

# The Administrator's Manual

National Lutheran School Accreditation



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# Mission Statement

National Lutheran School Accreditation encourages, assists, and recognizes schools that provide quality Christian education and engage in continuous improvement.

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# I. The School Leader's Role in Accreditation

Lutheran schools share Jesus with the children we serve and their families. We also strive to operate with the highest standards of academic quality. NLSA provides a strategic tool to evaluate our overall effectiveness in the areas that validate our purpose and demonstrate our quality. No other accreditation process is able to accomplish that task so effectively for Lutheran schools.

National Lutheran School Accreditation is available for schools operated by congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and The Lutheran Church—Canada. A school that chooses to participate in the process must be able to demonstrate in a self-study report and to a visiting team that its program meets standards required by NLSA and accomplishes the stated mission and vision of the school.

A meaningful accreditation process requires exceptional leadership. That leadership begins at the school's administrative level. It starts with the head administrator's perception and attitude about accreditation. NLSA is an ongoing process that evaluates a school based upon national standards and the school's unique mission. It results in ongoing school improvement that does not end with the team visit. NLSA is an impetus for positive, directive change. Effective leadership is critical before, during and after the year a school's self study is undertaken. Effective leadership is required relating to the implementation of changes that result from a successful NLSA process.

The school accreditation process does not necessarily have to be administered by the school principal. A highly effective well respected teacher leader can coordinate the leadership of an accreditation process. The school administrator must support that leader in every way, starting with a positive attitude about the accreditation process and what it will ultimately accomplish for the school. A principal's attitude about a school's accreditation process becomes the filter through which all eyes see the process.

Much direction about conducting the self-study process is provided within the self-study. The purpose of this manual is to provide a detailed overview of the NLSA process related directly to the school accreditation leader's work, from beginning to end. Accreditation work does not end with the team visit. NLSA is a process that affects a school throughout its five-year accreditation cycle. Therefore accreditation becomes an important strategic tool to help a Lutheran school become a school of choice in its community. An appropriate attitude about, knowledge of, support for, and encouragement by the school leader provides the backdrop for success with accreditation.

## A. Preparing your school for a self-study process

Introductory materials explaining the NLSA process may be obtained from your LCMS district office or directly from NLSA. These materials include a sheet called, "Getting Ready for Accreditation." It is strongly suggested that a school making its first application for accreditation have most of the things from the list prepared before beginning a self-study process. This greatly reduces the workload and stress associated with conducting a self-study process.

It is an expectation that schools beginning a re-accreditation process should already comply with required and general indicators of success. For these schools preparation for an accreditation self study process involves a careful analysis of the standards and the assembly of documents and evidence that will support ratings that are assigned by subcommittees.

Your assigned NLSA consultant is the advocate for your success with your accreditation process. Begin your consulting process as soon as you receive notification of your consultant. The consultant will need to visit your school, advise you of your responsibilities and assist in the development of a timeline for your process. Start with the end in mind and plan back to achieve your timeline. From beginning to conclusion of the site visitation team you can anticipate a 9 month – one year

time frame as you complete the self-study process. If you are bogged down preparing individual pieces of required documentation or evidence, additional time will be necessary.

An accrediting process is a significant undertaking. It requires careful reflection and evaluation related to every aspect of your school's program. Practices must be articulated and defended. Documentation and evidence must be assembled. Schools entering into an accreditation process for the first time are advised to review the self-study document carefully before applying for accreditation. Confirm that all required documentation and evidence called for in the self study document has been developed and reviewed before submitting an application and beginning a self study process. A school can take several years assembling required documentation and curriculum before applying to become accredited. A checklist of required documentation may be obtained from your consultant and is also available on the Lutheran school portal.

NLSA accreditation is a whole school evaluation/improvement process. All programs and levels of a school can be evaluated using a single NLSA process. However, schools containing more than one level may request the use of separate accreditation processes (early childhood, elementary, or high school). This can be accomplished by completed separate applications for each level of the school and paying a single application fee. Many schools that incorporate a variety of levels have found separate but related processes to be both relevant and appropriate when conducting the self-study process. Consult with district accreditation officials to determine what process would best serve your school.

