



VISITING TEAM REPORT

## Pillow Academy

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11/05/2019 - 11/07/2019

# A History of SAIS Accreditation

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SAIS member schools are part of a remarkable history of quality assurance in education.

SAIS began its organizational life in 1903 as the "Mid-South Association of Independent Schools," providing training for teachers in private schools and some early public schools in the southeastern states. In 1953, another organization began as the Southern Association of Independent Schools, providing a forum for independent school administrators to work with public schools through SACS and to contribute to the larger interest in accreditation in the southeast. MAIS and SAIS merged in 1986 to form the present SAIS, with an emphasis on accreditations through SACS for independent schools and professional development for administrators, trustees, and teachers. Today, SAIS works to help both established and emerging schools approach these issues with creativity and innovation. Working at the state, regional, and national levels, SAIS serves and strengthens member schools through the promotion of the highest quality educational standards and ethical conduct.

The mission of SAIS is to provide leadership, accreditation services, and professional development resources that will strengthen member schools as they fulfill their missions. The focus of SAIS's interest when it began in 1953 was to develop and maintain relationships with the expanding organization of SACS in order to ensure significant input from independent schools into the exploding world of public school accreditation. The post-WWII years of baby booming, facility planning, teacher training, and legislative entitlement funding eclipsed the scope and role of private education in America close to the current level of service. Part of this history of negotiating standards in a predominantly public-school oriented world of education caused SAIS to embark on its own method of accreditation in the late '90s. The efforts resulted in the SAIS method of accreditation available to member schools.

SAIS has designed and implemented a significant program of accreditation to assist member schools as they develop and promote high quality education in this region. This method is based on a school's stated mission and its own unique approach to thorough and vigorous self-examination.

In today's world of accountability in schooling, accreditation serves as a critical component of a school's demonstrated effectiveness and ability to provide successful schooling for children. A school that is able to achieve accreditation demonstrates a commitment to a process that requires the school to meet a set of rigorous standards; to engage in a program of continuous school improvement; and to demonstrate quality assurance to its stakeholders through self-evaluation and peer-review. SAIS accreditation provides schools access to an integrated network of services and technical assistance that supports every school's ability to identify and meet its goals for improving student performance and the teaching and learning process.

SAIS accredited member schools are part of an international network of accredited schools that have demonstrated success in educating children. As such, SAIS accreditation is recognized throughout the world as a symbol of quality in education for students and teachers. To earn accreditation, schools must meet quality standards, be evaluated by an outside group of peer professionals, and implement a school plan focused on strategic improvement and student performance. Accreditation is voluntary and must be renewed each year.

# The Review

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A team representing SAIS conducted an on-site visit to review this school's self-study and standards compliance. The team was comprised of team members whose diverse independent school backgrounds provided an array of expertise. The visiting team sought the answers to these four critical questions within the framework of the school's self-study. The following pages contain the findings.

In conducting the on-site reviews, the visiting team was responsible for:

1. Assessing the adequacy of the self-study process;
2. Identifying strengths of the school deserving commendation;
3. Developing recommendations that may help to strengthen the programs of the school;
4. Assessing compliance with the standards of SAIS;
5. Developing a written report of the findings.

To fulfill the team's responsibilities, team members:

1. Reviewed documentation provided by the school;
2. Conducted interviews with board members, parents, school personnel, students, and community members;
3. Applied the standards for accreditation;
4. Developed a draft of commendations and recommendations;
5. Contributed to the content and focus of the written report;
6. Provided input as to the determination of accreditation.

The primary focus of the self-study process is to demonstrate the capacity of a school to meet the requirements for accreditation. A typical self-study consists of:

1. Analysis and response to accreditation standards;
2. Identification and demonstration of a continuous process of improvement;
3. Implementation of methods that provide for quality assurance.

