Penquis Superintendents' Association Research Report

HIGH SCHOOL ACCREDITATION IN MAINE: PERCEPTIONS OF COSTS AND BENEFITS

November 16, 2009

Prepared by:

Janet Fairman, Brenda Peirce, and Walter Harris

Center for Research and Evaluation

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

High School Accreditation in Maine: Perceptions of Costs and Benefits

This report presents the findings of an exploratory study conducted by the Center for Research and Evaluation during the summer and fall of 2009, which focuses on perceptions of the costs and benefits of the accreditation process for high schools in Maine. The study was commissioned by the Penquis Superintendents' Association, a professional organization in mid-Maine. The findings presented here are the researchers'/ authors' conclusions, and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of the funding organization or its members. The research team worked with the funding organization to determine the study focus and research questions. The research team independently selected school cases and maintained confidentiality for those cases, developed interview protocols, collected and analyzed data, and wrote this report. None of the researchers has been employed by an accrediting organization, served on accreditation teams, or been employed by a secondary school.

Background

Schools seek accreditation as a process that provides a visible credential validating school quality. The ability to obtain and maintain accreditation may signal to parents, community members, students, colleges and universities that the school has met certain standards related to curriculum, teaching practices, learning opportunities, and physical resources for learning in the school. In Maine, accreditation is a voluntary decision made at the local school district level, and is not required by the state. The process for obtaining accreditation is a long and expensive one, typically conducted on a ten-year cycle. In this era of multiple state and federal accountability mandates in education, and severe budget constraints and reductions, some education leaders question whether they can continue to spend the time and financial resources for school accreditation.

Research Methods

This study explored perceptions around the costs and benefits associated with high school accreditation in Maine. The research questions included the following:

- What issues related to high school accreditation have surfaced in the research literature?
- What is the history and current status of high school accreditation in Maine?
- Why do some Maine high schools receive less than full accreditation?
- How do local education leaders describe their accreditation experience?
- What are the costs associated with high school accreditation?
- What are the perceived benefits of high school accreditation?

A case study research design allowed the researchers to examine the views and experiences of particular high schools from diverse geographic and demographic settings. The primary source of data was interviews conducted by phone with superintendents, high school principals, and school board chairs or members. Superintendents and principals were asked to recommend an individual who was on the school board during the period of the school's self-study and accreditation team visit, and who was knowledgeable about the process and accreditation outcome. The interviews allowed the researchers to examine how participants' views may differ according to their job role, perspective, level of involvement in the accreditation process, and outcome of the process. A total of 30 individuals were interviewed from 11 different high schools in Maine. One superintendent we contacted declined to participate as he had recently taken his position and was not familiar with the high school's accreditation experience or report. One principal and two school board members from different systems did not respond to our invitation to participate in an interview. In one system, we interviewed both

the current and the previous principal. Documents collected included the accreditation report and letters from the accrediting agency. One high school did not yet have their final accreditation report, as they were awaiting a follow-up visit. The accreditation report was useful in cross-checking the information obtained through interviews, in providing a more complete record of the accreditation process and outcome, and in allowing for comparison across the schools in the study.

Additionally, the researchers conducted phone interviews with representatives from five statewide education organizations or stakeholder groups in Maine, to explore whether these organizations held policy positions regarding accreditation. Representatives from the statewide professional organizations representing superintendents, schools boards, principals, teachers, and special education administrators participated in the interviews. A phone interview was also conducted with a Maine Department of Education staff member who has responsibility for basic state approval of schools in Maine and knowledge about the history of accreditation in Maine. The relevant statute pertaining to school accreditation in Maine was reviewed. Three officials and one staff member of the NEASC Commission on Public Secondary Schools (CPSS) participated jointly in a phone interview to allow the accrediting organization to share its perspective on accreditation. Relevant documents describing NEASC policies and procedures were reviewed.

Finally, phone interviews were conducted with 14 college admissions counselors from a diverse group of 12 post-secondary institutions in Maine and the New England region. The sample included: one of the seven community colleges in Maine with an enrollment of about 1,800 students; the state university of Maine (Orono) and four other New England states, with undergraduate enrollments ranging from 8,600 in Maine to 16,000 in Connecticut (the University

of Massachusetts at Amherst did not respond to the request for information, possibly because the early fall is a particularly busy time for admissions officers); three highly selective small private colleges in Maine with 1,700 to 1,800 undergraduates and a less selective private college that offers both four-year and graduate degrees in vocational studies with 2,100 undergraduate students; and two larger private colleges in two states that border Maine, with enrollments of 4,000 and 9,000 undergraduate students. A list of the participating schools is appended to this report. These interviews explored the admissions requirements or expectations related to high school accreditation and the degree to which accreditation factors into the decision to accept or reject a student's college application.

Interviews were based on a structured interview protocol. Interviews with participants from the high schools and with the NEASC officials were digitally recorded and transcribed. The researchers took detailed notes during interviews with all other participants and typed a record of the responses for each interview. Accreditation reports were examined and compared. The findings were summarized for each high school using analytical data tables including narrative/ descriptive and numerical data. Then, cross-case analysis examined the themes and patterns across the 11 school cases. The cases were also sorted by accreditation outcome, to examine how local education leaders' perceptions may vary depending on their school's accreditation status. Similarly, findings from the interviews with college admissions counselors were organized into tables with descriptive summaries, to look at patterns of perception and policy within and across different groups of post-secondary institutions.

A sample of 11 secondary schools was selected purposefully from the list of 102 accredited Maine high schools on the NEASC Commission on Public Secondary Schools website (http://cpss.neasc.org), to represent different geographic regions of Maine, school enrollment

size, and accreditation outcome or status. The sample also reflects diversity in student poverty levels and student achievement. In terms of geographic representation, three of the schools are located in northern Maine, three are located mid-state, and five are located along the Maine coastline. The cost for housing the visiting team members during an accreditation review may vary dramatically depending on the rural or urban setting of the school. Enrollment size ranges from approximately 200 to 1,150 students, and two of the schools include some middle grades. The school mean for student eligibility for free or reduced lunch ranges from 23% to 52%, with six schools averaging well above the statewide (district-wide) mean of 39% for this indicator of student poverty. With respect to student achievement, about one third of the schools scored more than three points below the statewide average score on the Maine High School Assessment (MHSA) in 2007-08, while two thirds scored within three points of the state mean. Table 1 describes the study sample.

Table 1. Description of Study Sample

School	Approx. Enrollment (2008-09)	Free/ Reduced Lunch (2008-09)	Maine High School Assessment For Mathematics (2007-08)
A	400	44%	Within 3 points of state average
B	600	52%	Within 3 points of state average
C	1150	30%	Within 3 points of state average
D	200*	34%	>3 points below state average
E	650	44%	Within 3 points of state average
F	250*	45%	>3 points below state average
G	750	51%	>3 points below state average
H	200	52%	>3 points below state average
I	550	38%	Within 3 points of state average
J	750	23%	Within 3 points of state average
K	800	40%	Within 3 points of state average
State mean	--	39%	--

*enrollment includes some middle grades

Six of the schools in this sample had their NEASC team visit within the last year and a half, while the other schools had their visits before that date. Two schools went through the self-

study as long as nine years ago, but most were more recent, with seven schools doing their self-study within the past four years or less.

Of the 11 schools in the sample, five were fully reaccredited in their most recent NEASC review, though one included temporary "conditions", one school had received "warning status" in a previous review, and one of the schools had recently been taken off "probation" status. Three schools were on "warning" status, and three schools were on "probation" status as a result of their most recent NEASC visitation and review.

In looking at the relationship between the accreditation outcome and district poverty levels, we found that two of the three schools on probation have among the highest free/ reduced lunch eligibility rates of this study sample, while the third school is below the statewide mean for this indicator. Among the three schools on warning status, two schools have free/ reduced lunch rates that are higher than the statewide mean, while the third school is considerably below the statewide mean. Among the five schools that were reaccredited without warning or probation, two schools are well below the statewide mean for free/ reduced lunch, two schools are somewhat above the statewide mean for free/reduced lunch, and a third school is substantially above the statewide mean and recently came off of probation status. While a larger percentage of schools on warning or probation status were also among the higher poverty districts, the sample is too small to know if a correlation exists.

