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Margaret Erich
Diocese of Kalamazoo, MI

Angelia D. Salas
Michigan Association of Non-public Schools

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National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools: An Effective Tool for School Accreditation

Margaret Erich
Diocese of Kalamazoo

Angelia D. Salas
Michigan Association of Non-public Schools

Background

In 2012, as the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools (NSBECS)* were published, the Michigan Non-Public School Accrediting Association (MNSAA) embarked on a mission to update its school accreditation process in an effort to refresh the process and to better align with current educational practices. The NSBECS became the guiding light that helped update and revitalize this process.

MNSAA was created by the Michigan Association of Non-public Schools (MANS) in 1984 to provide a rigorous, state-recognized accreditation process for faith-based, non-public schools. Nearly 190 schools will be accredited by MNSAA in the 2018-2019 academic year. In 2013, the MANS Board of Trustees initiated a transition to the NSBECS for Catholic school accreditation. The shift to these new standards was coupled with the adoption of a cloud-based reporting system.

The accreditation process has always required schools to conduct a 6-12 month self-study, followed by a two-day onsite peer review. The peer review team is made up of school administrators, diocesan representatives and a chairperson responsible for directing the team and documenting the visit feedback. Completed self-study reports are submitted to MNSAA where they are reviewed by a state level Leadership Council for accreditation consideration.

While the MNSAA regularly reviewed and updated the process, several concerns emerged: 1) subjective feedback from site teams made schools question the accuracy and validity of the site-visit reports; 2) schools provided insufficient data in their documentation of evidence; 3) the visit was viewed as

a burden and the feedback wasn't consistently used for school improvement; and 4) feedback from annual report readers was inconsistent. It was clear that a change was needed to maintain a valid MNSAA process.

Making the Transition

After more than twenty years without significant changes to the accreditation process and materials, it became apparent to the MNSAA leadership that the process needed to be invigorated to address the concerns we were noting. After evaluating other available processes, it was decided to use the NSBECS because of the strong focus on Catholic Identity and the rigor of the benchmark rubric language. Beginning in 2013, MNSAA worked with diocesan superintendents to disseminate these new standards and benchmarks and to prepare schools to adopt the standards in preparation for new self-studies at the end of their current accreditation cycle.

To facilitate a full transition, a core team of superintendents and a building principal worked concurrently to develop a cloud-based accreditation system called *Accreditrac*®. An analogous version of the system was already in use in Florida. The MNSAA team worked with *Accreditrac*® developers to customize the application allowing data entry for ratings on each benchmark, providing areas for narratives to explain activities, and an area to document evidence. The MNSAA leadership and the MANS board believed it was essential to avoid document uploads and instead use data entry fields that would allow data extraction for analysis. This type of data analysis was nearly impossible with the previous paper reports. The leadership was hopeful that the data-driven nature of the self-study would increase quality of documentation and reduce the opportunity for subjectivity site reviewers were experiencing during performing classroom observations.

Transitioning to new the NSBECS while switching to an online submission process after 30 years of paper submissions was ambitious. We knew school leaders were just learning how to interpret the NSBECS and that we would be testing the technology as we used it. We gave schools the option to wait three years until the process was perfected, or, to start immediately and troubleshoot problems along the way. We were delighted that the majority of schools were eager to make the transition. This willingness spoke to their enthusiasm for the new standards and it set the tone for a more collaborative approach to the accreditation process.

As expected, there were bumps along the way. Glitches in the *Accreditrac*® system occurred but were typically addressed within 48-hours. We

learned quickly that schools were submitting significantly more evidence than we expected and that our cloud storage would need to be increased. One pilot visit in the Diocese of Lansing was particularly memorable. After purchasing a case of Chromebooks, loading specialized reviewer emails and securing a mobile hot spot as a back up to insufficient wireless the Regional Coordinator found that the rural school we visited was so far from a mobile tower and built so solidly that we were unable to access any online functions, including the report. The team showed amazing resilience, pieced together printed items, and continued with a very successful visit. Since then, our interpretation of the NSBECS has improved and the technology has been fine-tuned. Reviewers have a high standard for evidence and rarely does the technology cause a concern.