The study addresses four critical questions relative to each of the school's stated goals for improvement and mission fulfillment:

- **PROFILE:** Where is the school today? The PROFILE should include clear, comprehensive information reflecting current student performance data, stakeholder perspectives, community characteristics, and analysis of strengths and limitations in the areas of student learning and school performance.
- **VISION:** Where does the school want to go? The VISION is a clear, compelling purpose communicated through the school's vision and mission statements, beliefs, and core values.
- **PLAN:** What is the plan to get there? The PLAN should be based on an analysis of pertinent data, research of the best practices, and alignment with generally-accepted expectations for student learning at schools with similar missions.
- **RESULTS:** How will the school know when it has accomplished its plan? The RESULTS are documented evidence demonstrating successful implementation of strategies that resulted in accomplishment of the school's mission and student achievement gains related to the school's mission.

# SAIS Accreditation Policies

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- Accreditation Committee

The SAIS Board of Trustees has established the SAIS Accreditation Committee to oversee the accreditation services offered by SAIS. The Accreditation Committee establishes and maintains review boards whose members review and act upon visiting team recommendations. The Board of Trustees reviews and officially approves the schools recommended for accreditation by the Accreditation Committee.

- Accreditation Appeal Process

If the visiting team recommendation to offer accreditation or re-accreditation is rejected, specific reasons will be given and the school may be given a timeframe and assistance to address deficiencies. The decision of a review board may be appealed in writing by the head of school, referencing specific area(s) in which the school was found deficient. A subsequent review board will review the original findings and the appeal materials. If the decision is upheld by the subsequent review board, the decision may be appealed in writing by the head of school to the SAIS Board of Trustees. The school's accreditation status will remain unchanged during an appeals process. The judgment of the SAIS Board of Trustees is final.

- Interim Report Requirements

Accredited schools must submit a two-year interim report to SAIS after the team visit. This report ensures continued compliance with standards/indicators and documents efforts made in addressing the visiting team's recommendations and the school's self-study goals.

- Member in good standing: Schools must remain a member in good standing, with all annual membership dues paid in full and abiding by policies and procedures.
- Notification of substantive change / head of school change: Accredited schools must notify SAIS in a timely manner of a substantive change using the form at [www.sais.org/change](http://www.sais.org/change). Changes may include: head of school change, other leadership changes, adding or contracting grade levels, merger, name change, mission change, major construction, crisis situation, litigation, school closure, other changes. In the event of a substantive change, SAIS may request additional information or conduct a visit to the school.
- Terms of accreditation and re-accreditation: Terms of accreditation are generally for five years commencing on July 1 and concluding on June 30. Schools must host a visiting team prior to the expiration of their term of accreditation and during the same semester of their previous accreditation if a re-accreditation visit and within three years of becoming a candidate for accreditation if an initial accreditation. Any variance to an accreditation timeline must be approved by SAIS. A new self-study is required for each five-year period reflecting evidence of continuous improvement.
- Non-compliance: Stakeholders may file a non-compliance complaint against a school. Upon receipt and verification of a non-compliance report, the school will be given an opportunity to respond to the inquiry. The inquiry, response, and any subsequent written correspondence on the matter may be made available to the accreditation visiting team chair on the next accreditation visit. However, an immediate investigative visit to the school may be undertaken if the response by the school is unsatisfactory or an accumulation of complaints indicates that a school's response is inconsistent with a preponderance of evidence. As is frequently the case, if a school's practices are bordering on non-compliance, a discussion that is triggered by a non-compliance complaint is often a catalyst to remedy such practices. In the event that a school is not compliant, a series of actions will be undertaken with the school such as but not limited to: a request to remedy the non-compliance issue, placing the school on warned status or probation, and an ultimate action of dropping accreditation.

# Roster of Team Members

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# School Snapshot

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## Mission

Pillow Academy's mission, as a college preparatory school, is to educate the whole child in an environment of academic excellence and Christian values, so that each child is challenged to grow and mature in knowledge, wisdom, and service.

