

# Beyond PA Department of Education and State Requirements to Sustainable Achievement

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Presented By:



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High-quality charter schools in Pennsylvania and throughout the nation – including brick-and-mortar schools and cyber schools – provide students with life-changing opportunities that may not otherwise be available to them.

However, because of a few bad operators, some view charter schools as fiscally irresponsible and poorly managed. Charter schools are consistently under fire for “draining” public school funding and are often misperceived as failing to follow state standards.

While this creates a challenge for many high-quality charter schools, both statewide and nationwide, it also presents an opportunity to tell a different story. For a charter school to set itself apart and be sustainable, it must show that it is focused on providing a quality education, equipping students for academic success and operating in a manner that is fiscally sound.

How can charter schools push beyond state and authorizer requirements to guarantee to their students, parents, community and elected leaders that they are focused on accountability and achievement?

*By pursuing accreditation through the Middle States Association Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Schools.*

## Notes From the Field: The Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School

 10,000  
Students

 9  
Regional Offices

 50+  
Clubs and  
Workshops

Founded in 2000, the Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School (PA Cyber) is one of the most successful online public schools in the nation, serving students in kindergarten through 12th grade throughout the Commonwealth.

Leaders at PA Cyber believe that the school has a responsibility to hold itself accountable beyond what is required by the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

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## Notes From the Field: The Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School [continued]

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To that end, PA Cyber has used the Middle States accreditation process as an efficient and cost-effective approach to ensuring transparency and accountability and to helping the school continue to grow and improve.

By earning Middle States accreditation, PA Cyber has been able to demonstrate to its stakeholders that the organization and the education it provides has undergone a third-party peer review and has met a series of standards that exceed state regulations.

At the same time, PA Cyber was able to leverage the accreditation process to help fulfill state reauthorization requirements.

The accreditation process provided faculty opportunities for professional development through participation on the school's accreditation team. Faculty will also have the chance to serve on a Middle States visiting team.

Accreditation has also served to validate specific programs and initiatives, such as the school's extracurricular programming. While PA Cyber is an online school, it provides a range of extracurricular activities for students and their families, including art programs, cooking classes, STEM programs, and more. These programs are typically held at one of PA Cyber's nine regional offices. Students also have the opportunity to participate in clubs that meet digitally and in school-sponsored social events, including field trips and proms.

In addition, PA Cyber also used the accreditation process as a framework for developing a comprehensive strategic plan that establishes a firm foundation for the school's long-term success and sustainability. PA Cyber works with all stakeholders to pursue goals developed through the strategic planning process. They include:

- Nurture a culture of inclusion that fosters autonomy through open dialogue and shared responsibility.
- Create engaging initiatives that prepare students for the future by personalizing educational content and opportunities.
- Forge partnerships that create meaningful experiences that lead to real-world opportunities.

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Accreditation through Middle States is a multifaceted, peer review evaluation process that schools and school systems – public, private and charter – voluntarily use to demonstrate they are meeting defined set of research-based performance standards. The 12 Middle States standards examine schools and school systems in a holistic way, supplementing student-testing data to provide a more complete measure of performance and chart a strategic and realistic course for continuous school improvement. The standards specifically address School Governance and Leadership and Finances.

The Middle States accreditation process is collaborative and built on strong relationships with peer review being a powerful part of the process. Middle States sends a team to visit every school it accredits and recognizes that any accreditation process should address that diversity and the unique qualities that make every school special. Simply put, one size should not fit all when it comes to accreditation.



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