harnessing it to improve your institution. Schools that have an established mechanism for continuous improvement are dynamic, living communities of learning. Accreditation agencies can provide a guiding hand in this process by offering objective standards that every school should strive to meet. This paper will draw heavily from the model approved by the National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE), the research arm of the five major accrediting commissions. The author approaches this subject from the perspective of a new principal of a four-year-old Muslim school in the "candidacy" phase of seeking accreditation with the southern regional accrediting commission, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS).

## The Model for Continuous School Improvement

School accreditation is changing. Although daunting in the past, Muslim schools stand much to gain from the shift in accreditation beginning in 2004 toward a more qualitative focus. Prior to 2004, accreditation requirements consisted of exhaustive lists of detailed requirements. Many educators may have felt that meeting accreditation requirements was more of a formal bureaucratic endeavor for the sake of “having a piece of paper” and would do little in the way of having any authentic impact on the real quality of education. However, the focus in accreditation is now on the formative process of improvement. It is fitting that institutions devoted to human development and lifelong learning embody the principles they wish to transmit to students. Termed “*The Next Generation*”, the NSSE and the regional accrediting commissions advocate a model comprised of three major components<sup>1</sup>:

1. Meeting Standards
2. Continuous Improvement (Internal Review)
3. Quality Assurance (External Review)

Teachers already work within a similar paradigm. When designing a lesson, plans are made according to curriculum standards. In accreditation, the school as an institution must meet certain quality standards. In class, students are taught and evaluated by the teacher through classroom learning and assessment that (in most cases) emphasizes formative learning. This is analogous to continuous improvement in schools where stakeholders within the school, (primarily educators), continuously monitor the success of improvement efforts from within. Finally, back in the classroom on an annual basis, students typically undergo standardized testing which offers a third-party quality assurance that curriculum standards are being met. In accreditation, every five years educators from outside the school visit to conduct a quality assurance peer review, offering both commendations and recommendations for the school to use for future goals and growth. A summary of this comparison is offered as follows:

<b>Paradigm Comparison for NSSE’s “Next Generation” Model</b>	
<b>School Accreditation</b>	<b>Teaching</b>
Standards for School Quality (set by the regional accrediting commission)	Curriculum Standards for Student Learning (set by the state or other entity)
Continuous School Improvement (via planning and self-evaluation by school stakeholders)	Continuous Student Learning (via formative learning experiences in the classroom designed by the teacher)
Quality Assurance (via five-year visits by an external peer review team)	Quality Assurance (via standardized testing)

While the standards still provide a checklist of criteria for schools to meet, the most critical component in any endeavor is the work of those within the school who will actually get things done. It is not solely the administration’s job to do some paperwork and get the school accredited. Nor is it up to the school’s governing board. Rather,

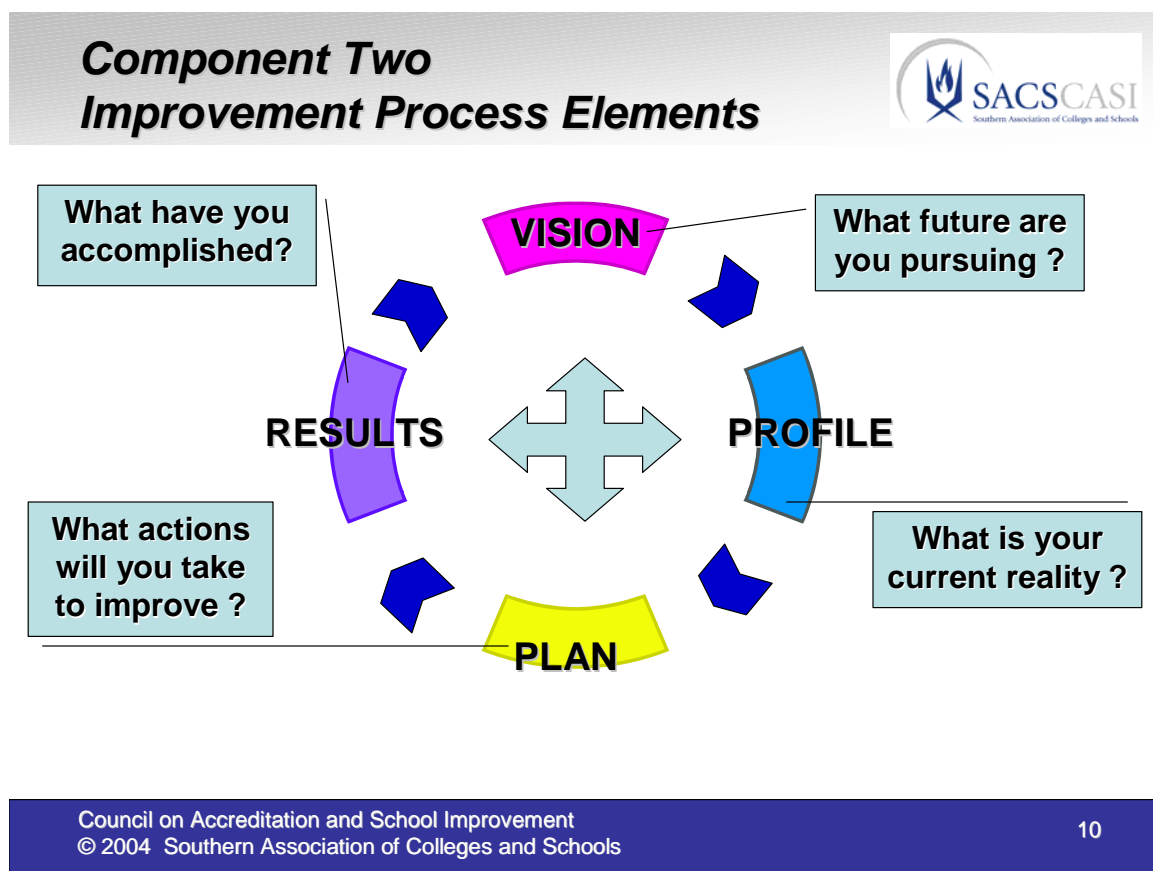
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<sup>1</sup> NSSE (2005). *Accreditation for Quality Schools: A Practitioner’s Guide*; NSSE Schaumburg, IL.