The number of public high schools on probation for the entire state of Maine is also small—only five, and the number of schools on warning status is not known as this information is not published. Among these five schools, two schools are near the statewide mean for free/

reduced lunch eligibility, one school is below the statewide mean (by 6 percentage points), and two are considerably above the statewide mean (by 12 percentage points or more).

Findings

High School Accreditation Literature

A search for literature on high school accreditation produced few empirical studies, but more commentary or opinion pieces from proponents and critics of accreditation. Proponents call for a stronger accountability focus in the accreditation process, with a greater emphasis on student achievement data, and better coordination between state education agencies and accrediting associations (Bassett, 2004; Rothstein, 2009). These authors argue that accrediting agencies, for K-12 public or private schools or post-secondary schools, have not gone far enough to measure the outcomes of education but continue to emphasize the "inputs" (Bassett, 2004; Eaton, 2001; Rothstein, 2009). Both proponents and critics of accreditation have questioned the effectiveness of peer review by educators who are not trained in evaluation, with oversight by associations that rely on membership dues from the schools they are evaluating (Portner, 1997; Rothstein, 2009). Rothstein advocates for a system closer to what exists in England, New Zealand, and the Netherlands, where full-time inspectors evaluate schools against national standards and achievement goals.

Two research studies, both doctoral dissertations conducted over ten years ago, examined local education leaders' perceptions of the high school accreditation process and its impact on school improvement. Flynn's study (1997) involved a 1995 survey of the superintendent, high school principal, and a randomly selected school board member from 130 public high schools in Massachusetts. These schools had participated in a NEASC visitation from 1986 to 1991. The

response rate was 47%, with the highest response rate from principals. Cushing's study (1999) largely replicated Flynn's study with a 1998 survey of similar groups from 66 public high schools in New Hampshire. These schools had participated in a NEASC visitation from 1987-1997. The response rate was 56%, also with the highest response rate from principals.

The two doctoral studies produced very similar findings. Both studies found that a majority of superintendents, principals, and school board members held positive perceptions of the NEASC high school accreditation process, and felt the process was beneficial to their school and community. All three groups viewed the self-study as the most important component of the process, and felt it was valuable for its potential to identify strengths and weaknesses in the school, and to indicate goals for school improvement. Principals particularly emphasized the value of the accreditation process as a vehicle for positive change in their schools, and also noted that the process provided a means to validate school practices, an opportunity for self-evaluation and collaboration among teachers, and supported school funding requests. School board members and superintendents emphasized the importance of the outcome of accreditation, in maintaining accreditation status to ensure public confidence in their local schools. All three groups indicated that their communities expect their schools to maintain accreditation, and that loss of accreditation would be viewed negatively by the community. There was less agreement about whether accreditation had increased the community's expectations for the school or whether accreditation had helped students gain acceptance at more selective colleges (Cushing, 1999; Flynn, 1997). Both studies found that the school board members who responded to the survey were less knowledgeable about the goals of accreditation and the process than superintendents and principals, and that community members may not be well informed about the process.

Some important differences between the two studies relate to the state education policy context in each state. Flynn (1997) was interested in looking at education leaders' perceptions at a time of severe budget constraints, following the tax cap legislation in Massachusetts that limited or reduced school budgets and also shifted school budget authority from school boards to town councils. Survey respondents in Flynn's study commented on the difficulty of addressing NEASC recommendations in light of the fiscal constraints, but still valued the accreditation process. Respondents indicated that some actions had to be postponed, and some respondents said that complying with accreditation requirements interrupted or conflicted with district initiatives (Flynn, 1997). The budget constraints and tax limitations in Massachusetts during the time of Flynn's study bear a strong resemblance to the current fiscal situation in Maine.

In New Hampshire, the state required districts to develop an educational improvement plan. Cushing (1999) investigated the relationship between this activity and accreditation work. He found a lack of agreement across the groups of superintendents, principals, and school board members about which effort had more impact on the high school's educational program, the accreditation process or the state-mandated district improvement plan. As districts were engaged in multiple improvement efforts simultaneously, it was difficult for respondents to know the impact of any single effort. In both Flynn's (1997) and Cushing's (1999) studies, principals credited the accreditation process as having more of an impact on education reform than did superintendents and school board members.

Responding to the increased emphasis on accountability and standards, the NEASC Commission on Public Secondary Schools (CPSS) revised its standards in the late 1980's, and worked to increase consistency across visiting teams through training and a handbook of guidelines. Several authors noted that the more rigorous standards had the impact of increasing

the number of schools on warning or probation status (Cushing, 1999; Flynn, 1997; Portner, 1997). As some schools fell short of the standards, superintendents and school board members began to take more interest and became more involved in the process (Cushing, 1999; Flynn, 1997). Both Flynn and Cushing noted that some survey respondents expressed concern about their school's ability to meet NEASC standards, but the majority of their respondents supported the accreditation process and high standards (Cushing, 1999; Flynn, 1997). However, neither study disaggregated the survey responses by accreditation outcome, so it was not possible to compare the views of leaders whose schools had favorable accreditation results with those whose schools had received warning or probation status. It is also important to note that both studies occurred a few years before the implementation of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation, which substantially increased the stakes for schools and communities and changed the accountability landscape yet again.

The Commission on Public Secondary Schools (CPSS) engaged in a major revision of their standards in 1998, which were implemented in 2000. This revision signaled a shift away from cataloging the "nuts and bolts" of the education program to more of a focus on teaching and student learning. Visiting teams began to examine the alignment of the school's mission and learning expectations with curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Teams spent more time observing classroom instruction and looking for evidence that teachers spend time reviewing assessment results to inform practice and school improvement (Manzo, 2000). By the late 1990's, schools were beginning to show signs of stress from increased state and federal accountability requirements, and complying with these high-stakes mandates often over-shadowed accreditation work. Many schools struggled to meet higher standards, particularly where they served high poverty populations and were also experiencing tighter school budgets

(Cushing, 1999; Portner, 1997). NEASC has continued to revise its standards approximately every five years, with the current revision scheduled for use in 2011.

Since the Cushing (1999) and Flynn (1997) studies of twenty years ago, NEASC commissioned a more recent study of educators' perceptions of the impact of accreditation on school quality (NEASC, 2006). NEASC is the first and oldest accrediting agency in the U.S., and currently accredits about 661 public secondary schools (over 95%) in the six-state New England region (NEASC, 2006 and NEASC website). The accrediting association conducted a survey in 2005 with a sample of all member schools that had a team visit between 2002 and 2005. This survey included K-12 public and private schools, international schools, and post-secondary schools. The broad findings of the K-12 survey will be described here, focusing on the results for public school grades 9-12 only. Principals or their designee from 102 public secondary schools responded to the survey, which included 31 fixed-choice items and five open-ended questions. Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement using a four-point Likert scale.

Overall, the results of the NEASC survey indicate a high level of agreement among the 102 responding public secondary schools that the accreditation process had or will have a positive impact on the quality of teaching and learning in their schools. Specifically: 89% of the public secondary leaders agreed or strongly agreed that participation in the accreditation process has enhanced the quality of education at their schools; 81% agreed that the process led to improvements in the quality of classroom instruction; and 81% agreed that the standards set by the Commission on Public Secondary Schools (CPSS) will help improve teaching and learning at their school. Survey respondents also indicated strong agreement that the accreditation process contributes to school improvement: 81% of the public secondary leaders agreed that accreditation affects school improvement in both the short-term and long-term. And there was

strong agreement that the accreditation process had improved the academic environment of the school (78% agreed), and staff communication (78%). Somewhat lower percentages, but still a majority of respondents, indicated agreement that the accreditation process led to improvement in the organization and management of the school (66%), professional development for teachers (65%), institutional leadership (63%), and the work environment for school staff (61%). Respondents to the survey indicated strong agreement that the NEASC accreditation process was fair and valid: 84% of the responding public secondary schools agreed that the recommendations of the visiting team were valid and thorough and 82% agreed their school was fairly evaluated. Respondents indicated more agreement that there was adequate training prior to the visit (86%) than they did about whether there had been sufficient guidance and support following the visit (77%) (NEASC, 2006). This survey provides timely data from a large sample of public high schools across the New England region that have recently undergone the accreditation visit, and indicates that a large majority of school leaders strongly value the process for its positive impact on teaching and learning.

