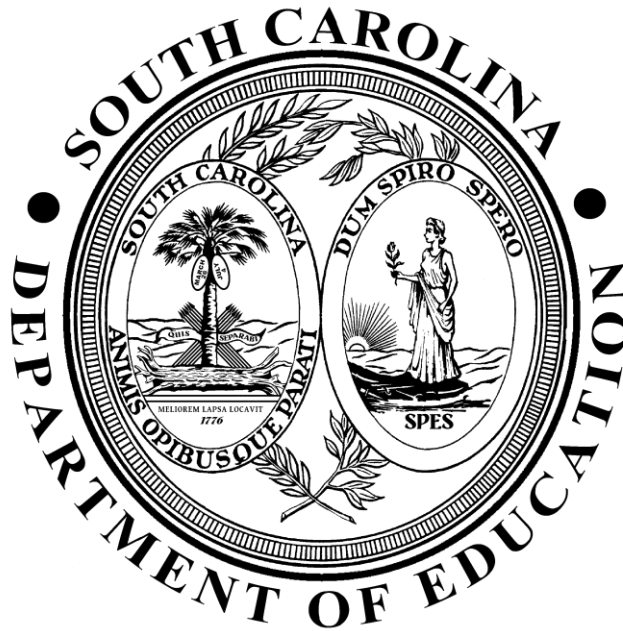


STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

MOLLY M. SPEARMAN
STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATION



Accreditation Task Force Report

Presented to State Superintendent of Education Molly M. Spearman

November 20, 2017

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Introduction

The State Board of Education (SBE) accredits all public education units under provisions of SBE Regulation 43-300. Public education units include boards of trustees and district operations, elementary schools, middle schools, secondary schools, and career and technology education centers. A set of accreditation standards derived from state statutes and regulations governs each educational program. Regulation 43-300 provides districts and individual schools that have received an All Clear for accreditation two accreditation options. Districts and schools may be accredited through: (1) the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE); or (2) AdvancED. Every district and school must meet all applicable State Board of Education regulations, South Carolina laws, and accreditation standards. All districts and schools must annually apply for accreditation.

In response to information and requests from local superintendents and school district officials, State Superintendent Molly M. Spearman convened the Accreditation Task Force (Task Force) to receive input for determining if changes are warranted in accreditation processes or regulations currently used in South Carolina's public schools. Superintendent Spearman opened the initial meeting on June 28, 2017, with a challenge to members to share their concerns, engage in open dialogue, and explore every option to create a process that works best for all districts and South Carolina's students. Participants of the Task Force were not limited to discussing current regulations, but could propose changes or new regulations if the Task Force deemed that necessary for improvement. The Task Force received the State Superintendent's commitment that their input would be carefully considered as the SCDE reviews and makes changes to the accreditation process.

The Task Force, comprised of a representative group of stakeholders, (Appendix A) provided input through a series of meetings from June through October 2017. Task Force input and recommendations are contained in this report. Using a facilitated process in meetings in June, July, and August, issues and concerns were surfaced, discussed, and categorized in priority areas. The Task Force met in October to review the recommendations.

Task Force members are acutely aware of looming teacher shortages, changes in pathways to certify teachers, and changes that technology presents both for subject content delivery and setting. To most effectively ensure college- and career-ready graduates, Task Force members articulated the need for certain flexibilities in current regulations that would allow school districts to meet changing needs, while maintaining quality in staffing, program, and scheduling decisions.

This report is somewhat conversational in tone. As closely as possible, the actual dialogue of Task Force meetings is reported using charted meeting notes to retain both the content and the context of the recommendations provided for SCDE consideration. Discussion topics are elaborated below.

Participants requested assistance from the SCDE through the development and posting of helpful documents, rubrics, and examples of best practices that would fully reflect accredited

compliance. During the meetings, Task Force participants were asked to list types of information that would be most helpful to them. Participants discussed whether there should be a total system overhaul. The issues of compliance (as is the primary focus of the current accreditation system) versus instituting a system focused on continuous improvement were examined. Participants sought clarification of needed flexibility in instructional minutes and scheduling of required instructional days across the school day and year. Participants were sensitive to the issue of a district and school board receiving an All Clear status when one or more schools within the district were not all clear. The current designation for districts and school boards indicates compliance for operations items only. In the spirit of holding the entire system responsible for the success of all schools, participants considered some change of wording to more clearly communicate system responsibility for all schools.

