



AN INTRODUCTION TO  
**DESIGNING OUR FUTURE**  
A PROTOCOL FOR SELF-STUDY AND ACCREDITATION

**MIDDLE STATES ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGES AND SCHOOLS  
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# WHAT IS DESIGNING OUR FUTURE?

*Designing Our Future (DOF)* is a self-study and accreditation protocol primarily focusing on growing and improving the school's capacity to produce the levels of student performance desired and expected by its community of stakeholders. Organizational capacity is defined by the 12 Middle States Standards for Accreditation for Schools that represent the "building blocks" required for a quality school and educational program (e.g., finances, facilities, student services, etc.). Through this protocol, the school determines which areas of its curriculum and organizational capacity are the priorities for growth and improvement, sets measurable goals to address these priorities, and then establishes a plan to achieve its objectives.

*Designing Our Future* differs from other accreditation formats used by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools in that it organizes the self-study process around a number of descriptive summaries that address the work of the school. Each descriptive summary consists of the gathering of information and data relevant to the topic and ends with the school and its community of stakeholders conducting a self-assessment of the school's adherence to the Standards for Accreditation that are relevant to the topic.

The *Designing our Future* protocol is recommended for school's seeking accreditation for the first time or schools that have recently gone through major changes such as a merger, addition of grades, or change in educational program.

## PHASES OF THE *DESIGNING OUR FUTURE* SELF-STUDY

PHASE	ACTIVITY
PHASE I	Organizing for and Conducting the Self-Study
<b>Note: Phases II, III, and IV can be conducted simultaneously.</b>	
PHASE II	Assembling the School's Foundation Documents—The Descriptive Summary of the School's Foundation Documents
PHASE III	Describing the School, Its Students, and the Community It Serves—The Descriptive Summary of the School Community and Its Student Performance
PHASE IV	Describing the School's Programs, Services, and Resources—The Descriptive Summary of School Leadership and Organization; The Descriptive Summary of Educational Program and Resources; The Descriptive Summary of Student Services and Life; The Descriptive Summary of Maintenance and Operations
PHASE V	Planning for Growth and Improvement in Student Performance and Organizational Capacity—School Improvement Planning
PHASE VI	Achieving and Maintaining Accreditation
PHASE VII	Preparing for Reaccreditation

These phases are further defined in the self-study guide.

# THE SELF STUDY AND ACCREDITATION PROCESS

## ORGANIZING [Phase I]

The style of governance established for the self-study continues through the full accreditation process. For this reason, the administrative leadership of the school must give considerable thought to the formation of the Planning Team, which is the group that facilitates the completion of the self-study.

In the organizational phase of the self-study, the school seeks to answer the following questions:

- *How should the school and its community of stakeholders organize to conduct the self-study?*
- *Who should be responsible for leading and coordinating the self-study process?*
- *What should be the timeline for completing the self-study?*

Most schools organize the self-study and accreditation process through three management structures:

- A school-wide Planning Team that provides oversight of the whole process
- Subcommittees for the various studies that are part of the self-study process
- A subcommittee to make arrangements for and oversee the onsite visit of the accreditation team

These management structures are described below.

### **The Planning Team**

The primary function of the Planning Team is to organize and coordinate the self-study process. The Planning Team provides the energy, enthusiasm, and expertise to move the process forward and helps to ensure that necessary support and resources are provided as the self-study activity proceeds. The size and composition of the Planning Team will vary depending upon the size of the faculty and staff.

The composition of the committee will also vary depending upon the school and the community it serves. Typically, the Planning Team will be comprised of mainly faculty and staff members, although the quality of the self-study is increased when other stakeholders such as parents and community members are included. The head of the school should also serve on the committee.

Therefore, since the Planning Team is the linchpin of the Designing Our Future planning process, it deserves a good deal of attention as the school begins the self-study process. The strength of a growth and improvement plan is frequently related to how well the membership of the Planning Team reflects a cross-section of the school's stakeholders, and how well the Planning Team accepts and fulfills its responsibilities.

Typically, the head of the school, assisted by key members of the staff familiar with the school and its community (often the Internal Coordinators), assume the task of identifying the stakeholders of the school, determining how many from each stakeholder group will serve on the Planning Team, and issuing the invitation to join the Team.

The goal should be to create a Planning Team that is a microcosm of the school's stakeholders. Those viewing the Team from the outside should see in it an accurate reflection of the school and its community.

### **The Internal Coordinators**

A required component of the *Designing Our Future* protocol is the appointment of a team of Internal Coordinators. The primary functions of the Internal Coordinators are to:

- Lead the Planning Team.
- Coordinate the school’s planning process and development of a plan for growth in student performance.
- Oversee planning and preparation for the Team Visit.
- Prepare the Mid-Term Report.
- Provide the energy, enthusiasm, and expertise to move the process forward.

The Middle States Association encourages schools to appoint more than one Internal Coordinator whenever possible. Internal Coordinators are responsible for coordinating and overseeing many activities related to the self-study and planning processes and implementation of the plan to improve student performance. Most schools find that these responsibilities can be met more effectively and efficiently when shared by multiple Internal Coordinators. In addition, multiple Coordinators ensure that, if one of the Coordinators leaves his/her position, the remaining Internal Coordinator(s) can carry on, and the planning process can move forward smoothly.