Empirical research describing the perspective of colleges and universities on the importance of high school accreditation in college admissions decisions is scarce. One accrediting association sponsored a survey study in 1978 and again in 1988 with a sample of over 100 public and private four-year post-secondary institutions in the Midwest that varied in enrollment size and other demographic variables. In their association's publication, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools reported that results from both years of the survey were fairly similar, but that high school accreditation was viewed as somewhat more important by college admissions officers in 1988 than in 1978, for students coming from in-state high schools. When the researchers examined the results for just the largest colleges and universities

in their sample, they found that high school accreditation was deemed equally important for college admissions decisions for both in-state and out-of-state high school students, and that these larger schools also rated high school accreditation as more important in admissions decisions in 1988 than in 1978. In comparing the results for public and private institutions, the researchers found that high school accreditation had increased in importance more for the public institutions than it had for the private post-secondary institutions (Thrash & Hall, 1989). The 1988 survey was conducted 20 years ago. More recent studies that explore the importance of high school accreditation from the perspective of colleges and universities were not found.

Accreditation in Maine

The state of Maine required high school accreditation only briefly, as a result of educational reforms enacted during the 1980's. From roughly 1989 to 1991, the state recognized a statute (Maine State Legislature, 1983) that required accreditation, authorized an advisory accreditation council to set accreditation standards, and recommended a five-year accreditation cycle. According to a Maine Department of Education (MDOE) staff member, about six high schools were accredited during this time period. This respondent explained that accreditation by the state was offered "as an alternative to NEASC".

Given the prevalent fiscal constraints of the early 1990's, some of the educational initiatives of the 1980's had to be "put on hold", and accreditation was one of them. Because of on-going fiscal challenges facing Maine and the lack of a mandate for accreditation, the provision for state accreditation was never revived. Budget and staff reductions in the Maine Department of Education prevent the state agency from tracking and publishing the status of school accreditations, following up with schools that fail to obtain full accreditation through

NEASC, or conducting accreditations. Increasingly, state and federal mandates have prompted the state agency to focus their efforts on collecting and reporting student assessment results. The MDOE staff member we interviewed said that parents sometimes call the state agency with concerns when their local high school loses accreditation or is put on probation status by NEASC. Ideally, this respondent would like to see some state involvement in accreditation and values the type of information the accreditation process provides about school quality. He stated:

> Accreditation gets into the quality of the school. The basic approval process is based on quantitative information, like: Do you have a library? Etc. It's the bare minimum. That's a limitation of the basic school approval—we don't look at quality, which accreditation does. . . . I'm concerned when a district says they're not sure how they'll afford it. It's a wonderful process. . . . Maybe someday the department of education can get back into it (MDOE interview, Oct. 2009).

Currently, Maine does not require schools to be accredited. Rather, school accreditation is a "local choice", and the state is only involved in basic school approvals or inspections. The New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) is the only accreditation agency recognized by the state of Maine. According to the NEASC website, 102 public secondary schools are accredited in Maine and another two schools are "candidates" for accreditation. There are currently 119 public schools in Maine that include secondary grades. Thus, only 17 public schools with secondary grades do not have NEASC accreditation. The non-accredited schools are predominantly located in northern and western Maine. Six schools are located in northern Maine and another three are on the northern coast. Four schools are in western Maine. Two schools are located on islands, and two are in southern Maine. The total enrollment for these schools ranges from about 1,250 to 1,900 students, but because some of the schools include elementary or middle grades, the total number of students per grade varies considerably, from about 100 students per grade to 475 students per grade. Secondary enrollment in these 17 schools

ranges from about 45 to 275 students with a mean of 160 students. Without further research, we do not know why these schools have not sought accreditation.

Accreditation Process

The school accreditation process through NEASC is a ten-year cycle, which typically includes a self-study conducted over two school years, a four-day visitation by a team of educators from other secondary schools, and follow up progress reports and monitoring. To conduct the self-study, schools typically organize committees that focus on one of the seven NEASC standard areas: mission and expectations for student learning; curriculum; instruction; assessment; leadership and organization; school resources, and community resources. Each committee engages in a review of the strengths and weaknesses of their school in relation to a standard. Committee members rate the school on indicators for each standard. The committee works by consensus to develop a report that recommends specific goals and actions to help the school attain the NEASC standard. Each committee collects evidence to support their description of efforts toward meeting a standard. For example, teachers collect evidence of teacher and student work to illustrate their curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices. The school also solicits feedback from teachers, students, and parents through surveys. NEASC contracts with an outside source to compile and report survey results for which schools pay a fee. Each committee's report is presented to the entire teaching staff for comment and may be revised before it is voted on and accepted by the school. The school also writes a profile of the school, describing the school's history, demographics, and unique challenges. The profile and committee reports comprise the school's self-study report which is sent to NEASC for review (NEASC, Sept. 2006).

NEASC reviews the self-study report and organizes a team of volunteer educators to visit the school to provide an external review. The purpose of the review is to examine the school's effort and progress in meeting the school's improvement goals related to the NEASC standards. The team consists of principals, teachers representing different content areas, a guidance counselor, curriculum specialist, and media specialist. Team chairs and assistant chairs receive training each summer (two days for chairs, one day for assistant chairs), while the team members receive an orientation on the first visitation day. The team visit typically begins on a Sunday and runs through Wednesday. The school district assumes the cost for hotel, meals, and mileage reimbursement for the visiting team. During that time, the visiting team members meet with teachers, school board members, administrators, students, and sometimes parents. Team members observe classroom instruction, shadow and interview students, and walk through the school facilities to examine the adequacy of the physical space and school resources, accessibility, maintenance, and safety. The team examines the collected evidence and writes a report which includes the school profile, assessment of the school's self-study process, descriptions of school practices, resources and challenges, and finally commendations and recommendations in each of the NEASC standard areas. NEASC provides a draft of the report to the school principal to provide the opportunity for clarification or correction of errors. The team report is reviewed by the NEASC Commission on Public Secondary Schools (comprised of representatives from each member state in the region), which also provides the school with a letter outlining the major findings of the report.

Schools are asked to provide a written progress report on actions taken to address the recommendations at various intervals, typically at the two-year and five-year intervals after the team visit. If NEASC deems certain recommendations as urgent, they may require special

progress reports at more frequent intervals. The NEASC Commission may recommend various levels of accreditation as a result of the team report, ranging from full accreditation to accreditation with warning status, probation, or termination of accreditation. Schools placed on probation status are listed on the NEASC website for public information. The NEASC website includes the following description and purpose of school accreditation:

> The standards applied by the Commission are qualitative and can be adapted and applied to any of the types of educational institutions served. . . . Accreditation is an expression of confidence in the institution's purposes, performances, and human and financial resources. The goals are effectiveness, improvement, and public assurance (NEASC, 2009).

Reasons for Failing Full Accreditation

According to the NEASC website, 102 of the 119 Maine public schools with secondary grades are currently accredited, and five of these schools are on "probation" status for work to be completed to meet NEASC standards—typically in the areas of curriculum, school resources, and community resources which includes funding and maintenance of facilities. Other schools may be on "warning" status or have temporary conditions they must meet to maintain their accreditation; however, this information is not publicly reported on the NEASC website.