## **B. Administering the self-study process**

### **Challenges in leading the self study process**

NLSA is a whole school evaluation/improvement process. It is designed to involve school leaders, board members, teachers, parents, students and congregational members. People may enter into the process with pre-conceived notions about the school. It is important that they lay aside any prejudice that they may have formed prior to their involvement and enter into their assigned areas with open minds and attitudes that will be influenced by evidence and practices in place at the school.

It is also important for those involved with the self study process to understand that they are involved in a school wide evaluation process that does not include the evaluation of individual teacher effectiveness. Teacher supervision is the job of school administration. It does not in any way fall within the purview of those who serve on subcommittees or the steering committee.

#### **a. Evaluating school purpose**

Every accredited Lutheran school must be able to present a scriptural rationale for its existence, clearly state its purpose, and state the preferred future condition of its organization. Documents that define and support the school's purpose must be presented clearly and concisely and must not conflict with the mission statement of the sponsoring congregation or organization.

In evaluating the relevance of its purpose a school must determine how the stated purpose is reflected in the overall operation of the school, including administration, instruction, co-curricular activities, and learner outcomes. Clearly defined documentation and evidence provides additional support and direction for the accomplishment of the school's purpose. Since these concepts guide and direct all of the programs and activities in place at the school they must be well defined and clearly understood by everyone.

The accreditation self-study begins with the evaluation of the school's purpose including a careful review of documentation and practices that support and reflect that purpose. Begin your self-study process by focusing on Standard

1: Purpose, with the entire teaching staff and school board. Use your work with the Purpose Standard to establish the procedure your school will use and the tone of the entire self-study process.

## b. Process Requirements

NLSA has established requirements that are associated with each of the standard areas. **Required indicators of success** describe the practices that are essential for Lutheran schools seeking accreditation. In order to be accredited in good standing the school must answer these indicators “YES” with practices and evidence to support their answers. The visitation team will spend time verifying that the school complies with required indicators. The school’s assigned accreditation consultant is required to verify that required indicators of success are met before a school validation visit will be authorized.

**Required evidence and documentation** must be present and engaged in order for your school to be accredited in good standing. The school’s assigned accreditation consultant is charged to verify that required evidence and documentation is in place. Conducting a school accreditation visit without required items in place could result in the denial of an accreditation award. Therefore it is essential that all required evidence and documentation is well-prepared and reflects the actual condition in place at the school.

It is important that faculty, pastor, board members, parents, and students understand that the purpose of this process is to improve the quality of the school program through self-evaluation, introspection, and comprehensive examination of what is happening to children in the school environment and by comparing it to national standards for Lutheran schools. During the NLSA process, it may become obvious that some facets of the school need be changed. Those desirable changes that can be done quickly should be done as part of the process, not just delayed for future action. School improvement should be intentionally pursued, not just be discussed, as part of the NLSA process.

## c. Potential evidence and practices

Evidence and practices build the case to demonstrate how a school enacts general indicators of success. Potential evidence and practices provide a list of suggestions for a school to consider as it evaluates its compliance within each standard area. The more significant the evidence and practices, the higher the school can rate its accomplishments.

Evidence is what the school has (documents, policies, schedules, meeting minutes, written curriculum etc.).

Practices are what the school does (training, teaching methods, supervision, building inspections etc.)

Compliance ratings for each general indicator are determined by subcommittees through careful evaluation of the preponderance of evidence and practices that have been assembled in support of the indicator. Schools are not limited to considering only those items of evidence and practices that are listed. We recommend that schools identify and list items that are not presented on the list but are present and enacted at the school.

## d. Determining indicator ratings

Subcommittees should start their work by securing the Required Evidence and evaluating the school’s compliance with every Required Indicators of Success. Required items must be present in order for your school to be accredited in good standing. If you mark NO for any required indicator, it is strongly suggested that the school develop the required items before proceeding or correct an area of concern before moving forward with the process.

Then move into a careful analysis of your school's status using the General Indicators of Success. The general indicators have been specifically designed for each section and are written not only for the purpose of clarifying and explaining, but also to stimulate thought, reflection and self-evaluation by each subcommittee.

