



**Southern Association of Independent Schools
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools**

SAIS-SACS Accreditation

VISIT REPORT

for

The Donoho School
2501 Henry Road
Anniston, Alabama 36207

Ms. Janice Hurd
President
jhurd@donohoschool.com
256.237.5477 ext. 100

Ms. Cherri W. Morgan
Board Chair
Cherri806@aol.com
256.237.5477

March 10 – 12, 2009

Mr. John D. Marshall
Visiting Team Chair
Head of School, Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School
Rabun Gap, Georgia

Southern Association of Independent Schools
and
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools:

A History of SAIS-SACS Accreditation

SAIS and SACS member schools are part of a 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 accreditation 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.

Established in 1895, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (commonly referred to as SACS) is a non-governmental, voluntary organization that accredits more than 13,000 public and non-public institutions from early childhood through university. Since its inception, SACS has served the educational community by dedicating its mission to helping schools improve student learning. Today, SACS is the largest accrediting agency in the world and is one of only six agencies that accredit both public and nonpublic educational institutions.

The current partnership offers schools a process for achieving SAIS-SACS accreditation. In today’s world of accountability in schooling, accreditation serves as a critical component of a school’s demonstrated effectiveness 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, research-based 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-SACS 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.

A SAIS-SACS accredited school is part of an international network of accredited schools which have demonstrated success in educating children. As such, SAIS-SACS 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.

Roster of Team Members

Chair

Mr. John D. Marshall
Head of School
Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School
339 Nacoochee Drive
Rabun Gap, Georgia 30568
706.746.7467 ext. 219
jmarshall@rabungap.org

Team Members

Mr. Chris Cleveland
High School Principal
Wesleyan School
5405 Spalding Drive
Norcross, Georgia 30092
770.448.7640 ext. 2206
ccleveland@wesleyanschool.org

Mr. Roger Cox
Dean of Students Middle School
Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School
339 Nacoochee Drive
Rabun Gap, Georgia 30568
706.746.7467 ext. 335
rcox@rabungap.org

Mrs. Mary Madge Crawford
Lower School Dean
Tuscaloosa Academy
420 Rice Valley Road
North Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35406
205.758.4462
mmcrawford@tuscaloosaacademy.org

Ms. Peggy E. Darby, CFRE
Director of Development
Highlands School
4901 Old Leeds Road
Birmingham, Alabama 35213
205.956.9731 ext.116
pdarby@highlandsschool.org

The Review

A team of five educators representing SAIS and SACS schools conducted an on-site visit to review this school's self-study and standards compliance. The team was comprised of members whose diverse independent school backgrounds provided valuable expertise. The visiting team sought 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 strengthen the programs of the school;
4. Assessing compliance with the standards of SAIS-SACS;
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:

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

The study addresses four critical questions:

1. **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.
2. **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.
3. **PLAN: *What is the plan to get there?*** The PLAN should be based on an analysis of pertinent data, research of best practices, and alignment with generally-accepted expectations for student learning at schools with similar missions.
4. **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.

The Self-Study

The Donoho School was founded in 1963 as an independent, co-educational college-preparatory school serving families in east-central Alabama. Located in Anniston, Alabama, the School has three divisions (lower, middle and upper) and currently enrolls 409 students in grades Pre-K – 12. The school offers a rich, varied, and challenging academic curriculum that includes nine advanced placement courses. Academic requirements for graduation are rigorous and consistent with college-preparatory schools across the Southeast region. One of the marquee programs of the school is the opportunity for qualified juniors and seniors to earn credit through a dual enrollment program with nearby Jacksonville State University. The Donoho School also offers a wide range of extracurricular and athletic programs and is a member in good standing of the Alabama High School Athletic Association.

In 2004, the Donoho School was one of the first independent schools in SAIS to receive the newly developed dual SAIS/SACS certification. The school again applied for dual SAIS/SACS accreditation in the fall of 2008. Stakeholder committees were formed in August of 2008 and began working to examine the school's compliance with SAIS standards and indicators. Evidence of school compliance was initially sent to the chair of the visiting team in a draft in October, 2008 and a subsequent update was provided to the chair in early 2009. Building upon the valuable work undertaken in the 2004 self study, these committees then developed and distributed stakeholder surveys, which were given to students in grades 4-12, parents, faculty, and selected members from the local chamber of commerce.

The Donoho School is to be commended for its well-organized and systematic process of assembling its self-study committees. These committees examined all aspects of the school: mission, beliefs, programs, procedures and policies. It is clear to the visiting team that this self-study represents a conscientious effort to provide a “snapshot” of the state of the school as well as a working strategic plan and action steps for continuous school improvement, as called for by SAIS/SACS.

The visiting team would like to recognize the dedication of Director of Admissions Sue Canter for leading an exemplary and inclusive self-study process that produced comprehensive documentation that was easily accessible for the visiting team to review and analyze.