Of the 11 schools in this study, five were fully reaccredited though one school said they had temporary "conditions", three schools were on "warning" status, and three schools were on "probation" status as a result of their most recent NEASC visitation and review. One school was reaccredited with a temporary condition to comply with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements for handicapped student access.

All three schools on warning status were cited for work to be completed in curriculum, such as aligning the school mission with the curriculum, reviewing the curriculum on a regular schedule, and improving the academic rigor of the curriculum. One school was also put on warning status for two additional standards, assessment and community resources. Work to be completed under community resources included facilities repairs, ADA compliance, and better access to classroom space.

Of the three schools on probation status, one school was cited for work to be completed on five standards, a second school was cited for four standards, and a third school was cited for only two standards. As these schools have completed work, NEASC reduced the number of standards for which the schools are on probation. All three schools were cited for improvement needed in the areas of school and community resources, which included: repairs and maintenance to the facilities; major renovations such as roof repair, updating science laboratories, or replacement of portable classrooms; heating and ventilation work; window replacement; and improved accessibility for handicapped students. For one of these schools, the initial NEASC accreditation report did not specifically recommend facility renovations for science instruction, but recent letters from NEASC have included this among the work to be completed in order to remove the probation status. In addition to the recommendations to address facilities and funding issues, two of the schools on probation status were also cited for work to be completed in the areas of curriculum and assessment.

Perceptions of the Accreditation Experience

The Self-Study

Interviews with superintendents, principals, and school board members from 11 Maine high schools indicated that schools typically begin the self-study with the task of developing or revising their school mission statement. This work usually involved input from the whole school community. The schools also conducted surveys of teachers and community members as part of the accreditation requirements. Veteran teachers who had prior experience with the accreditation process typically served on the steering committee, orchestrating the school's self-study and scheduling for the team visit.

Teachers predominantly led the work for the self-study committees organized around the seven NEASC standards, but did involve school board members, central office staff, a few parents and students on certain committees. The extent to which schools involved community members in this work varied. Four schools involved a broad spectrum of stakeholders in the accreditation process. One of these schools held several forums to inform and involve parents in the process. Other schools had less success in obtaining parent or school board member involvement in the committee work. Some school board members said it was difficult for them to attend committee meetings at the times scheduled by teachers, which was often after school. Some superintendents and principals were more involved in guiding the process than others, but administrators usually served a supporting role, making sure that teachers had the resources they needed to conduct the work and getting guidance from NEASC as needed. One superintendent, who had formerly been principal of the high school, felt he had been excluded from the process

entirely by the school staff leading the work. Other superintendents did not report having this experience, and felt well-informed about the process.

Consistently, interviewees reported that the self-study was beneficial and was the most important aspect of the entire accreditation process-- more helpful than having the outside team visit. The process encouraged the school community to identify what they do well and where they would like to improve. Some comments included the following:

> The thing we were looking for is what are we doing right, and what are we not doing. What's working for us, what's not, what holes are there. What are we doing that's redundant. What are we doing that's not effective. . . . It's a way for us to recenter ourselves. So for us it was an opportunity for growth and introspection (principal, 09/09/09).
>
> I think it's huge. It's getting a thorough knowledge of what you're doing well and what you're not doing well, and where your needs are, which sets a foundation for you to create an action plan. And NEASC will help you create an action plan (principal, 8/25/09).

While a majority of the schools found the self-study very helpful, four schools indicated that the self-study was only somewhat helpful. Interviewees gave a variety of reasons for their views. Some felt that teachers may not have taken the process seriously, and therefore did not engage deeply enough in the self-review process. A superintendent commented: "It left a lot of control in the hands of the teachers who have always been in control of the status quo. I'd say it reinforced the status quo and made it difficult to do otherwise" (08/24/09). In two schools, administrators felt that teachers used the accreditation process as a vehicle to voice dissatisfaction with school or district leadership, rather than focusing on curriculum and teaching practices. A principal said:

> Sometimes the self-study can be just a complaint session. . . . Many times the staff who write these reports think they can use it as leverage to get something out of

> the community or the school board or superintendent. . . but it doesn't always work that way (08/26/09).

While interviewees all reported some level of stress and fatigue among teachers while they were engaged in the self-study work, perceptions of teachers' attitudes and reactions varied across the 11 schools. For the six schools that were reaccredited without condition, interviewees reported fairly positive attitudes and support from teachers. These schools reported that teachers saw the potential benefits of engaging in reflection and self-review, and took the work seriously. Still, these schools reported that this work took most of their inservice and professional development time, and was somewhat stressful for teachers. One principal commented:

> I've got an extremely professional staff here. . . . They were extremely supportive through the whole process. They really worked hard. You didn't have to stand on their shoulders or run behind them to find out if things were getting done. They're self-motivated (09/09/09).

Among the six schools receiving either warning or probation status from NEASC, interviewees reported that teacher support was less strong and uneven, and they reported higher levels of stress among their teachers. Some teachers in these schools felt the self-study was a "waste of time", while others saw the potential for school improvement. Of the three schools on probation status, interviewees from two schools reported teachers were generally negative about the self-study process, and they cited low teacher morale and poor climate in these schools at the time of the self-study and visitation. A superintendent of a school that received warning status said:

> I saw levels of stress increase. Teachers found it difficult to manage the additional burden of accreditation given state and federal initiatives. Teachers' collective plates are full, and I think they struggle with maintaining initiatives from the recent past on top of continuous state mandates and initiatives in still different directions (09/09/09).

Across the 11 schools, there were some patterns in the breadth of the self-study effort. Generally, the five schools that were reaccredited without warning or probation had identified a broader range of areas needing improvement through their self-study, and focused primarily on curriculum and assessment. One school also looked at school-community relations and community involvement in school decisions. In contrast, the three schools receiving warning status as a result of their subsequent NEASC visit focused on fewer areas for improvement, and the three schools receiving probation status put more attention on their facilities in the self-study. One of the schools that received probation status also looked at curriculum, school leadership, and organization in their self-study.

The NEASC Team Visit

Interviewees did not report any problems in obtaining sufficient notice from NEASC in scheduling the team visit in advance. However, one school did report having difficulty getting clear communication from NEASC prior to their visit, and attributed it to staffing and leadership changes taking place recently at NEASC. This school felt they had incurred greater time and expense to complete their accreditation, because of the lack of clear and timely guidance earlier in the process.

Most schools viewed the experience of the NEASC team visit positively. Interviewees described the visiting team members and chair as being "professional", "well-orchestrated", and effective, and said they knew what questions to ask. Interviewees described the intense work schedule for the visiting team, and their thoroughness in doing the review. Some of the principals shared that they have participated on NEASC visitation teams to accredit other high schools. These individuals expressed positive views about the value of the accreditation process

and the work conducted by the visiting team, and noted that team members do not get paid for this work. Four of the 11 schools described negative experiences or impressions of the team visit. One school had a problem with a team chair person's behavior and said that team members were intimidating or confrontational with teachers. Two other schools felt that their schools were judged too harshly, as both were put on probation status for facilities and funding issues. Interviewees at a fourth school which received warning status disagreed in their views of the team visit.

Interviewees reported that teachers felt some stress or anxiety in response to the NEASC team visit, as they were aware that they and their school were being evaluated. Most schools reported that their teachers were proud to present their work to the visiting team, and looked forward to the validation of their work. Principals said they communicated to teachers that they should conduct business as usual during the team visit. One superintendent shared:

> I think many people view the visitation with anticipation and excitement. That is the light at the end of the tunnel. . . .There's a great deal of satisfaction with respect to finality. . . . You've done the majority of the work, and now it is an opportunity for people to see what you are presenting to them (09/11/09).

In a few schools with a history of warnings or probation, teachers' anxiety level was heightened. In a few cases, teachers felt strongly disappointed when the NEASC team presented a more negative summary of their findings at the end of the visit. Some principals commented on the lingering negative impact on teacher morale.

> The visiting committee chair was pretty harsh. He laid it out there pretty harsh. And a lot of the faculty, I think they were hurt by it. . . . So it was awhile for me to help the faculty get over that (principal in school on probation, 8/26/09).