The more significant the practices and their impact related to the accomplishment of the indicator, the higher the rating. After gathering evidence and citing practices and their results, the subcommittee should arrive at a consensus about the correct rubric rating for each indicator of success.

Rubrics have been defined for each general indicator that list what must be present for the school to assign an "operational" rating. If you're the evidence validates that you exceed all of those ratings a "highly functional" rating may be assigned. If your evidence suggests that the rubrics are not present at your school you will assign an emerging rating. If you have ranked a general indicator as Emerging (2) or Not Evident (1), this area must be addressed in a well-developed school action plan that will be implemented over the course of the accreditation cycle.

## **e. Curriculum**

A written curriculum is an NLSA Required Standard. For many schools this is typically one of the most challenging parts of the accreditation process. Curriculum development is an ongoing process for our schools.

Accredited schools continuously use a variety of assessment tools to evaluate the effectiveness of their curricular outcomes, making adjustments in related teaching strategies and instruction whenever necessary. Therefore the curriculum becomes a living document that guides and directs the instructive process. Teachers are continuously engaged with their curriculum for it establishes the direction for teaching and learning. There are options for our schools related to curriculum development.

Many LCMS districts have taken the lead on curriculum development for their schools. Several of our districts have been involved with joint curriculum mapping projects. Regional associations of Lutheran schools have also been heavily invested in curriculum work.

At a minimum, the NLSA expectations for curriculum design include written objectives (learning outcomes) for every grade level in every subject area designated by the standard area. Faith integration is a certain expectation related to curriculum development in Lutheran schools. Curriculum mapping and the Concordia Curriculum series (CPH) are also acceptable options related to curriculum development. Use your assigned consultant to verify that what you have prepared related to curriculum development will fulfill NLSA requirements.

## II. Leading the Self-Study Process

### A. The Work of the Steering Committee

After the decision has been made to seek National Lutheran School Accreditation, the school selects five to eight people, representing various members of the school community to a steering committee. This steering committee's primary task is to plan, guide and coordinate all things related to the self-study process. It is suggested that committee membership include parents, teachers, administrator, pastor, other church staff members and board of education members.

The steering committee will have the primary responsibility for planning and guiding the entire accreditation process including:

- Naming the members of all subcommittees.
- Establishing a schedule for the self-study.
- Establishing a method and a schedule for subcommittees to report to the faculty and the steering committee.
- Securing materials and supplies for subcommittees.
- Editing and approving the final written work of all subcommittees.
- Submitting written reports to the assigned consultant as soon as they are completed.
- Assuring that the school complies with all Required Standards and Required Indicators of Success.
- Directing actions that bring the school into compliance with accreditation standards before the self-study process is completed.
- Determining the school's readiness for an accreditation visit based upon compliance with required NLSA standards and indicators of success.
- Accepting recommendations from subcommittees related to the school action plan and coordinating the development of the plan when the self study is completed and after the visitation team makes its recommendations.

### B. The Self-Study Report

An NLSA self-study provides an opportunity for a school to honestly and objectively reflect upon its quality through a careful and honest evaluation of indicators that quantify compliance with national standards for Lutheran schools. The process helps the school identify strengths and areas of concern needing attention. An NLSA self-study process usually can be successfully conducted within nine months to one year. The NLSA application process allows the school up to two years to complete its self-study process. Faculty members, pastor(s) [Elementary], board members, parents and students are all included and actively involved in the self-evaluation process using a committee format. Normally the bulk of the work is carried out by the teachers and school.

The Self-Study Report Form is to be used as a tool for self-evaluation and overall school improvement. Each of the seven standards are to be addressed and considered independently, but with an emphasis that all will be guided and directed by the school's purpose and in that way will be integrated. This report is the culmination of a school's self study process. It summarizes the school's finding and reflects the actual conditions found at the school at the time of the study. A single report compiles the findings of seven subcommittees into as single report that will be verified by a NLSA school visitation team.

The self-study report requires a summary of general information about the school. This information is usually assembled by the school accreditation leader and reviewed and approved by the steering committee.

Each of the seven standard areas follow a consistent reporting format that includes:

#### Respond to the Following Questions

Narrative responses are to be written for all of the questions at the beginning of each standard area and included in the self-study document.