Impact of Using the NSBECS

In a relatively short time after adopting the NSBECS, we noted a number of improvements in our accreditation process.

The first improvement was in the quality of benchmark interpretation. We encouraged regional coordinators, site teams and administrators to consult the benchmark rubrics and guidelines throughout the process. We found that as users became better versed in the new standards there was a greater alignment between how the school rated itself and how the site team rated the school. Because of this, it is increasingly rare that a school is surprised by the ratings and comments provided by their site teams. This is significant as it helped change the perception that the visit is intended to identify inadequacies. Instead, it is now more frequently viewed as a time for honest reflection with consultation from a team of peers.

We are also experiencing a strong collaborative spirit state-wide. The clarity of the new standards, benchmarks, rubrics and resultant school improvement framework makes them easy to understand and embrace. For diocesan leaders, having a common normative reference tool allows them to see accreditation, not as a duty to complete every five years, but as a way to view annual goal setting and improvement planning.

This collegiality extends throughout the process. Every summer we gather volunteer peer reviewers for two days. The reviewers read a selection of annual reports so that each has been reviewed for progress by at least two reviewers. MNSAA staff provide an overview of the process, a review of the benchmark rubrics and coaching throughout the two days. Each reviewer pairs up with another reviewer over the course of the days to compare com-

ments and to ensure that the schools are being reviewed without bias. While this is a tremendous service to MNSAA schools, it is also a powerful way to build familiarity with the new standards. We have several reviewers who return for the review year after year saying that they continue to learn strategies to strengthen their own school through the process. The NSBECS support our efforts to build a culture of learning and mutual support.

The new focus on data-driven evidence has been challenging and tremendously rewarding. The schools now have a very clear expectation as it relates to the burden of proof. The benchmark rubrics, which include a list of possible sources of evidence, provide guidance that has been a good starting point for them. Evidence is required to accompany the ratings and narratives. This data-driven approach forces school leaders to be more mindful of the way they collect and use data. Schools believe these new standards provide a beneficial framework and are now implementing and documenting processes to show that.

The NSBECS and the Accreditrac[®] system have put our schools on a more integrated path for school improvement. Diocesan superintendents have fully adopted these standards and are guiding schools in how to address their weaknesses in school improvement and strategic planning efforts. The Diocese of Kalamazoo requires that any areas with low ratings are identified and addressed annually. They have also embraced the domains as the framework for school board reporting. The Diocese of Grand Rapids has created strategic planning guidance for schools organized around the standards. This spring, the Archdiocese of Detroit will hire a staff member to provide leadership for schools working to align the standards, school improvement and strategic planning.

Most significantly, we now have solid standards and rubrics by which we can measure the Catholic Identity of each school. These standards stress the integration of the faith in every aspect of the school's operation, thus effectively addressing any concerns that the faith was only superficially taught in subjects other than theology.

Looking Forward

We believe that the NSBECS, and the way we are implementing them in our accreditation process, have been transformative in many ways. The standards and benchmarks keep us laser-focused on the areas that are essential to the development of faith-filled Catholic schools. We aren't relying on a tool or process designed to address the environment found in public schools or

independent schools. Instead we remain true to school improvement within a rich Catholic context.

As we enter the next five-year cycle with our original pilot schools we recognize that there are still many opportunities to learn and grow. Enhanced professional development on the nuances of the NSBECS will always be needed if our schools are to continue improving. Schools need access to strategies and resources to improve lower rated benchmark areas. Viable strategies are likely described within reports from other schools. We need a way to point schools to them or to create a clearinghouse of promising practices. We have not yet begun to dissect the treasure trove of data contained over the first five years of Accreditrac[®] use. Once we do, we will be able to track trends, identify areas for professional learning and identify excellence at the diocesan and state level. Finally, we believe there is a correlation between school ratings on the standards and benchmarks and student assessments. We hope to begin to make those comparisons on a limited scope over the coming years.

Margaret Erich is Superintendent, Office of Schools, Diocese of Kalamazoo, Michigan. Correspondence regarding this article can be directed to Ms. Erich at merich@diokzoo.org.

Angelia D. Salas is Director of Services for the Michigan Association of Non-public Schools. Ms. Salas can be reached at asalas@m-a-n-s.org.