Certification

Concerns about certification of professional staff were numerous and resulted in several recommendations, as articulated below.

Recommendation #1: Accept Evidence of Efforts and Progress Toward Certification

The elaborated topic in this recommendation is an expressed desire for time to work with a teacher(s) to become certified. When and if additional time is allowed, the SCDE should consider the following:

Require districts to maintain a detailed progression chart with support documents to show evidence of progress of the teacher and accountability, such as what the district is doing to support teacher success, including webinars, classroom observations, and evidence of student success under this teacher's care. Multiple measures showing evidence would be needed.

Allow review of noncertified teacher status to be "individualized." For example, a school/district's designation would not change from Advised to Warned if a new hire needs additional time to complete final requirements for certification. In addition, the designation would not change from Advised to Warned if a teacher who was employed the previous year is still successfully working toward certification.

Insist that three-way communication occur among the teacher, district human resources personnel, and the SCDE when working on getting a teacher properly certified.

Develop a mastery-proficiency template to gather information and use the template to make decisions regarding the qualifications of "non-traditional" instructors, to include unique background, credentials, alternative setting experience, etc.

Recommendation #2: Increase Flexibility in Alternative Certification Pathways

The elaborated topic of this recommendation is to provide flexibility and Program of Alternative Certification for Educators (PACE) and other alternative provider options for all certification areas.

Certain courses required for certification could be waived, on an individual basis, based on career path, native language of the candidate, and/or longevity of the candidate.

The SCDE should review, clarify opportunities, and provide guidance for multiple alternative routes for certification in general education and special education arenas.

Allow flexibility for out-of-field requests.

Under certain circumstances (see discussion in next section) a teacher could be allowed to teach a percentage of the instructional day out-of-field.

Provide viable avenues for all audiences, both internal and external, to gain deeper understanding of alternative certification pathways.

Recommendation #3: Add Flexibility to Certification Areas

The elaborated topic of this recommendation is to allow a certified teacher to teach a percentage of the instructional day (a class or two) outside the specific area of certification with the limitation that the teacher must still teach in his/her base content certification area. For example, a teacher certified in Chemistry might also teach a class of Biology students. To accomplish this, the Task Force recommends the following actions:

Develop a table or rubric of “relatable” subjects. Using the rubric, schools could have teachers that teach in relatable areas teach other subjects in which they do not hold current certification. This would be a one-year emergency allowance. A written justification would need to be submitted to the SCDE for this request.

Allow teachers to add an area of certification without the coursework if they pass the content-specific Praxis. This would be a one-year emergency allowance. A written justification would need to be submitted to the SCDE for this request.

Combine Early Childhood and Elementary certification. Adjust requirements to ensure coverage of student development from pre-K to sixth grade, and allow individuals to be certified pre-K–6.

Codify Proviso 1.76 which permits secondary certified teachers to teach at the middle school level.

Recommendation #4: Address Percentage of Certified Staff Through Flexibility

The elaborated topic for this recommendation contains a question: in looking at the school faculty as a whole, must one hundred percent of the staff be certified or should there be flexibility for a percentage to qualify under “alternative” guidelines, as is currently allowed in the Charter School legislation?

The Task Force did not directly answer this question, but recommends the flexibility addressed through other strategies presented as an alternative to fixed percentages of certified staff.

Recommendation #5: SCDE Should Define “Teacher of Record”

The elaborated topic for this recommendation is to define a process for designating a “teacher of record.” What would be the parameters within which this could be done and what would the proficiency standards be?

The Task Force agreed that designation of “teacher of record” must be further defined and thus was outside of the scope of its work for purposes of this report. The SCDE will further explore this definition.

Recommendation #6: Allow Exception for Unsuccessful Teacher Searches

The elaborated topic for this recommendation is unsuccessful teacher searches. Should documentation of effort allow district/school to avoid an accreditation status designation?