Therefore, it is critical that the Internal Coordinators see their primary roles as “coordinating” and “delegating” the responsibilities and activities required by the protocol.

### **Subcommittees**

Typically, the Planning Team creates subcommittees to plan, conduct, and analyze the results of various elements of the self-study. Following are examples of possible self-study sub-committees:

- Foundation Documents Subcommittee
- Community & Student Performance Subcommittee
- School Leadership and Organization Subcommittee
- Educational Program & Resources Subcommittee
- Student Services & Life Subcommittee
- Maintenance & Operations Subcommittee
- School Improvement Planning Subcommittee

To ensure a comprehensive and thorough self-study, the composition of the subcommittees should reflect the different constituencies and the varying backgrounds, expertise, and interests of individuals in the school’s community. For example, the school may decide to ask students to serve on a subcommittee such as Student Services & Life Subcommittee.

Typically, schools will appoint subcommittee chairs to lead the work of the self-study subcommittees. Middle States strongly supports the use of co-chairs. Co-chairs ensure that if one of the subcommittee chairs leaves the school or the job position, the remaining co-chair can carry on effectively. Schools have effectively used co-chairs to share the workload and to capitalize upon the different talents that each can bring. When co-chairs are appointed, each can represent a different constituent group (administration and teachers), if the school so chooses.

### **DESCRIPTIVE SUMMARIES [Phases II, III, IV]**

Phases II, III, and IV can be conducted simultaneously. In Phase II, the Planning Team and school community review, revise, or reaffirm the school’s foundation documents. These foundation documents include a Mission Statement, Beliefs or Core Values, and a Profile of Graduates. Phase III involves gathering data on the school community, the local community, and student performance data. Studying this data about the school’s students’

present performance highlights gaps and begins to help clarify targets for student performance goals. In Phase IV the Planning Team and subcommittees focus on the Descriptive Summaries in areas such as the educational program, leadership, student services, and operations. Phase IV also includes a thorough assessment of each of the school's curricular areas. These assessments may be done by subcommittee and/or through surveys provided by MSA related to curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Each of the Descriptive Summaries in Phases II, III, and IV include the collection of data, the self-assessment of relevant MSA standards for accreditation, and a determination of areas for improvement.

### **The MSA Standards and How They Are Assessed**

The Standards for Accreditation are qualitative statements that reflect research-based best practices for schools. There are twelve Standards for Accreditation that schools, school systems, and similar education institutions must meet in order to become accredited. The Middle States Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Schools most recently revised the Standards for Accreditation in 2014.

The Planning Team may choose to direct and oversee the self-assessment, or it may appoint a separate committee to do so.

It is important that the results of the self-assessment are credible and meaningful. Therefore, it is important that as many members of the school's community as possible are provided the opportunity to participate and to share their perceptions regarding how well the school meets each Standard and its Indicators of Quality

One way of administering the surveys is through SurveyMonkey.com. Schools and school systems that purchase Survey Monkey's online survey service may use that service to make the survey of the Middle States Standards available to their stakeholders online either directly at the SurveyMonkey.com website or on the website of the school and/or school system.

Middle States provides three versions of the survey:

- Staff Survey
- Parent Survey
- Student Survey

### **The Results of the Self-Assessment Survey**

When the surveys have been administered and the results have been obtained, it is important to conduct a study and analysis of the results to make them more meaningful and usable. The study and analysis of the results may be conducted by:

- Individual committees appointed for each Standard for Accreditation or Descriptive Summary; or
- In the case of a very small school, by one committee appointed for this purpose or by the Planning Team.

## **DEVELOPING A PLAN FOR GROWTH AND IMPROVEMENT [Phase V]**

The school uses the data collected during its review of adherence with the MSA Standards, its foundation documents, and student performance results to determine its priorities for growth in student performance and organizational capacity. The Planning Team develops 3-5 measurable objectives, at least two of which must be focused on improving student performance. The objectives are reviewed by MSA staff through the technical

review process and the approved objectives are included as a part of the self-study. The school develops action plans for each objective that are reviewed by the Visiting Team during their visit.

### ACCREDITATION VISIT AND DECISION [Phases VI & VII]

When the self-study is complete the school hosts a Visiting Team, typically for 3.5 days, who will validate what the school has presented in their self-study. The Team will make an accreditation recommendation to the Commission(s) of the Middle States Association and a final decision will be made by the Commission(s) at their biannual meetings. The accreditation term for schools using *Designing Our Future* is 7 years, with a mid-term review report due in the third year of accreditation.

If you are interested in using the *Designing Our Future* protocol to conduct your school's self-study, please contact your MSA staff liaison to discuss the benefits of this option. For more information on this protocol, we encourage you to attend a free self-study workshop (workshop schedules are posted on the MSA website) and also to visit the MSA website to access additional self-study materials. \*\*\*Please note it is strongly suggested you consult with your MSA staff liaison prior to initiating your self-study.