Our mission drives everything we do at Pillow Academy. Every decision made by the administration and board is first measured against our mission statement to determine if it is directly tied to our mission as stated above.

## Brief History

Pillow Academy is an independent college preparatory school that serves students in Greenwood and the surrounding five-county area. The school began in 1966 in one metal building for grades kindergarten through 8. What began with 145 students and eight full time faculty members, now serves approximately 800 students in grades K4 through 12th. Pillow Academy employs 77 full time employees and 21 part time employees.

## Leadership

Pillow Academy consists of three school divisions. The 2018-2019 enrollment at Pillow Academy is 766. The lower school (grades K4 through fifth grade) has 368 students. The middle school (6th through 9th) has 233 students, while the high school (10th through 12th) has 165 students.

Pillow Academy is governed by a board of trustees with six members. Board members serve a term of three years and may be renewable with a total of two consecutive terms. The mission of the board is to hire a headmaster, set policy in conjunction with the headmaster, and oversee the finances of the school. The mission of the headmaster is to have general supervision over and general responsibility for the administration of all phases of activities of Pillow Academy, including but not limited to academics, discipline, technology, personnel, personnel recruitment, evaluation and supervision, facility maintenance, fiscal management, fundraising, extracurricular activities, and any additional responsibilities concerning the well being and development of Pillow Academy.

## Self Study

To obtain the opinions of students, teachers, and parents, Pillow Academy used the survey instruments provided by the Southern Association of Independent Schools. Respondents were asked to rate the level of importance they placed on a variable. Next, respondents rated the perceived performance of the school in delivering on the same variables. Participation in the surveys was as follows: 350 parents, 259 students in grades 8-12, 82 faculty members, six trustees, and 301 alumni. All students took the online surveys on campus during the regular school day. All faculty, parents, and alumni were emailed a link to the survey and were able to take from their home, office computers, or mobile device. Pillow Academy faculty and parents were reminded through email about the importance of their participation.

After receiving the results, a team was formed to analyze the data contained in the report. Items that had high importance but low performance were considered for the action plan. After the initial team identified specific and meaningful institutional goals, other teams were formed to break each goal down. For each of the school's identified area of improvement, the team addressed the four critical questions. Where is the school right now? Where does the school want to go? What is the school's plan to achieve the vision? How will the school measure

its level of success in achieving the vision and continue to use data to inform it future?

## Improvement

Our goals are:

1. To improve the learning environment by ensuring availability of current technology and providing training for students and faculty;
2. To encourage excellent instruction in the classroom through curriculum alignment across grade levels and continued teacher training;
3. To foster a safe learning environment for our campus community.

# Introduction

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## Introduction and Overview of the Visit

The SAIS visiting team was warmly welcomed to the campus of Pillow Academy in Greenwood, MS. While at the school, the team met with numerous stakeholders over the course of the visit. All team members noted the skilled hospitality of the school and found the people of Pillow Academy to be genuine and justifiably proud of their school. The open, honest conversations with the school's constituent stakeholders allowed the team to gain candid insights into the school and left the team with a clear sense of the school's plans to address their needs. The team toured the spacious campus of Pillow Academy, which provided a sense of the campus's layout. The visiting team viewed the classrooms, common areas, and saw many evidences of the history of this established independent school and how the day to day operations carried out the school's mission.

Through a series of group interviews, the visiting team members were able to query students, board members, support staff, faculty, the administrative team, and parents at Pillow Academy. All parties demonstrated a deep love for the school, strong local pride, and an interest in continuing the successes of the school. Many people acknowledge that Pillow Academy was a "linchpin of the community." Due to the school's location in the Mississippi Delta, many students, board members, and faculty communicated a passion for seeing the perpetuation of Pillow Academy as a key feature of their local community.

The board communicated a clear understanding of their role in the school, referring to their consistent deferral of community concerns to the appropriate parties within the school leadership. They cited their commitment to policy governance. Several board members emphasized their commitment to the success of the school within the community. All stakeholders demonstrated their investment in the school improvement process and their willingness to "go the extra mile" in order to enhance the school.