In reviewing the ten NEASC reports from the schools (one school did not provide a copy of their report), we found considerable variation in the number of hours that a visiting team spent observing classroom instruction, and in shadowing students in the school. This was not related to the size of the visiting team, which was consistently around 14-15 members across the 11 schools. Table 2 shows the variation in classroom observation time and shadowing time across the ten NEASC visiting teams. The variation is significant: total classroom observation time ranged from only two hours to 75 hours, and the total time shadowing students ranged from three hours to 45 hours. While some of the shadowing time may have included time in classrooms, some of this time also included student time in the lunchroom or talking with students. The brief period of classroom observation in a few cases may raise questions about the validity of the team's evaluation and recommendations in the area of curriculum and instruction.

Table 2. Comparison of NEASC Visiting Team Time

School	Total Team Hours Observing Classrooms	Total Team Hours Shadowing Students
A	42	3
B	20	45
C	75	44
D	2	35
E	30	45
F	--	--
G	45	3
H	3	18
I	30	3
J	16	29
K	15	45

School F did not provide a copy of their NEASC report.

When asked about this variation in an interview, the NEASC Commission on Public Secondary Schools (CPSS) officials said that there should be consistency in the amount of time

teams spend observing classrooms and shadowing students. They said in a few cases, team members may not have conducted the observations as expected due to scheduling problems or miscommunication, or teams may not have recorded the number of hours accurately in their report.

For most of the schools we studied, the visiting team was comprised of Maine educators from diverse school settings across the state. Five schools had a few team members (1-6) from outside the state, and these were not necessarily schools that were located near the state border. NEASC Commission officials indicated in an interview that their staff sometimes have difficulty filling visitation teams for Maine and Vermont due to the longer driving distance involved, and often have to find last-minute replacements when team members ask to be excused. In these cases, they must draw on volunteers, who may or may not be from within the state, who are able to serve on a team at short notice. Another reason for including out-of-state educators on teams is the fluctuation in number of schools that are scheduled for visits in a particular year. NEASC officials said that in the past three to four years, they have needed to form visitation teams for as many as 15-16 Maine schools in the same year. In other years, the number may be much smaller, which makes it easier to fill the teams with in-state educators. In all cases, NEASC attempts to draw on in-state educators for the role of team chair or assistant chair, to make sure the leader is a person who is familiar with the state's curriculum standards. NEASC also works to balance teams by including educators from both rural and urban school settings, and includes education specialists with expertise in areas where the school has particular initiatives, such as technology.

When asked how NEASC works to achieve consistency across visitation teams and accreditation reports, the NEASC Commission officials we interviewed described the training that the chair and assistant chair receive in the summer, and the orientation for team members on

their first visitation day to be sure that all members have the relevant evaluation guide and materials. There is a separate evaluation guide for each of the NEASC standard areas. The guide provides a template for conducting the work, interview protocols, indicators and rating guides for the standard.

The NEASC Accreditation Report

There was some variation in the time between a NEASC team visit and the school receiving the team report. Five of the 11 schools received the team report two to three months after the visit, while five schools said it took four to six months to get their report. One school had a visit seven years ago, and did not remember when the report was received.

The number of recommendations across the seven standard areas varied significantly across the ten schools for which we obtained the NEASC report. The total number of recommendations ranged from under 30 to over 100. Table 3 presents this information. For nine schools, curriculum was a major area emphasized in the recommendations, and sometimes instruction and assessment were also emphasized. For eight of the schools, community resources to fund facilities maintenance or renovation, or staffing, was a major area of recommended action.

Table 3. Total Number of Recommendations in NEASC Report

Total Number of Recommendations Across the Standards	Number of Schools (n=10)
21-30	1 schools
31-40	2 schools
41-50	3 schools
51-60	3 schools
>100	1 school

When asked if they felt the NEASC recommendations were fair and relevant, interviewees from six schools agreed. They said the recommendations came as no real surprise and were consistent with the areas identified as needing attention in their self-study. Views were more mixed from the other five schools in the study. Interviewees from these schools agreed that recommendations in some areas, such as curriculum and instruction were fair, but that others were less fair. They disagreed with some recommendations in the areas of leadership, school resources, and community resources. In some cases, interviewees wondered what evidence the visiting team had found to support a particular recommendation. In other cases, interviewees felt that certain recommendations were too "nitpicky", particular in the area of facilities maintenance, safety, or renovation.

Several interviewees mentioned that while they would like to renovate their science laboratory facilities, they did not have the financial resources to do so as frequently as recommended by NEASC and some did not see that such substantial renovation was needed. Interviewees from three schools were frustrated by the difficulty of getting off probation status with NEASC because of the recommendations to replace portable classrooms or address other major facilities issues. In these communities, generating additional local funding for facilities has been a major and on-going challenge given the low income demographics, the inclusion of tuition students from neighboring communities, and efforts to comply with the state-mandate to consolidate school districts. These school systems have either requested funding from the state for facilities renovation or replacement, or plan to do so. Yet, the interviewees were skeptical about their chances of obtaining state funding any time soon, given the succession of recisions in the state's allocation to schools. One principal in a school on probation said: "I can put a

dynamite science lab in here, but if the roof is going to leak on it, does it make sense?" (09/01/09) A principal from another school on probation shared the following:

> We've spent over a million dollars in renovation this summer. We're moving ahead. We still have portables. And they're really hammering us on the portables. They don't like portables, but we don't have a choice. We're a poor district, so we can't afford to do it on our own (08/26/09).

Some schools commented on the large number of recommendations they received. Interviewees from one school said that the recommendations were not always written in a clear way to guide action, and that there were redundancies in the recommendations listed across the standards. Some schools noted there were differences in the report and the letters they received from NEASC, which made it more difficult for them to respond.

When asked about the consistency of recommendations in communications to schools, NEASC Commission officials said in an interview that schools having more difficulty meeting standards receive multiple monitoring visits and that these visits may uncover new information that conditions in the school have either improved or worsened over time. The officials acknowledged that facilities issues typically do take longer for schools to address and resolve. Schools have the option to "show cause" to explain why action has not been taken, and may appeal a decision about their accreditation status or specific recommendations. NEASC's policy on probation status does not specify a time limit for this status, but uses the language of "reasonable progress" in a "reasonable period of time" (NEASC, Sept. 2008). This provides NEASC and schools with more flexibility. One NEASC official said: "We take every school on a case by case basis", and that NEASC considers the school's capacity to respond to the recommendations for improvement. While NEASC leaves it up to schools to decide how to

address the recommendations and meet standards, they seek evidence of a plan and strategies to meet improvement goals.

Actions on Recommendations

The schools in this study were at varying stages in their ten-year accreditation cycle. Six schools had a NEASC team visit recently in 2008. These schools have already begun to address some of the recommendations in their accreditation report, and have completed some tasks. Interviews with these schools indicated different levels of challenge in complying with the NEASC standards. For one school visited prior to 2008, interviewees said they have been able to address almost all recommendations within five years of their NEASC visit. Interviewees from five schools in the study indicated they would have difficulty addressing some recommendations, due to the small size of their school or budget constraints. For example, interviewees from one school said it would be difficult for them to schedule common planning time for teachers given their small teaching staff and the number of classes their teachers cover. Other schools indicated they would have difficulty finding the necessary funding to automate their library resources or address major concerns with their facilities.

Schools in this study have worked to address certain standard areas first—mission statement, curriculum, and instruction. These are the areas in which they felt most able to implement improvements. Meeting NEASC standards in assessment, and school and community resources was much more challenging for these schools. Several interviewees talked about their efforts to work on school-wide rubrics for assessment, and how developing and implementing this change takes considerable time. Two schools said they had also worked on facilities improvements, which typically included heating and ventilation upgrades, window and lighting

replacements, and general maintenance. While some schools had been able to do more extensive renovations to their facility with the support of federal stimulus funding or a local bond, other schools said they had not been able to identify potential funding for this type of work.