accrediting agencies want to see that the educators are primarily responsible for the school's commitment to continuous improvement. Schools are free to utilize the model for improvement that works best for them. NSSE has identified four major elements that any effective continuous improvement cycle will have:

1. Vision (Defining what kind of school you want to become)
2. Profile (Gathering data about where your school is today)
3. Plan (Setting goals and implementing an improvement plan)
4. Results (Evaluating your results and re-starting the cycle of improvement)

In a slideshow available on SACS's website<sup>2</sup>, this has been visually represented as follows:



As seen above, this cycle is continuous and provides a framework for the efforts of the school's stakeholders to identify goals in accordance with a broad vision, determine the current situation, plan and take action, evaluate the results against the vision and the restart the process again with the next set of goals. Along the way, it will be important to document evidence of your growth. This evidence consists of archived documents, photographs, videos, policy books, minutes of all the various committees and other

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.sacscasi.org/region/selfstudy/Overview\\_of\\_the\\_SACS\\_CASI\\_Guided\\_Self-Study\\_60\\_min.pps](http://www.sacscasi.org/region/selfstudy/Overview_of_the_SACS_CASI_Guided_Self-Study_60_min.pps)

meetings, as well as any other artifacts that preserve the story of your school's development. The school profile provides a particularly valuable record. Updated periodically, the profile<sup>3</sup> consists of:

- student performance data,
- student and community demographics,
- school characteristics,
- stakeholder perspectives on the quality of education (i.e. survey data).

While this information is primarily collected to inform the plan for school improvement, such data will also offer your students' parents a professional concise summary of information about the school. Many grants and government programs require the same information. Such data is also in serious demand by researchers of Islamic schools. Muslim schools should make a commitment to provide this meaningful information on the Internet.

### **Using Accreditation Standards as Developmental Goals**

Continuous improvement implies ongoing institutional development long after minimum standards are met. However, due to the zealous will of many communities to provide the option of Islamic education regardless of the presence of qualified personnel, many schools get off to an ambitious start without necessarily having all the necessary pieces in place. Such efforts are laudable – those who wait around for perfection before getting started will never get started. However, it is blameworthy to allow negligence to set in when shortcomings are not identified and brought to standard over time. For this reason, accrediting standards are extremely helpful in terms of providing tangible goals for Muslim schools to meet in the first few years of operation. Even if a school has been open for over a decade or more, accreditation standards will prove instructive toward insuring that a healthy infrastructure is in place.

Though the standards should really be considered the minimum requirements for all schools, some of the standards might seem difficult to attain in the beginning. However, the esteem of becoming accredited can also serve as the motivation for board members, administrators, and teachers to do whatever it takes to get the minimum accomplished. The long-term stability of Muslim schools and respect within the educational community depend on the importance of schools meeting such standards for quality. Regional standards may vary slightly, but due to the fact that they are centered around “best practices” in educational research, any set of accreditation standards should serve your school well. The headings for each area of SACS's standards<sup>4</sup> for nonpublic schools are provided below:

#### **Organizational Standards**

- 1. CONTINUOUS PROCESS OF EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT**
- 2. BELIEFS AND MISSION**
- 3. GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP**