PROFILE

The 2009 School Improvement Plan for The Donoho School details, in a thorough and systematic manner, the school's "profile" beginning on page 30 of the plan (enclosed). Student achievement is measured via recognized national assessment tests, and test results are utilized by the administration and faculty to assess student progress and program effectiveness. Results are shared with parents through written reports and in meetings with advisors or members of the counseling department.

The Donoho faculty and staff are experienced and well-qualified, with roughly 85% of the instructional staff holding a master's degree or higher. Each member of the faculty serves as a mentor/advisor for a group of students, and this "counseling" role is considered to be of equal importance to the educator's teaching role.

Commendations:

The visiting team commends the school for:

- Its ownership and implementation of the entire self-study process and the creation of a school improvement plan, strategic plan, and specific action steps to enhance student learning.
- Excellent student academic performance over the past five years on national tests. Donoho's students outperform both public and private school test score averages for the state of Alabama, the Southeast region, and the nation. The SAT averages are especially impressive and reflect favorably on students' preparedness to excel in college-level work.
- Installing SMART boards in classrooms as directed in the school's on-going technology plan and providing on-site teacher training for technology.
- Evaluating regularly the curriculum, especially scope and sequence, and seeking to make improvements through a thoughtful and collaborative process.
- Fostering a collegial atmosphere that promotes teamwork among the faculty, especially in the lower school division.
- Providing a wide variety of high quality extra-curricular/enrichment activities, including athletics and fine arts, for students in all three divisions.
- Being a *learning institution* that is student-centered, maintains its commitment to providing students an excellent educational experience, maintains high academic standards, and prepares its students for the challenges of college and beyond.
- Partnering with parents and creating a culture of parental support and volunteerism across all three divisions.
- Its systematic and thorough approach to teacher evaluation and professional development, including: formal and informal classroom observations, follow-up conferences, and individual goal-setting. Impressively, the administration requires teachers submit a detailed scope and sequence for all courses as well as nine-week lesson plans that are updated and revised each quarter of the school year.
- Its on-going partnership with Jacksonville State University, particularly its dual enrollment program and professional development opportunities.
- Its commitment to posting the school's mission statement throughout the campus.
- The College Counseling program which is positively viewed by parents and students.

- Its novel Intersession program that includes class trips to educational destinations as well as “shadowing” a career professional in an area of interest to the student.
- Proactive, timely communication from the school to its parents regarding the academic progress of the student. Edline is a tool that is greatly appreciated and used by parents.
- Its comprehensive efforts and investment to provide a safe and secure campus. The addition of security cameras on campus is evidence of this commendation.
- Prudent management of school finances during a challenging period for the school over the past five years. The current economic maelstrom heightens the importance of having in place cost control and containment measures. The fact that the school is free of any long-term debt is a great strength in this difficult economic environment.
- Restructuring the Financial Aid Committee to comprise only administrators (no trustees) in order to protect the confidentiality of applicant families.
- Completing the 2008 audit.

Recommendations:

The visiting team recommends that the school consider:

- Curtailing trustee involvement in the Admission selection process, especially in the consideration of twelfth grade applicants.
- Having the business manager of the school maintain all financial record keeping of the Parents’ Association.
- Having the President and Business Manager meet with the auditors to determine “best practices” for the fund management of auxiliary organizations of the school.
- Providing more dedicated time for departmental faculty meetings
- Installing an intercom system to help with the dismissal procedures, announcements, and other communications within the various school buildings.
- Dedicating more time for promoting the school in the Greater Anniston/Talladega County community.

VISION

VISION: *Where does the school want to go?*

The Donoho School community has a clear sense of its mission, beliefs and values. It also has a clear vision for its future, one that calls for continuing enrollment growth to support its already healthy programs.

Commendations:

The visiting team commends the school for:

- Its commitment to increasing and improving instructional technology, in particular the installation of SMART boards in several classrooms, and the plan to place them in all classrooms in the future.
- The Parents' Association's involvement and enthusiasm for supporting the mission and programs of the school.
- Beginning the development of a strategic plan to serve the school through the year 2011.
- Seeking to enlarge the student population by adding a three year old section to the preschool program in the fall of 2009.

Recommendations:

The visiting team recommends that the school consider:

- The hiring of a *full-time* admissions director, especially considering the benefits of growing enrollment or at a minimum, maintaining enrollment in the current difficult economic climate.
- Expanding its connections with alumni, especially to establish a viable Alumni Reunion program to reengage a wider scope of alumni with the school and to bring them back to campus on an annual basis.
- Investigating alternative streams of revenue for the school (i.e. after-school daycare and summer camp programs).
- Checking all school materials to ensure that the mission statement is consistently stated.