#### Required Evidence

Unless otherwise stated in the self study, required evidences must be attached to the self-study document and will be used by the subcommittees to arrive at its conclusion related to each general indicator.

#### Potential Evidence

Gather a preponderance of evidence related to each general indicator. Use the list of suggested evidence. Uncover additional evidence. Evidence or lack thereof will assist the subcommittee to reach an agreement on a rating rubric for each indicator. Seek policies and practices that are underway at the school that aid in the accomplishment of the indicator. Potential evidence does not need to be attached to the self-study, but should be available for the visiting team to review. This list is provided as a resource but does not require action during the self-study process by the school.

#### Potential Practices

Like potential evidence, potential practices are collected to show how the school is meeting the indicators. A list of potential evidence and potential practices is included in each section to help the school consider items which may be beneficial for the school to pursue or implement. The potential practices also do not need to be included with the self-study, but should be used by the subcommittee to determine ratings for the indicators and be available for the visiting team to review. This list is provided a resource but does not require action during the self-study process by the school.

#### Required Indicators of Success

The school must respond YES to required indicators in order to be accredited in good standing.

#### General Indicators of Success

A rating implementation for each indicator of success is based upon evidence and practices that support it. Each general indicator is to be rated using the rubrics and assigned a point value:

Highly Functional – 4 – exceeding accreditation expectations

Operational – 3 – meeting accreditation expectations

Emerging – 2 – understood but requiring action

Not Evident – 1 – cannot be observed

Operational (3) is the expected rating for a Lutheran school. Rubrics are defined in the self study to establish the conditions that must be present for an operational (3) rating. The sub-committee will arrive at a rating after careful consideration and discussion. Written comments provide clarification for the visiting team for rating that were assigned for each indicator of success that was not rated below Operational (3). Comments provide helpful information and clarification for the visiting team.

Summary and Response Actions

Summary and response actions related to schools strengths and items needing improvement are to be provided. Subcommittees carry on the primary work of evaluating the school’s compliance with their assigned standard through a thoughtful and purposeful evaluation of each of the general indicators of success.

**C. Developing the school action plan**

As a result of their self study findings, each school is to develop a School Action Plan. Accreditation is an ongoing process that does not end with the team visit. Evaluation is a stimulating force that leads to school improvement for the benefit of its students and community. Accreditation requires that schools will identify strengths and concerns related to every standard area. The strengths should be celebrated. Areas of concerns will need to be considered and addressed strategically. As a result of the findings of the school during its self study process, and recommendations of the visiting team, the school will establish and implement n blueprint for ongoing improvement. That blueprint is known as the School Action Plan.

As the concluding part of the school’s self study, a preliminary action plan must be developed. This plan will be designed to address every areas of concern (emerging-2 and not evident-1) that was identified by the school during the self study process. Each concern must be noted and addressed. After the school receives the visiting team report, it will be required to amend its preliminary report to include additional concerns that were identified by the visiting team.

The school must respond to each concern that has been expressed by the visiting team. Concerns and recommendations of the visiting team must be integrated into the final school action plan that is developed and implemented by the school. This document that integrates the findings of the school with the recommendations of the visiting team becomes the school action plan. A school that links an accreditation process with an intentional school action plan and continually uses it to better serve its students is a school on a pathway to success.

The preliminary school action plan must be attached to the self-study document.

The format below may be used to construct the School Action Plan

Section and Standard #	Concern and related strategies for remediation	Target Year	Responsible Party	Year Completed

The findings of the visiting team must be included in the final action plan. The school must carefully evaluate concerns identified by the visiting team in their report. The recommendations of the team may include specific ways to enhance the school action plan. They may add additional concerns that were not identified by the school in the self-study process. Each visiting team concern and recommendation must be given careful consideration. The school must respond to each concern that is expressed by the visiting team. Whenever possible, concerns and recommendations of the visiting team must be integrated into the final school action plan that is developed and implemented by the school. This document that integrates the findings of the school with the recommendations of the visiting team becomes the school action plan. A school that links an accreditation process with an intentional school action plan and continually uses it to better serve its students is a school on a pathway to success.