Perceptions of Costs, Time, Effort

Interviewees from all 11 schools in the study reported that the accreditation process involves substantial time and effort on the part of their teaching staff, as well as a significant financial cost. Although the process runs over a ten-year period, the two-year self-study requires the most time and effort from teachers and others involved. Interviewees consistently reported that during the self-study, their schools devoted all the available inservice or professional development time to the work of self-review, gathering evidence, and completing the committee reports. Schools used early release days, hired substitutes, and paid teachers to work during the summer. Some schools increased the number of early release days during the self-study to provide more time for this work. While interviewees described the benefits of engaging in this self-review and planning for school improvement, they also noted that devoting all their time to this effort for two years forced other professional development needs to be put on hold. Some comments included the following:

> For the next two years, every second of professional development time that we had as a school went toward accreditation. A lot of people look back at that and say "We lost some time with curriculum and things", but at the same time we had a chance to take a real good look at what we were doing as a school (principal, 09/03/09).

> I guess there have to be disadvantages, because when you're doing the self-study, you're not going to do that training in teaching mathematics. But the NEASC study will indicate to you that you need that training, or don't need that training, and what type of training in that area would be best (principal, 08/25/09).

Estimates of the total number of person hours devoted to the self-study process varied from 500 hours for one school, to 2,000 hours for another school, to 5,000-6,000 hours for three schools. The remaining schools were not able to provide an estimate of the time, either because they did not maintain a record of the time or because the self-study occurred a few years ago. In all cases, interviewees said the self-study involved many hours of staff time.

In addition to the intensive work required for the self-study, schools also spent considerable time in planning for the NEASC team visit, and responding to NEASC recommendations and requests for verification of progress on work. Some schools were required to submit special progress reports in addition to the standard two-year and five-year progress reports, and this required pulling teachers together to work after school or during the summer. Interviewees from one school said that the large number of recommendations in their NEASC report was overwhelming and difficult to respond to.

Most of the schools in this study (eight) said the total cost for their accreditation was around $20,000. One school said the cost was slightly lower, and another school said the cost was $30,000-$35,000 over a two-year period. Interviewees indicated that about half this cost was spent in supporting the self-study work, through inservice, substitute salaries, or teacher stipends. The other half supported the cost of housing, meals, and mileage reimbursement for the NEASC visiting team. Given the large team size (14-15 members typically), these costs can be substantial. For example, team members are provided private hotel/ motel rooms for approximately three nights.

Part of the cost for the self-study included teacher stipends for six of the 11 schools. These schools said they paid teachers who led the committee work, worked during the summer,

or edited/ proofread the self-study report. Other schools indicated that they tried to avoid having to pay stipends because of budget constraints.

In addition to the cost of supporting the self-study and the NEASC team visit, interviewees mentioned the cost of paying annual membership dues to NEASC. This cost is based on the school's enrollment, but was typically around $3,000 per year for the schools in this study. Interviewees said they were required to pay double the membership fee during the year of the NEASC visit. Thus, over the ten-year period of a NEASC accreditation, several schools in this sample spent roughly $33,000 on membership dues and another $20,000 for the self-study and team visit, totaling $53,000.

Most of the schools in this study indicated they had concerns about the financial cost of accreditation, and many of the schools said the cost is increasingly a greater challenge. Only four schools indicated that as a percentage of their total budget, the cost of accreditation has not yet been too difficult to meet. While some interviewees maintained that the cost was reasonable, other interviewees felt that NEASC should reduce the cost of membership fees, materials to guide the process, and team visits. A few interviewees suggested that NEASC could reduce the cost for schools by using smaller visitation teams. Other interviewees noted that schools can also keep the cost down by making an effort to economize on meals and lodging for the team visit. Two schools that are on warning status and three schools on probation status expressed the strongest concerns about the financial cost and time required for accreditation:

> My biggest concern with NEASC is the cost associated with it, both in financial and personnel time (superintendent in school on warning status, 09/11/09).
>
> My concern now is the budget constraints. . . With the times the way they are, every penny is crucial. . . .We've been able to afford it. Our district has allowed for it and done pretty well on keeping costs down on everything. . . I think it's a

> worthwhile cause if the district can work it out financially (school board member in school on warning status,10/10/09).
>
> As we look forward at curtailments, we're going to be really questioning whether we're going to be able to afford to go through with this process. It's an expensive one, because it's a lot of time and financial investment. So it's going to be a real question whether we're going to be able to afford that (superintendent in school on probation status, 08/24/09).

While most of the schools had some level of concern about the cost of accreditation and time involved, opinions differed more as to whether or not the investment is worthwhile. Most of the interviewees felt that the benefits of accreditation were worth the time and financial cost, or felt they had no choice but to seek accreditation because of public expectations for accreditation. While most schools felt the benefits outweigh the costs, many interviewees voiced the sentiment that the costs were high and could be reduced to make it more affordable for schools. The three schools on probation status and one school on warning status said they were questioning if the accreditation was worth the cost, and one of the schools on probation said they are giving serious thought to discontinuing their effort to obtain accreditation.

When interviewed for this study, NEASC Commission officials acknowledged that they have heard concerns about the cost of accreditation from schools in the New England region, in light of the current economic crisis. Membership dues were increased at a lower rate recently, in consideration for the budget constraints schools are facing. Officials said some schools have asked to pay their dues in installments rather than all at once, but did not indicate that any schools have sought to delay their team visit to post-pone the cost of the team's travel expenses. The cost for schools to conduct the surveys and have the results processed is almost double if the school chooses to use paper surveys instead of electronic surveys. NEASC officials indicated that while most schools still use paper surveys for parents, they have seen an increase in the use

of electronic surveys, which can be more quickly processed and reported. NEASC is not currently considering a reduction in the number of team members. NEASC officials emphasize that the work required of team members is already very demanding, involving long work hours during the four-day visit.

Perceptions of Benefits

The interviews with school leaders revealed several different ways the accreditation process may benefit the school community. The most significant benefit that interviewees described was the self-reflection and review of the self-study. Interviewees commented that providing time and a structure for teachers to take a deeper look at what they do is not something that might occur during the normal school day, or that teachers would engage in on their own given the endurance of isolation in teaching practice. They felt that this process of critical self-review is a necessary foundation for developing goals for school improvement. Comments included the following:

> It allowed us to look at our school through a focused lens. . . to critically look at what we are doing well and areas we need to improve on. . . . It was an eye-opener (principal, 9/14/09).

> The self-assessment is just crucial. . . . How are we doing? What are we doing? . . . . Sometimes you have to be pushed to do that. It's just a hard look. . . .That is a real benefit to the process (school board member, 9/11/09).

> As teachers, we tend to close the door and we become an entity unto ourselves. So it's very important that a group like this comes in and kind of opens that door, and shakes it up a little bit, and makes people look at what they're doing. . . . I think it makes them look at things that they felt happy with, and contented with (school board member, 09/19/09).

> The one thing that it does the most for us, is it gets teachers to talk to each other about what they're doing in the classroom. We just don't do enough of that (principal, 09/03/09).

Interviewees said that the accreditation process also supports their school's efforts to improve and to meet state and regional standards. They described improvements such as student advisory programs, more community involvement in school governance, improved communication with students and community members, and work to align mission statements, curriculum, assessment, and instructional practice. Many people also commented on the value of having "a fresh set of eyes" and the opportunity to gain new ideas or suggestions from other experienced educators on the visiting team. Some comments were:

> Any time you have someone from outside come in and say, "Here are the standards that schools are using across New England, and here's where you are in relation to those standards", things are improved here, educationally, curriculum things have improved (superintendent, 8/26/09).
>
> I think that accreditation is a standard that we set or a goal that we set for ourselves in order to continually attain the quality of education. . . accreditation is a plus because it's a reminder that you need to be continually attaining high standards at all times (school board member, 09/20/09).

