



AN INTRODUCTION TO  
**SUSTAINING EXCELLENCE**  
A PROTOCOL FOR ACCREDITATION

**MIDDLE STATES ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGES AND SCHOOLS  
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# THE SUSTAINING EXCELLENCE PROTOCOL

*Sustaining Excellence* is a protocol that uses strategic planning and action research as vehicles for growth and improvement in student performance and in the school's capacity to effect that growth. The protocol, developed by the Middle States Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Schools (MSA-CESS) of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, links various planning and school growth and improvement efforts to effect even higher levels of student performance.

The *Sustaining Excellence* Protocol provides an accreditation protocol option for schools that can demonstrate 1) their efficacy, over time, in producing the levels of student performance that are desired and expected by their community of stakeholders and 2) are recognized as what Doug Reeves calls "leading schools." Leading schools are those schools that are achieving high levels of student performance, have an excellent understanding of the necessary antecedents for those results, and are likely to continue achieving those high results over time.

Rather than using the school's limited time, energy, and resources to complete a traditional self-study for accreditation that might not provide the kind of value desired by the school and the Commissions, the Commissions offer The *Sustaining Excellence* Protocol as an option that permits "leading schools" to earn reaccreditation by focusing their time, energy, and resources and that of their community of stakeholders on:

- Identifying an aspect of the school's educational program, services, and/or learning environment the school and its community of stakeholders desire to grow and/or improve in order to produce even higher levels of student performance or creative ways to measure student performance;
- Discovering how current research informs efforts to grow and improve the aspect of the school's educational program, services, and/or learning environment on which the school wishes to focus;
- Developing a proposal for an action research initiative to demonstrate application of that research in the living laboratory of the school;
- Implementing the research initiative and documenting the results of implementation; and,
- Sharing what was learned from the implementation with the broader education community in the form of a colloquium.

## **Student Performance**

The Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Schools define the term "student performance" in the broadest possible terms. Although academics are at the heart of every school, our society has broader expectations for the knowledge, competencies, and characteristics it expects schools to produce in their students. Therefore, the term "student performance" encompasses all of those expectations. Following are examples, other than academic knowledge and competencies, that might be considered as the focus of an action research initiative:

- Oral and written communication skills
- Use of technology for learning
- School and community citizenship
- Understanding and respect for cultural and other differences
- Ability to think critically
- Ability to solve problems
- Working cooperatively and on a team
- Career planning skills and a career plan
- Healthy life choices, in one or more areas of physical fitness, drug and alcohol use, or other health factors
- Demonstrating academic integrity
- Demonstrating a love of learning

## SUSTAINING A PLANNING ETHIC

A sound planning ethic is critical to achieving a school's mission, its objectives for growth and improvement in student performance and organizational capacity, and its capacity to effect the intended growth. An effective planning ethic addresses the essential question: "Does our school and its community of stakeholders have the capacity, the will, and the systematic structures and processes required to develop and implement a plan to achieve our preferred future as defined by our mission?" An effective plan full of great activities is only as strong as the ability and willingness of the school and its stakeholders to implement it.

While successful planning is reflective of the school's context and culture, it should be visionary in describing what the school and its community of stakeholders want for their students and pragmatic in specifying the steps that can be taken to reach those goals. Successful planning for growth and improvement has been described as a delicate balance between brave steps forward and reassuring steps to the side; between the recognition of the need for growth and a celebration of what already exists that is good, steady, and/or certain; between the bold, frequently scary, visions of future possibilities and the comfort with past and present successes.

When a school seeks accreditation using the *Sustaining Excellence* Protocol, it must commit to working toward establishing and sustaining a planning ethic within the school. A planning ethic means that planning for growth and improvement becomes part of what the school and its community of stakeholders do in the educational programs, resources, services, and activities provided for their students. A planning ethic requires continuous clarification of the community's unique mission, beliefs, profile of graduates, and student and organizational performance goals. It requires that all of its processes are vision-driven. And it requires that the community is action-oriented by developing and implementing long-term, strategic action plans that integrate programs, services, facilities, and support to address the school's growth objectives.

In the *Sustaining Excellence* Protocol, the school also makes a commitment to continuous growth and improvement. The school and its stakeholders should demonstrate that they are never satisfied with the status quo in terms of how their students perform but are striving continuously to improve and/or grow the levels of performance. The setting of and striving to achieve a vision based upon a perceived need should become a dynamic process in which the school develops the flexibility to revise and modify its plans to achieve its objective(s) based on the results received from implementing those plans. As part of the accreditation process, the school must review the results of its efforts periodically and open its processes and results willingly to review by its peers in the Middle States Association.