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<sup>3</sup> NSSE (1997). *School Improvement: Focusing on Student Performance, A Comprehensive Guide...*; NSSE, Schaumburg, IL.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.sacscasi.org/region/standards/nonpublic2004.pdf>

4. FINANCES AND RESOURCES
5. HUMAN RESOURCES
6. SUPPORT SERVICES FOR STUDENT LEARNING
7. LIBRARY/MEDIA SERVICES
8. FACILITIES
9. COMMUNICATIONS AND COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

### **Instructional Standards**

10. CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN
11. CITIZENSHIP AND CONDUCT
12. ASSESSMENT, MEASUREMENT, AND EFFECTIVE RESULTS
13. DORMITORY LIFE (if applicable)

Under each of these headings is a list of the standards for that particular area. Part of the self-evaluation process is to determine the school's level of compliance with each standard. For example, in complying with the first heading, "continuous process..." the school will demonstrate how it has actually established the framework and infrastructure for implementing the four-part improvement cycle listed above.

Standards under heading two are vital to defining the reasons your school exists and ensuring that resources are allocated accordingly and that stakeholders are in vertical alignment on what the school is about. Many schools suffer from a simple lack of focus and clarity of vision. Obviously, Muslim schools are private and this means there must be clear reason why stakeholder have chosen to get involved in them when free public education abounds everywhere. Furthermore, conflicts arise when stakeholders have differing assumptions about what it means to be an "Islamic" school. Conversely, when the mission is clear, stakeholders who support it will get involved and those who want something else will not.

Headings 3 and 4 on governance and finance are also among the most critical foundational aspects of school success. Too often, Muslim schools are poorly funded and board members are focused on improving everything about the school except the board itself. The commitment of the board to accreditation can begin steering the governing body in the right direction. Rather than arguing with the head administrator, who board members see as a subordinate and are thus less receptive, the accreditation standards provide credible third-party guidance on what matters the board should and should not be concerned with. For example, SACS standard 3.4 *The school has policies and procedures that provide for the orientation and training of the governing and/or advisory board*. One of the most valuable resources in this regard is Mary Hundley DeKuyper's Trustee Handbook, 8<sup>th</sup> Edition published by the National Association of Independent Schools. This book offers guidance to board members in a relatively simple manner and emphasizes their role in long-term planning, governance, and establishing the fiduciary integrity of the institution.

Headings 5-9 provide the basis for the rest of the organizational infrastructure that a school must have in order to offer both staff and students the safety, security, and professional quality they deserve. Among these, perhaps the most troubling standards for Muslim schools are those regarding staff qualifications such as:

*5.1 Administrative, instructional, and support staff are qualified and competent to perform the duties assigned to them in the school and to meet the needs of the total school program, and the students enrolled.*

*5.8 Counseling services and library/media services are under the leadership of legally qualified personnel. These services are aligned with the school's mission, beliefs and goals.*

Although not clearly stated, the definition of “qualified” held by the external review team is a Master’s in education for the head administrator and a Bachelor’s in the related field for teachers. State teacher certification is not necessarily required for nonpublic schools, contrary to popular belief. While this might ease the burden for many schools, the requirement for qualified counseling and library personnel will push the envelope, albeit forcing attention on much needed student services in these areas.

Headings 10-12 are the instructional standards where it is assumed schools would have the most infrastructure already in place. They may also be the areas where a lot of the improvement efforts will be focused since these impact student learning the most directly.

### **The Role of ALL Stakeholders in School Success**

A healthy school is characterized by a thriving learning-community that is inclusive of all the stakeholders involved. Stakeholders include anyone who holds a stake in the success of the school. The most important stakeholders are the students. They are the ones being taught, graded, molded, trained, empowered, and nurtured in the context of the school. The school exists because of them. Other stakeholders include parents, teachers, administrators, board members, alumni, and members of the community. Each group has a role to play in establishing a climate of continuous school improvement. These roles must be defined well enough to encourage healthy participation and then respected in order to maintain harmony between them.

Most notably, excellence in education will hinge on the ability of the teachers to do their jobs efficiently and to be empowered to give critical input where their expertise is needed most. Parent involvement should be organized through a satellite parent organization that provides parents with a channel for productive participation without overstepping appropriate boundaries. Administrators must be empowered to lead and make decisions about day-to-day operations while board members stay aloof from daily matters in order to focus on the fiscal stability and long-term goals. Proper respect of roles helps keep people working together in harmony.

Further, broad-based involvement is also needed. Typically, stakeholders in Muslim schools do often find themselves in more than one role. However, it is best to have as many different people involved as possible. Each person should seek to benefit the organization with his/her unique talents and skills.