The Task Force recommends allowing the exception based on documentation of effort. Documentation from districts would have to show due diligence and a “recruitment plan.” Due diligence could include some or all of the following:

- Extensive local searches conducted without success;
- Local application system and record of interviews open for review;
- Evidence of utilization of Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement (CERRA);
- Evidence of utilization of national and international resources for teacher candidates; and
- Evidence of utilization of VirtualSC resources.

An assurance form signed by the district superintendent would affirm that all avenues have been exhausted.

The Task Force recommends that the SCDE conduct research to determine whether a database exists that provides content area, state-specific certification listing of teachers who seek an opportunity to provide virtual teaching services.

Rubrics/Best Practices

Recommendation #7: Provide Exemplars on a User-Friendly Website

The Task Force was charged with identifying potential resources that would be helpful to districts as they comply with criteria in the accreditation process. The Task Force recommended that the following exemplars be provided as resources for districts:

- Comprehensive Health Education;
- District Strategic Plan;
- School Renewal Plan;
- Reading Plan; and
- Gifted and Talented Plan.

Other exemplars should be added as individual districts express needs that might also have relevance for other districts.

The Task Force requested the development of a user-friendly website where the exemplars noted above and other useful exemplars for complying with legislation and provisos that require school district action (e.g., the Jason Flat Act) would be posted.

Recommendation #8: Compile and Post Due Dates

The Task Force requested a complete listing of due dates for various aspects of the accreditation process.

System Overhaul: Compliance Versus Continuous Improvement

The Task Force engaged in an extensive discussion relating to the issues of compliance versus continuous improvement. A number of salient points were made, including the following:

- School districts are asked to use a “systems” approach in all other improvement efforts (e.g., strategic planning and professional development). Those schools and districts that use AdvancED as their certification route must look at more than compliance issues and approach their work of improvement by looking at all aspects of the entire school system. AdvancED is, however, an elective option managed by a private entity with associated costs for membership.
- The Task Force discussed whether or not the accreditation system ultimately drives student achievement and whether the emphasis is in the right place.
- The current accreditation system allows a snapshot of important “basic structure” items and regulatory requirements that can be measured yearly and checked as “present or not present, met or not met.” Any system created for continuous improvement should be less compliance-oriented, instead focusing on needed long-term changes and allowing schools and districts time to show gains toward longer term goals.

- Members of the Task Force noted that the SCDE has responsibility for ensuring compliance with state and federal statutes and regulations regardless of whether that is through accreditation, continuous improvement, or some other vehicle.
- Some expressed concern that the SCDE may not currently have the capacity to implement an accreditation system that supports a broad-based, effective continuous improvement process similar to the one conducted by AdvancED. The design of any replacement accreditation system would need broad stakeholder input. Questions of how continuous improvement site visits and monitoring would take place and issues of time factors, rubrics, models to be developed, etc. make change daunting.

After discussion, the Task Force came to consensus around several compromise issues. The salient points made in this discussion include the following:

- Noting that some districts need more intensive assistance, the Task Force questioned whether the SCDE should enhance efforts within the agency to meet needs targeted by the accreditation report. The assistance would entail helping districts identify the root cause or causes of deficiencies and help with prioritizing and supporting local actions for change. There should be a marriage of both concepts (compliance and continuous improvement), working to identify and prioritize the best drivers of student achievement.
- The recommendations made previously on other priority issues, allowing some flexibility in problem areas, may (if implemented) alleviate most issues identified by districts.
- Some thought needs to be given to “large school/small district” issues with regard to whether any amendment of law is warranted. The application of regulations and the accreditation process reflect very differently, on occasion, when the size of the system is considered.
- AdvancED uses the same word “accreditation” to certify a very different process from the SCDE process, which causes confusion in districts and in the media as to what accreditation or failure to meet accreditation criteria means in the two systems. Attention should be given to ensure that the SCDE’s terminology is clearly understood and communicated to districts.

Based on extensive discussion, the Task Force further recommends the following:

Recommendation #9: Embed Accreditation Criteria in Current Technical Assistance Programs

The Task Force recommends an examination of current programs and practices in the SCDE (all offices) to develop a plan that would embed the accreditation process and data more directly in assistance provided to schools and districts. This examination would align various programs requirements to specific law, which would aid in streamlining compliance activities across multiple offices.