Action research, a major component of the *Sustaining Excellence* Protocol, is a practice typically associated with improving schools' performance. Action research is not a process used to simply learn more about a topic but rather a problem-solving process and a quest for knowledge on how to improve. It is not about finding available information about how to solve a problem. Action research is about people with a common interest working together to investigate best practices in a quest to adapt skills, techniques and strategies to address identified areas in need of growth and/or improvement.

The *Sustaining Excellence* Protocol also requires the school to commit to empowering participants in a collaborative fashion for the purpose of acquiring knowledge to promote a positive change in the academic and/or social culture of the school. Successful efforts with this protocol will identify a need that will benefit all students and facilitate the development of plans to achieve and measure intended results toward the school's preferred future. As a result of its efforts, the school commits to ensuring broad based knowledge and understanding of and support for the school's Action Research Initiative and the plans to achieve results defined by the Initiative.

Most effective is a planning ethic that provides significant roles for all of a school's stakeholders and also has the effect of realizing a strong sense of shared responsibility for the success of a plan to grow and/or improve student performance. If implemented faithfully, the *Sustaining Excellence* Protocol can provide the school with a vehicle to build sustainability into its planning for growth and improvement, because ownership of and responsibility for the success of the planning process and the Action Research Initiative no longer rest with one person (e.g., the head of the school) or the school's staff, but rather takes the form of distributive leadership in which all of the school's stakeholders assume some degree of responsibility.

## THE SUSTAINING EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK

### The Criteria for Accreditation Using the Sustaining Excellence Protocol

Schools that desire to use the Sustaining Excellence Protocol for reaccreditation by the Middle States Association must demonstrate they meet the following criteria:

- Strong evidence that it is and has been effective in growing, improving, and/or sustaining student performance, especially in academics, over time. (Note: the Sustaining Excellence Protocol will be made available to any school that can demonstrate its effectiveness—students are learning and growing over time—not just schools that are "high performing" in terms of state assessments, national/state rankings, etc.);
- A demonstrated history of continuous accreditation by the Middle States Association or another recognized accrediting agency;
- A history of excellent accreditation results free from monitoring issues and/or stipulations; and,
- Can provide evidence that it meets the requirements of the 12 Middle States Standards for Accreditation

Schools aspiring to pursue reaccreditation with the Sustaining Excellence Protocol must complete an application as part of the first phase of the protocol and submit it to the MSA staff member assigned as the school's liaison.

The school's completed application, providing insight into the issue identified as the focus of an action research initiative, will be reviewed by the entire MSA staff for approval. Upon review and approval that the institution's proposed initiative rises to the level of an action research endeavor, the school will be invited to proceed to the next phase of the Protocol, the Action Research Phase.

The Action Research Phase framework guides the school through its action research process and the development of quantifiable student performance objectives and action plans.

## PROCESS

Preferably, 18 to 24 months before the school is scheduled to enter into self-study for reaccreditation, the school consults with its respective MSA liaison about its eligibility to use the Sustaining Excellence Protocol for reaccreditation and the problem the school has identified as a potential focus on an action research initiative. It deserves note that schools aspiring to use this protocol are encouraged to enter into a partnership with collaborating partners such as, but not limited to, institutions of higher learning, governmental agencies, and educational research agencies.

As a result of that conversation with the school, a Middle States staff member advises if the school meets the criteria for eligibility to use the protocol and whether the proposed initiative appears to be aligned with the conceptual framework of the Sustaining Excellence Protocol.

If considered feasible, the school is invited to define its proposal and affirm its eligibility in meeting the Sustaining Excellence criteria by completing Phase I of the protocol documents, Sustaining Excellence Consultation and Application.

The school's Sustaining Excellence Consultation and Application submission is reviewed by the MSA staff and, if approved, is invited to move to the Action Research phase.

The Action Research phase is typically a year long process of collaborative research into best practices related to the chosen initiative, further defining the proposed focus of the initiative, creating a sequence of strategies and activities in the form of an action plan and conducting a self-assessment of the school's maintenance of the Middle States Standards' requirements.

Completing the Action Research phase, the school hosts two MSA Visitors over a two day period who validate that the school is maintaining the requirements of the Standards for Accreditation and offers an accreditation recommendation to the Commission on Elementary Schools and/or Commission on Secondary Schools.

The action plans are initiated as the school pursues its initiative. Three years into implementation of the Action Research Initiative, the school plans to host a colloquium for the educational community reporting and celebrating its progress. An MSA representative will also attend the colloquium, preparing a report of the school's sustained progress toward its intended future.