Some of the administrators and board members we interviewed said that some teachers in their schools were resistant to change, or that schools tend to become "complacent" with their successes and fail to strive for improvement. These individuals felt the findings of the self-review and/ or NEASC team report helped to support the efforts of school leaders to encourage new directions in curriculum or instruction and assessment practices. However, some interviewees noted that where veteran teachers tightly controlled the self-study process and did not seriously engage in a critical self-review, the usefulness of the self-study and the NEASC report were more limited, as they described current practices rather than goals for improvement.

Another benefit of the self-review and NEASC report is the potential for validation of current practices. Interviewees said that finding strengths in the school's curriculum and

practices is encouraging to teachers and helps morale. Having an outside panel of peer educators determine that the school is doing well in meeting regional standards confirms that the school is headed in a good direction. One superintendent commented: "It puts another set of professional eyes on the work that the school does, and affirms the direction. . . and affirmation is very important" (09/09/09). Another superintendent said: "It validated the good, hard work that they [teachers] always do. Having the good curriculums" (08/24/09). A third superintendent commented: "The visitation is valuable in that it validates your self-study. But most of the value is in the process and results of the self-study" (08/14/09).

Similarly, interviewees described how the accreditation process provides information to the broader community about the quality of the school and helps to maintain a positive public perception of the school. The self-study and the NEASC report describe things the school is doing well. Interviewees said that public confidence in the school is important politically, if the school hopes to maintain strong local support for their school budget and, for some schools, continue to attract tuition students from other communities. Some comments were:

> Public perception—if you didn't have it, it creates a lot of questions, a lot of uncertainty, a lot of skepticism (superintendent, 9/11/09).
>
> There's a general perception out there that if you're not an accredited high school you are substandard (superintendent, 08/14/09).
>
> It's extremely important. There's a great deal of pride in this community, from the sports program all the way to the academics. So for them to receive the accolades from NEASC because of the work that has been done and is continuing to be done by educators here, that's very important to the community (principal, 09/09/09).
>
> I think it benefited our high school because the faculty, and the students and the parents participated. We all took something out of it. As a board member, I learned where some of the weaknesses were, and some of the strengths (school board member, 08/26/09).

Interviewees from five schools said that accreditation is very important to their community, expected by their community, or a "point of pride". They indicated that their communities are willing to raise the necessary funding to support the cost of accreditation and to address facilities concerns or other recommendations that result from the accreditation. Interviewees from the other six schools had more mixed views. In these schools, superintendents typically felt that accreditation was important to the community while principals and school board members were more skeptical about the level of public interest and concern about accreditation. Some of these interviewees noted the small number of parents who attend public information meetings on accreditation or other school efforts.

While interviewees strongly asserted that there are important benefits for teachers and the school if the school maintains accreditation, there were conflicting views about the extent to which accreditation benefits students. On the one hand, interviewees expressed the view that the accreditation process provides objective data that prompt improvements in the quality of the curriculum, instruction, assessment, and other aspects of students' educational experience. On the other hand, interviewees were unsure about how important accreditation is for students individually, particularly with respect to a student's success in being admitted to post-secondary education. Interviewees from five schools felt the accreditation process had helped to improve their school's educational quality generally, four schools indicated more mixed views, and two schools said their teachers made the biggest difference in school quality, not their participation in accreditation. Interviewees from most schools felt they were already doing a good job meeting state and federal standards in education without the accreditation process, while three schools indicated they feel accreditation supports their work in meeting standards.

When asked about the importance of accreditation for students individually, the majority of interviewees were unsure whether high school accreditation would have an impact on a student's application to post-secondary education. Several people expressed the view that students who are home-schooled and students from other non-accredited schools in Maine are still able to gain acceptance to "good" colleges or universities. Only two schools consistently indicated the view that accreditation increases the success of a student's college application. The following comments reflect these different views:

> I truthfully don't know. The feeling is that if a high school is not accredited, children have a hard time getting into college (school board member, 09/19/09).
>
> The number one reason we don't steer away [from the accreditation process] is the fear that colleges are going to not accept students from non-accredited high schools. We know that's not true, because they do accept kids from non-accredited schools (principal, 09/03/09).
>
> I question whether or not having the accreditation helps our students get into schools, because you have home-schooled kids who get into very good colleges, and graduates from Christian schools, and graduates from these alternative schools get into very good colleges, and none of them have NEASC accreditation. So I don't know whether it would adversely impact our students (school board member, 09/02/09).
>
> I don't think colleges care one way or another. They look at SATs, the type of courses students are taking (principal, 09/09/09).
>
> I feel that it's important to be accredited because it helps the students when they graduate to come form an accredited school (school board member, 8/26/09).

Commitment to Continuing Accreditation

Schools in this study indicated varying degrees of commitment to continuing their effort to seek accreditation. Most interviewees said they feel it is important for their school to be accredited, both because the process stimulates and supports school improvement efforts and because it contributes to the community's positive perception of

school quality. Despite the increased challenge of meeting the financial cost of accreditation, and managing the numerous external demands on teachers' time, most interviewees said they hope to continue the accreditation process.

> I just take it as it's something we have to do. The community expects it. And we need to use it to help improve instruction for our children (principal in school on probation, 8/26/09).
>
> Most people in a community with a school without accreditation would look at that as a red flag. . . . When you look at the monetary commitment and you compare that to the benefits, I look at it as an investment (superintendent in accredited school, 9/11/09).
>
> I want to see all schools be accredited. It's important, to have the same standards for our students, no matter where they go to school (school board member in school on warning status, 10/10/09).

Some interviewees indicated more uncertainty about their district's ability to continue to meet the financial cost of accreditation. In schools on warning and probation status, interviewees expressed mixed levels of commitment to continuing accreditation.

> If I had to make the choice between human resources-- a program for kids, and the label of accreditation, I would probably opt for the programming for the kids. . . . And that may happen with the cliff that we're looking at with curtailments (superintendent in school on warning status, 09/09/09).
>
> The initiatives that are being put in place by the federal and state government, such as NCLB and the implementation of the Maine Learning Results, are certainly holding schools to a certain standard. So you wonder, are we doing two things for the same reason? . . . . The biggest different that I see is NCLB does not look at some of the elements that accreditation does, such as your school and community resources (principal in school on warning status, 09/10/09).
>
> We have seriously considered withdrawing from the process in time and resources because we're just not getting our bang for the buck (principal in school on probation, 09/09/09).

Perspectives of Education Stakeholder Groups

Representatives from the leadership of statewide professional organizations representing superintendents, schools boards, principals, teachers, and special education administrators participated in interviews for this study. The interview data reveal that none of these organizations have official positions on school accreditation. Further, none of the organizations are formally notified when a high school is put on probation after an accreditation visit, and none respond in any systematic way to high schools that have not met accreditation standards or been placed on probation status by NEASC.

When asked for their opinion about NEASC accreditation, the education leaders' responses were remarkably similar and supportive of accreditation. One person stated: "It provides a uniform yardstick of quality and measures what high schools are achieving." Another person reflected on the value of the self-study: "I think it's good for the staff and good for the folks in the school to really take a good look at what they're doing and have some goals as to changes that can be made that are good for kids." Another education leader was supportive of accreditation: ". . . because that stamp of approval is expected by a number of parents of kids who attend high school in a number of Maine communities."

When asked about potential negative aspects of accreditation, all respondents indicated that the financial cost was a major concern. One person stated: "It's extremely expensive and, frankly, for smaller high schools it has a much greater impact on the budget. . . . From a cost standpoint, especially in these times I think that there are schools out there that are evaluating whether that is the best way to spend their money." Another person commented: ". . . as a former school board member we probably wouldn't have done it because of the cost. But the

community wanted it done because their perception of it was that it gave kids something important they needed when they go on to college . . . having an accredited high school."

In summary, these professional organizations have no formal involvement with the accreditation of Maine schools or policy positions on accreditation. Leaders of these organizations are supportive of accreditation as a means of applying quality standards to schools, gaining benefits from reflection and self study, and representing to the local community the quality of the education being provided. All are aware that the financial cost of accreditation is an issue for many schools and is being weighed against its value.