All groups of stakeholders shared a common loyalty to the school, a commitment to its success, and a passion for the work done at Pillow Academy. In the words of one teacher, "Once a Mustang, always a Mustang." Several stakeholders communicated their recognition of the "changing face" of Pillow Academy and their ongoing efforts to accommodate the variety of learners enrolling. All stakeholders believed that ownership for their actions were a key piece of the Pillow Academy ethos while simultaneously trusting those charged with the responsibility for the school.

# Area 1

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## Title

To improve the learning environment by ensuring the availability of current technology and providing training opportunities for students and faculty

## Description

Pillow Academy is proud of the technology that they have available to them. They have iPads and Chromebooks available for student use, multiple computer labs, and technology in every classroom for teachers to use during instruction.

Pillow Academy wants teachers to be able to receive adequate training in order to consistently and correctly use the technology that is already in place. They want to have specific seminars or training sessions that cover technology topics that teachers need. They would like to make sure they are more consistent with incorporation of technology across grade levels.

The most important measure of success will be teacher feedback. Teachers should feel comfortable with the technology in their classrooms, and they should use technology on a regular basis. Student ability will be another measure of success. Students should be able to access email and interact correctly with Google School to complete and turn in assignments in middle school and high school.

## Commendations

The visiting team commends the school for the following:

- Current implementation of SMART technology in classrooms, with special commendation for the lower school's intentional interweaving of technology to enhance instructional design;
- Enabling teacher leadership in the area of technology innovation;
- A collaborative approach to technology-need identification among lower school faculty;
- The implementation of online learning management systems in grades 6-12 to facilitate student ownership of their learning in a college preparatory environment.

## Recommendations

The visiting team recommends that the school consider the following:

- Identifying teacher-leaders in grades 6-12 to facilitate professional development in the use and implementation of digital learning systems and digital applications for education;
- Demonstrating technology-enhanced pedagogy through interdivisional workshops;
- Aligning technological purchases and training to the Pillow Academy ethos and mission statement;
- Undertaking a technology audit to ensure the seamless use of existing systems including WiFi access and bandwidth with special attention to the Pillow Academy student WiFi network;
- Embedding and modeling digital technology use for students within classroom lessons with particular emphasis on middle grades students;
- Establishing schoolwide expectations for digital technology use within unit plans.

# Area 2

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## Title

To encourage excellent instruction in the classroom through curriculum alignment across grade levels and continued teacher training

## Description

Currently, Pillow Academy seeks to achieve overall curriculum alignment pre-K through 12th grade with plans across grade bands and content areas to ensure that students master content before moving to the next grade level.

The school wants to continue to seek implementation of current curriculum alignment plans as well as continually monitor and evaluate to ensure that best practices are being followed while standards and rigor are being met.

Faculty and staff will utilize monthly meetings to evaluate curriculum and assessments through the use of skills mastery checklists and entrance exams. They will utilize monthly meetings to evaluate curriculum alignment through the use of summary reports and seek to ensure that content, skills, and standards build from one level to another. The professional development committee will utilize monthly meetings to research and recommend potential professional development opportunities.

## Commendations

The visiting team commends the school for the following:

- Ongoing collaboration between classroom teachers and resource teachers;
- Schoolwide mindfulness of students' college readiness when planning scope and sequence of classes;
- Efforts by the English and science departments to vertically align curriculum 12-K.

## Recommendations

The visiting team recommends that the school consider:

- Formalizing the process of documenting existing curriculum standards into living documentation;
- Developing processes for ensuring accountability and continuity of educational excellence for both current and future faculty;
- Creating a regularized format for departmental, divisional, and all-school collaboration and reflection;
- Investigating opportunities to develop curricular units that reflect the unique, local qualities of the Mississippi Delta.