PLAN

PLAN: *What is the plan to get there?*

The school improvement plan, which the visiting team defines as including both the 2004-2008 action plans and 2005-2008 strategic plan, provides a comprehensive and detailed road map for the near future. It is clear that enrollment growth, especially in the middle and upper schools, remains a critical goal for the school to move to the “next level.” The report of the 2004 visiting team made several recommendations pertaining to enhancing admissions, marketing and public relations, and the school has made real progress in recent years, as enrollment has grown more than 20% over the past five years. This growth has occurred in the lower school. The written admissions materials, print ads, and DVD convey an understanding of the school’s mission and are very well done.

The visiting team strongly recommends building upon the counsel of the previous visiting team by taking additional steps to “develop a student recruitment strategy,” ideally in writing and one that includes all facets of enrollment management and integrated marketing (to include the strategic use of trustees, parents, alumni and community leaders).

Commendations:

The visiting team commends the school for:

- Posting of the mission statement in every classroom, as detailed in the 2004 visiting team report.
- Surveying all stakeholders. The school has indicated that the alumni will be surveyed during the 2009 year.
- Progress on technology initiatives.
- Thorough and professionally executed teacher observations and evaluations.
- Providing Admissions materials with accurate information about the schools programs, accomplishments and academic successes of students.

Recommendations:

The visiting team recommends that the school consider:

- Making adjustments to the faculty handbook and/or other documentation to ensure the job descriptions and flow chart indicate appropriate supervision and chain of command.
- Including a written policy for teacher observation/evaluations in the faculty handbook.
- Creating and including in the faculty handbook a written plan for new faculty orientation—including any non-faculty coaching staff.
- Establishing a unified and thorough policy for background checks for all employees.
- That the mission statement be incorporated into all marketing/admissions efforts to further promote The Donoho School as a mission driven institution. Specifically, placing the mission statement on the main page of the website to make it more visible.
- Promoting the availability of financial aid to both current and prospective families.
- Continuing to educate families on the importance of giving to the school above and beyond tuition, especially emphasizing the critical importance of participating in the annual fund.

- Renewing its commitment to educate all constituencies on the importance of the Honor Code and making the commitment to promote a culture and understanding of honor among students.
- Strategically and prudently expanding the existing financial aid budget to increase enrollment and tuition dollars from those families who are able to pay at least one-half of the cost of full tuition.
- Marketing the school – and its financial aid program –broadly throughout local communities to encourage a wider range of families to consider The Donoho School.
- Adding one administrator in admissions and one administrator in advancement to focus on student recruitment and annual fund raising respectfully.

RESULTS

RESULTS: *How will the school know when it has accomplished its plan?*

Student assessment measures are both clear and easily measurable in the school's improvement plan. In addition, the 2004-2008 action steps set forth a timeline, person(s) responsible for implementation, and the resources needed.

As for the 2005-2008 strategic plan, the "status" report for each goal and action step is helpful and provides future direction. However, the visiting team suggests that a detailed timetable, person(s) responsible for implementation, and the resources needed be identified.

SUMMARY

The 2009 SAIS-SACS Visiting Team was impressed by the friendliness, helpfulness and responsiveness of everyone in the community. We were treated as professionals and enjoyed the southern hospitality that we believe characterizes The Donoho School. This is a community of close-knit adults who genuinely care about young people and fostering their development into a “whole person.” The board and administration keeps children’s needs and aspirations in the forefront of decision-making to guide the institution. Most school leaders have a general understanding of the overall educational purpose of the institution, even though there are mixed answers to the question: What is the school’s specific mission statement. The school mission should be clarified and communicated broadly to all internal and external stakeholders.

Our team was also impressed by the openness and collaboration between the board and the administration and between various stakeholders. Teachers and students alike offered positive and mutually supportive comments and each group obviously values the other. This creates an ideal environment that values student learning and growth and sets The Donoho School apart from public schools.

The visiting team’s consensus is that The Donoho School is a gem of school! All stakeholders seem to recognize this. Everyone we visited is eager to see the school continue the enrollment growth it has experienced during the past few years. This growth ideally will take place in the middle and upper school. The visiting team encourages all stakeholders, especially the board of trustees, to embrace the necessary strategies and action steps to achieve mission-appropriate and sustainable enrollment growth. This was also a theme from the 2004 visiting team report. With strong and enthusiastic board and administrative leadership, adequate staffing levels in admission and marketing, and a parent body that understands independent education and is committed to “sharing the story,” The Donoho School’s best days can be ahead of it.

CONCLUSION

The Donoho School community demonstrated an earnestness and seriousness of purpose in crafting its school improvement plan and preparing for the visit of the re-accreditation team. The team wishes to thank President Jan Heard and Director of Admissions Sue Canter for “going above and beyond” in their help and support of our work on campus. They both were helpful and contributed to a wonderful visit for the team.

The visiting team finds:

1. That the school is in compliance with all standards of the SAIS-SACS accreditation process.
 2. That the self-study conducted by the school meets the standard of quality and thoroughness required by the SAIS-SACS accreditation process and answers the four critical questions as outlined in the Guidebook.
 3. That the school is unanimously recommended for SAIS-SACS accreditation.
-