### III. Hosting the Team Validation Visit

National Lutheran School Accreditation requires a visit by a team of qualified outside observers. The school's accreditation leader must ensure that the visiting team is selected following required NLSA procedures. Advanced communication and planning with district officials and the team captain is essential so the visiting team can complete its work efficiently and effectively.

The purpose of the team visit is to validate that the self study document reflects the actual practice in place at the school. Through a review of documentation, interviews and observations, team members evaluate the school's compliance with required accreditation standards. The visiting team shall also use its expertise to make recommendations for further improvement.

#### A. Selecting Team Members

The work of the visiting team is led by a team captain who has experience and training in the NLSA protocol.

Careful attention should be given to the selection of visiting team members in order to have competency and balance. Members of the visiting team should know the characteristics of a good school program and represent the level of the school being visited.

The trained team captain and the visiting team members are selected in a collaborative process between the school administrator, the district accreditation commissioner and the district educational executive. Soon after the tentative date has been selected for the team visit, the school's accreditation leader should discuss the selection of a team captain with appropriate district accreditation leaders. The selection of a trained team captain should take place at least six months before the visit. After the captain has been selected and confirmed, team members should be added. Additional communication between district accreditation leaders and school leaders as team members are appointed. Ultimately, the appointment of the visiting team must be confirmed by the NLSA Director.

A request for the appointment of a visiting team can be made via e-mail by contacting the NLSA director: [Terry.Schmidt@lcms.org](mailto:Terry.Schmidt@lcms.org). The official appointment of team members must be completed at least one month (four weeks) before the team visit.

Serving as a member of a visiting team is a highly professional undertaking. The school accreditation leader should take care to recommend team members who will exhibit attitudes that are professional, cooperative, helpful, and constructive. Members will observe, visit, and inquire for the purpose of getting as comprehensive a view of the ministry of the school as is possible in the time available.

At least two members of the visiting team shall have previous experience with NLSA serving a member of a visiting team or as a faculty member of a school that has completed or is currently involved in the accreditation process. The selection of other team members from Lutheran schools that have not completed the NLSA process is encouraged. There are 6 visiting team members. Whenever possible, team members shall be selected using the following criteria:

- The trained team captain (selected in consultation with district accreditation leaders).
- A teacher or administrator from a non-LCMS Christian school.
- Two teachers or administrators from another LCMS school.
- A pastor of another LCMS congregation with a school.
- A public school teacher or administrator. (Whenever practical, this person may be an LCMS congregation member.)

## B. Preparing your school for the visit

School leadership for accreditation can be provided by the school administrator and/or the accreditation steering committee. Before and during the self-study process and team visit, leadership must be consistent and professional. The school accreditation leader must encourage each member of the faculty and accreditation committee throughout the self-study process.

In preparation for the school visit the school accreditation leader is also expected to:

1. Provide suggestions for the team captain and visiting team members to the NLSA consultant and/or District Education Executive.
2. Work with the NLSA consultant to establish a schedule for deadlines for completion of sections of the self-study.
3. Submit all written work to the consultant for approval.
4. Arrange for specific visiting team needs. Including: meeting space, technology needs, meals, transportation, and hotel accommodations (when necessary)
5. Distribute materials about the school to every team member as soon as convenient, but at least one month before the visit. (If the self-study report is not received one month before the planned visit, the visit must be postponed.) These materials should include: copies of the self-study report, directions for reaching the school, parking arrangements, and directions for entering the building.
6. Within 10 calendar days of receiving the final copy of the Visiting Team Report, mail the required number of copies to your district accreditation commission at your district office, and a copy to each team member.

## C. The work of the team at your school

The work of team is intense during the visit. During a short period of time, they will be called upon to observe, visit, and inquire for the purpose of getting as comprehensive a view of the school as possible. They will be called upon to evaluate and prepare sections of the visiting team report that reflect their findings.

As a part of their work at the school, team members will visit classrooms. The purpose of classroom visitation is to validate student engagement in the teaching/learning environment and assess through observation if indicator ratings suggested in the self-study document reflect the actual practice in place at the school. Team members have been instructed that they are not to make judgments about teacher effectiveness during their classroom visits. Teacher supervision is the responsibility of school administration. The school accreditation leader is to assure teachers that they will not be evaluated when team members observe their classroom.