# Area 3

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## Title

To foster a safe learning environment for our campus community

## Description

According to community surveys, Pillow Academy is currently meeting the faith-based and religious needs of our students at a very high level. However, it was brought to the school's attention that character education and emotional well-being of students is a high priority and needs improvement.

The school began a character education program in grades 6-12 beginning in 2013 called Pillow Prides. The goal of the program was to reward students for exemplary behavior both on campus and during school events off campus. The program was quite successful for the first three or four years, but started becoming ineffective. In 2017, teachers and administrators began talks of revamping the program, which led to the change of the rewards system, then a name change to Pillow Stampedes in 2019. They are currently looking for more activities to help students and teachers exhibit better character and empathy toward others. Along with teaching character and empathy in real life situations, they are focusing on these same areas in relation to social networks and technology.

In grades 1-5, students and teachers meet weekly in small groups called PALs (Pillow Academy Leaders). It is a chance for students to get to know another teacher and other students in the building while learning about God. They meet to discuss the verse of the week, sing songs, and have a short devotional. It is an outlet for kids to ask for prayer requests, learn about God, and have fellowship time with other students not in their class.

The school desires to increase students' ability to empathize with other people while showing strong moral qualities in any situation. They recognize how these two attributes seem to be disappearing and want to enable students to employ these regularly.

It is somewhat difficult to measure the success of achieving this goal in terms of documentation. The easiest way to determine their success will simply be observing how their students change their mindset and behaviors. However, as teachers and students build better relationships, teachers can document the growth through journaling and behavior reports.

## Commendations

The visiting team commends the school for the following:

- Open, honest, and trusted communication between parents, students, faculty, and administration;
- The evident mutual love between the Greenwood community and Pillow Academy;
- A welcoming attitude to entering families in the Greenwood community;
- Extensive efforts on behalf of the Pillow Academy to accommodate students with various learning differences.

## Recommendations

The visiting team recommends the school consider the following:

- Clarifying and formalizing the schoolwide understanding of how the Christian faith informs a Pillow Academy education;
- Empowering student-led service initiatives in the Pillow and Greenwood communities;
- Fostering communication opportunities for exploring and recognizing ethnic, racial, religious, learning, and socioeconomic diversity.

# Additional Commendations and Recommendations

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## Additional Commendations

The team commends the school for the following:

- Its confidence in the professionalism of the faculty and staff;
- Its vigorous focus on accommodating the growing need for dyslexia remediation within the school community;
- The intergenerational passion and pride in the Pillow Academy community;
- The development of the lower school garden curriculum and bringing students' learning outside of the classroom walls;
- The fastidious attention to cleanliness and first impressions provided by support staff at the school.

## Additional Recommendations

The team recommends the school consider the following:

- Partnering with other independent schools in the MAIS in pioneering contextually appropriate lesson, unit, and curricular decisions;
- Exploring and piloting student-focused learning opportunities;
- Capitalizing on existing physical space in creating opportunities for outdoor exploration;
- Formalizing identification, cultivation, and induction processes for new board members to ensure continuity with best practices.

# Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendation

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## Summary

The SAIS visiting team found Pillow Academy's improvement goals to be ambitious and appropriate for their school community. The team's interviews with all stakeholders confirmed the school's self-assessment and their wise choice of improvement goals.

## Conclusion

The SAIS visiting team would like to thank the school for their coordination efforts, support, and cooperation. The many veteran faculty members were impressive in their collegiality and high level of engagement and competency in the school improvement process. The community made the team's work encouraging, enjoyable, and intellectually stimulating. The team greatly appreciates the generous hospitality that was extended.

## Standards Compliance

The school is in compliance with all standards of the SAIS accreditation process as verified by documentation, observations, and interviews.

## Self-Study Quality

The self-study conducted by the school meets the standard of quality and thoroughness required by the SAIS accreditation process and answers the four critical questions as outlined in the Guidebook.

## Recommendation

The school is unanimously recommended for accreditation.