In fulfilling the requirements for continuous school improvement, it will be necessary to establish a school improvement team to focus on this area. The composition of this group should primarily be educators. One common misunderstanding alluded to earlier is that the responsibility for accreditation falls only on the Principal's shoulders. This is not the case. In order for a culture of school improvement to prevail, the practitioners of the teaching art must be thoroughly involved.

Another common mistake is for the board to take responsibility for school improvement. In fact, it may be that by default, board members already perceive that this is their role. However, as discussed earlier, board members have a much more foundational role. The "ideal" of having educator's as board members is often discussed and sought after on boards with rare results. On the other side, a common complaint is that board members are not educators, but are charged with making decisions about education in the school. Ironically, the educators that are needed are right there under everyone's noses! The teachers themselves, empowered and lead by the Principal who is the educational leader, are best equipped to inform the continuous improvement process. Board members must still offer a clear vision of where the school is going and provide resources, and in this manner, each stakeholder fills their own critical role in the success of the school.

One final note on this section is that while the teaching staff is most apt to inform and implement the improvement process in the school, there is also the tendency to resist change. For this reason it is all the more important that teachers understand how the accreditation process will affect them in an authentic way and is not simply a mess of bureaucratic paperwork. A fun resource that can be used to generate enthusiasm for change is Spencer Johnson's [Who Moved My Cheese?](#) It is a short parable examining the attitude of people toward changes in life that are beyond control. The message is that change is an inevitable part of life and those who embrace it develop and grow. This is a wonderful way to lead into the parallels between personal growth and the continuous improvement model that accreditation brings to the school.

## **Conclusion**

Thriving organizations set goals and work toward achievement. Without goals organizations stagnate. The same can be said for people. But by creating a climate of continuous improvement in schools, an enthusiasm for growth is generated that permeates throughout. The accreditation standards and process for school improvement provides readily available, third-party objective criteria for schools to adopt and achieve. For whatever reason, some schools may not even be in a position at present to take accreditation seriously. Some schools may have assumed the standards to be too rigorous and have not seriously considered accreditation up until now. What this paper demonstrates is that accreditation offers clear tangible goals for any school, whether it is just beginning or whether it has been thriving for a many years. Schools that endeavor to take accreditation seriously will not only take advantage of these benefits, but in addition, the goal of accreditation itself will serve as an impetus to meet the standards on a timeline and improve the quality of the school.

## **Appendix: Regional Accrediting Agencies & Contact Information**

### **New England Association of Schools & Colleges (NEASC)**

209 Burlington Road, Suite 201  
Bedford, MA 01730  
(781) 271-0022  
[www.neasc.org](http://www.neasc.org)

NEASC serves more than 2,000 public and independent schools, colleges and universities in the six states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont and American/international schools in more than sixty nations worldwide.

### **The Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (MSACS)**

3624 Market Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19104-2680  
(215) 662-5600  
[www.middlestates.org](http://www.middlestates.org)

MSACS works with public and private schools in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands. MSCES also works with schools in the mid-East, near-East, Africa, and Europe.

### **North Central Association (NCA)**

Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement  
Arizona State University  
PO Box 871008  
Tempe, AZ 85287-1008  
(800) 525-9517  
[www.ncacasi.org](http://www.ncacasi.org)

The North Central Association, Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement handles the accreditation of K-12 and other non-degree granting schools in 19 states in the central part of the U. S. including Arkansas, Arizona, Colorado, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota, Nebraska, New Mexico, Navajo Nation, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming, Department of Defense Dependents Schools.

### **Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS)**

Council on Accreditation and School Improvement  
1866 Southern Lane  
Decatur, GA 30033

Phone: (800) 248-7701  
[www.sacscasi.org](http://www.sacscasi.org)

SACS CASI accredits over 13,000 schools and school systems throughout the United States and overseas including Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Schools in Latin America, Schools using a Commission on International and Trans-Regional Accreditation (CITA) Protocol.

**Northwest Association of Accredited Schools (NAAS)**

1910 University Drive  
Boise, ID 83725-1060  
Phone: (208) 426-5727  
Fax: (208) 334-3228  
[www.boisestate.edu/naas](http://www.boisestate.edu/naas)

The Northwest Association of Accredited Schools accredits distance education, elementary, foreign nation, high, K-12, middle, post secondary non degree granting, special purpose, supplementary education, travel education, and trans-regional schools in Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington, and other geographical areas designated from time to time by the Board of Trustees.

**The Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC)**

533 Airport Boulevard, Suite 200  
Burlingame, CA 94010-2009  
Phone (650) 696-1060  
[www.acswasc.org](http://www.acswasc.org)

The Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) is one of six regional accrediting associations in the United States. The Commission provides assistance to schools located in California, Hawaii, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas, American Samoa, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and East Asia.