The final task of the visiting team as a whole is to provide a brief exit (oral) report to the faculty and others invited by the school. The team captain will lead this report and, ordinarily, the team members will participate in the presentation. This report will be general in nature, pointing to the forthcoming written report. It will share general information about NLSA, the visiting team's work, indicator ratings for each of the seven standard areas and an overall school rating average.

The only specific recommendation to be given at the exit report is the overall recommendation for or against accreditation. Outstanding strengths of the school are shared. If the team has decided that the school has any "major concerns" which may have a severe effect on the quality of education, the ministry of the school and/or endanger the health and safety of the school population, these should be identified. The team's verbal report usually takes no longer than 45 minutes. After that time, a brief question-and-answer may be held.

## IV. Expectations for Continuing Improvement

Accreditation is a continuous process that does not end with the team visit. Evaluation is a stimulating force that results in ongoing school improvement for the benefit of students and the community. After the school receives the written report that has been prepared by the visitation team, the administrator, staff, board members and accreditation steering committee should read and carefully consider the written report of the visiting team. The school may wish to retain their accreditation steering committee to follow up with the work related to the revision of their preliminary action plan that was constructed at the time of their self-study.

It is important that the school staff communicate to the team captain any errors or misinterpretations of facts that appear in the report. This should not be done in a defensive manner, but in a studied, professional way. Both the DAC and the National Accreditation Commission (NAC) are interested in avoiding errors and welcome the interest that is evident when explanations are forwarded that will improve the accuracy and completeness of the report.

After identifying concerns and related recommendations of the visiting team the preliminary school action plan must be revisited. The school will already be aware of many of the concerns that have been identified by the visiting team in their report for these were identified at the time of the school's self-study. These will not come as a surprise. New concerns noted by the team must also be considered and addressed in the school action plan. When concerns noted by the school at the time of their self-study are merged and consolidated with the concerns and recommendations of the visiting team, a seamless school action plan will be developed that guides and directs improvement efforts of the school throughout its next accreditation cycle.

The school action plan should be fully implemented following targeted dates and assigned responsibilities. It is important to identify tools that will help you determine how the goals were accomplished. Continuous follow-up by faculty is necessary to insure that the goals are being addressed and accomplished. Accomplishments related to the school action plan should be a regular part of faculty meeting. The accomplishment of every targeted action is a reason to celebrate.

Members of the school community have invested much time, energy and effort in a successful NLSA process. As a result, actions that will be engaged by your school over the next accreditation cycle should be shared with your school board, and interested members of the school community. In order to maintain momentum for continuous change and improvement it is critical that everyone who is invested in the success of the school understands the plan that will result in change related to continuous improvement. The extent to which the school's publics are made aware of the complete report is the responsibility of the school.

## **V. Ongoing School Accreditation Accountability to the District and National Office**

By now it should be clear that accreditation is linked with ongoing efforts related to school improvement. In addition to the areas you identified and targeted for action in your self-study report, your school is also responsible to address all of the concerns that were identified by the visiting team. These items are collated into a single comprehensive school action plan and addressed in an orderly and sequential manner.

The school accreditation leader (administrator) is responsible to report progress related to the accomplishment of your school action plan to your district accreditation commission. Your school action plan becomes your tool that allows you to describe and document your progress to district accreditation officials. This level of accountability insures ongoing progress.

The school action plan becomes the strategic document that is used to engage your school in a continuous improvement process. You are accountable for your school's progress on its action plan to your district accreditation commission. Actions that have been taken and accomplished are duly noted in your school action plan. Every spring, your action plan will be submitted to your district accreditation commission for review because your district commission is responsible to confirm your ongoing progress to the national accreditation commission.

Every accredited school is also responsible to submit an annual fee. The fee is due and payable to the national accreditation office in St. Louis by October 1 each year. Invoices are mailed to every accredited school in September.

The completion and submission of your school action plan that documents your school's ongoing improvement and the annual fee are both required for maintaining your school's accreditation status. Failure to comply will result in the revocation of your accreditation status.