Recommendation #10: Provide Targeted Professional Development and Exemplars

The Task Force recommends development and provision of targeted professional development and exemplars in the five to ten most commonly identified areas of concern experienced by districts in the *Annual Report of the Accreditation of School Districts in South Carolina*. Provide easy access and delivery strategies so that schools and district can have both examples of what is needed for compliance and support to achieve compliance. This can be achieved through the posting of exemplars on the SCDE's website.

Recommendation #11: Develop Communication Tools Comparing SCDE and AdvancED Accreditation Systems

The Task Force recommends that communication tools be developed for state and local use that more clearly define the wording and the meaning of terms used in the two approved accreditation systems (SCDE Accreditation and AdvancED).

Flexibility in Minutes and Scheduling

After discussion, the Task Force concluded that the flexibility already requested under previous priorities and the current existence of waiver possibilities as allowed by regulation will meet concerns voiced under this topic as related to required instructional minutes; permission for half days; and similar required minutes, subjects, programs, and scheduling issues.

All Clear Designation

Recommendation #12: Identify Whether All District Schools have "All Clear" Status

The Task Force examined whether the district's and school board's All Clear status should include a designation that all schools in the district are all clear. The Task Force recommends adding a line to the school board and district section of *Report of the Accreditation of School Districts* as follows:

The School Board and the School District jointly hold responsibility for the success of each school in the school district.

Are any schools in the district in "probation" or "accreditation denied" status? Yes_____
No_____

This could be an annual yes/no designation.

Other Pertinent Discussions

The Task Force briefly discussed consequences for late submission of required information in the accreditation process and posed the following questions:

- Should there be tiered consequences for late submission?
- Should grace be granted under certain circumstances or for missing the deadline for the first time?
- What should happen with those districts/schools that are habitually late in reporting and are routinely cited in the annual accreditation report?

Task Force members also discussed the accreditation status notification process for superintendents and board chairs. SCDE staff noted that both the district superintendent and the board chair must be notified. District Task Force representatives indicated a need for any notification being sent to a board chair to be sent to the district superintendent a specified time in advance of the official notification to the board chair.

The Task Force revisited the topic of the best time of the year for the District Strategic Plan and School Renewal Plans to be due to the SCDE. No conclusion was reached. There seems to be no perfect time of the year for the report due date.

On August 29, 2017, the Task Force talked briefly about certification issues that may need to be addressed. The question was asked, “What is the value of a certified teacher?” It was noted that the certification system has to make sense both to candidates who seek certification and to those seeking qualified personnel to staff professional roles in schools. How do we ensure the quality and adequacy of teachers to staff our schools? Do qualifications need to change? Do grade spans for certification need to change? Do teacher preparation programs need adjustment in their content and requirements? While there was no consensus reached, it was noted that answering these questions would impact the accreditation process in multiple ways.

Finally, an on-going theme throughout all meetings of the Task Force was the topic of effective communication. It was acknowledged multiple times that issues brought to the attention of State Superintendent Spearman about the accreditation process often resulted from ineffective communication, both from the perspective of the SCDE and school districts.

Recommendation #13: Implement a Communication Plan About Accreditation

Since effective communication is an important tool for facilitating change, this discussion reinforced the necessity of a very specific communication plan. The plan would address two issues: (1) a plan to communicate to all stakeholders any changes in the accreditation process as a result of recommendations presented by the Task Force; and (2) ongoing efforts to improve internal and external communication channels between the SCDE and local districts.

Next Steps

Upon presentation of this report to Superintendent Spearman, the report will be disseminated to stakeholders via the Office of Federal and State Accountability's webpage and presented to the South Carolina Association School Administrators' Superintendents' Roundtable on December 7, 2017. Superintendent Spearman will determine whether to pursue implementation of the recommendations made by the Task Force. Upon the direction of Superintendent Spearman, tasks and implementation plan development will be assigned to appropriate SCDE staff. The SCDE staff will review, evaluate feasibility, and take action as warranted on relevant report recommendations. The SCDE will determine whether flexibility in current regulations can be used to achieve desired changes or if regulation changes are required. If the latter, the SCDE will pursue changes through the regulatory process, as needed. In addition, the SCDE will develop an internal/external communication plan for adopted action and implement adopted actions.

Appendix A: Task Force Members

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