Perspectives of College Admissions Staff

One of the main reasons that high schools seek accreditation is to strengthen students' application to post-secondary institutions. While school leaders in this study were somewhat unsure about how important high school accreditation is in the evaluation of college applications, their perception was that accreditation could only strengthen students' chances of acceptance, particularly for more elite colleges and universities. To investigate the importance of high school accreditation in the college admissions process, this study included a sample of 12 post-secondary institutions in Maine and the New England region for the purpose of conducting phone interviews with experienced college admissions counselors and directors and reviewing on-line documents. Broadly, the interviews asked counselors what criteria are most important in evaluating college applications, how important high school accreditation is in the decision to accept or reject an application, and how non-accreditation may impact that decision.

Across the diverse group of post-secondary schools, there were some differences in the importance they placed on high school accreditation. Yet, most of the counselors we interviewed

agreed on certain points. These schools generally assume that most high schools are accredited, and therefore they do not always look specifically for this credential. Counselors said that the profile a high school submits with a student's application includes information about what year the school was last accredited, though the existence of a probation status might not be mentioned. Information about the school's accreditation is sometimes on the student's transcript. If the high school profile does not mention accreditation, then college admissions counselors would be alerted that the school is most likely not accredited.

Another point of agreement was the contention that a student would not be penalized if the high school is not accredited. College admissions counselors said that it would be unfair to reject a student's application simply because the high school is not accredited or on probation status. The only exception on this point was the University of Connecticut, where a college admissions counselor indicated the school's policy is not to admit students from non-accredited high schools. Some representative comments included the following:

> We try not to penalize the student if the school is not accredited (pubic university in New England, 9/25/09).
>
> Because we're a state university, a public institution, we cannot expect every high school in [the state] to be accredited by the regional organization. So we may have to be more broad-based. We've seen some schools that lost accreditation because of the plumbing in their bathrooms, or the size of their science labs, or things related to facilities that do not have anything to do with the academics (public university in New England, 9/23/09).
>
> I don't think we'd ever not admit a student if they were in a school that wasn't accredited. But it's easier for use to understand the value of the school (small private college in Maine, 9/25/09).
>
> We need to look at the student as an individual. We might want to find out more. . . . We wouldn't penalize the student (large private college in New England, 10/05/09).

Across the 12 post-secondary institutions, 11 of the schools did not mention high school accreditation as among the most important factors in college admissions decisions. The University of Connecticut was the only exception. None of the schools mention high school accreditation in the information for prospective students on their websites. For all 12 schools, the student's academic performance in high school and the rigor of the student's coursework were the most important factors. Secondary criteria mentioned included the student's essays, letters of recommendation, extracurricular activities, and test scores.

When asked specifically about the importance of high school accreditation in college admissions decisions, the responses were more varied and ranged from "not very important" to "extremely important". Admissions counselors from three selective small private colleges, the two large private colleges, and two of the five state universities in the study placed more importance on high school accreditation than did counselors from the two community colleges in Maine and three state universities. Several of the schools, including the selective private schools and two state universities, indicated it would be more difficult to evaluate a student's application without the certainty that the high school is accredited. For these schools, the credential is important in that it indicates the high school has met certain standards that are consistent for the New England region.

> There's no question that schools that are accredited give us a context to better understand the value of what the school offers. The school has achieved a standard . . . I think it's important enough for school boards and communities to invest in this, especially as college admissions is more competitive. It gives you an outside standard (small private college in Maine, 9/25/09).
>
> Of-course we want to see schools be accredited because it means they've achieved a certain level of quality (small private college in Maine, 9/23/09).
>
> If we don't know a lot about the school, it's hard to judge the student (public university in New England, 9/23/09).

Most of the schools indicated they would look for more information to evaluate the quality of the high school program if the school was not accredited. For example, admissions counselors said they might call a high school guidance office to find out why the school was not accredited or why the school was on probation status. Some counselors said they would look at the rigor of courses offered by the high school, the percentage of high school graduates going on to college, and the caliber of post-secondary institutions the students attend. While most schools indicated a certain degree of willingness to search for more information about a high school when the school is not accredited, some schools indicated that the large number of applications they receive and competitiveness means that it may be impractical for them to spend additional time researching a particular high school. Some admissions counselors from the selective small and large private institutions admitted that non-accreditation of a high school would make a student's application less competitive or successful than other similarly qualified students from accredited high schools, and the University of Connecticut representative indicated that accreditation was a requirement for admissions. Counselors from these schools made the following comments:

> It would contribute to a candidate not looking so great (small private college in Maine, 9/22/09).
>
> If we saw that the high school continually loses accreditation, that might be a concern and it might affect your review of the student's application (large private college in New England, 10/05/09).
>
> We need the information [about accreditation] to be on the transcript. If it's not there, then the student may not be as successful in the applicant pool (large private college in New England, 10/05/09).
>
> If the school is not an accredited high school, then the student would not be admitted (University of Connecticut, 10/05/09).

For the other state universities, non-accreditation would prompt the school to seek more information about the high school. One counselor explained:

> If the school was not accredited, we would ask for more information from the school, go to their website, read the course descriptions, where students went to college, the percentage of students going on to four year high education. We wouldn't exclude a student, but we would work to get more information (public university in New England, 10/1/09).

For the community colleges, counselors indicated non-accreditation would not be an important issue, and would not prevent a student from being accepted. One counselor said: "We aren't going to not accept a student because their high school is not accredited" (Maine community college, 9/22/09).

Limitations of the Study

This study explored local education leaders' perceptions about the costs and benefits of high school accreditation and their experiences with this process using a sample of 11 Maine public high schools that are in different stages of the accreditation process. While the sample was purposefully selected to ensure geographic and demographic diversity, as well as different accreditation outcomes, it is a relatively small sample of schools. It is possible that a larger sample in Maine or across the New England region would surface other views or experiences. A greater limitation of the study is that interviews were conducted with only three or four administrative leaders in each school. These leaders described the involvement and reactions of parents, teachers, and students in the accreditation process, but we did not hear directly from those groups. Similarly, we interviewed only one or two admissions counselors from each of the post-secondary institutions we contacted. Other counselors at the same institutions may hold somewhat different views or interpretations of policy.

Conclusion

This study provides timely research on the costs and benefits of high school accreditation. In general, the research on this topic is sparce, and much of it is quite dated. Two dissertations conducted 20 years ago and a more recent study commissioned by NEASC all used a survey method for research and limited their surveys to local education leaders. This study contributes data from in-depth interviews, and also compares the views of respondents according to the school's accreditation outcome or status. This study included questions about the financial cost and time involved in the accreditation process, which other studies did not examine. This study also contributes to the literature by describing the perceptions of a wide variety of stakeholders: local education leaders, statewide educational organizations, and colleges and universities throughout New England. Few studies have looked at the perceptions of college admissions officials about the importance of high school accreditation (Thrash & Hall, 1989), and none recently. Finally, the study provides data describing the perceptions of local education leaders in Maine, which complements the data already collected in Massachusetts (Flynn, 1997), New Hampshire (Cushing, 1999), and the New England region as a whole (NEASC, 2006).

The findings from this study indicate that while local schools continue to value the benefits of the accreditation process, there is growing concern about the ability of school districts to meet the financial cost for accreditation. Schools are also questioning whether their teachers can manage the workload of accreditation on top of other pressing state and federal mandates, and to what extent the accreditation work overlaps with or provides additional information that is not included in state or federal accountability efforts.

The state of Maine required high school accreditation only briefly from about 1989 to 1991, but currently regards accreditation as a local choice. NEASC is the only accrediting agency recognized by the state. While the vast majority of public secondary schools in Maine do seek accreditation through NEASC, a few schools, primarily located in northern and western Maine, are not currently accredited. Currently, five public high schools in Maine are on probation status, and one of these schools has been on probation for over six years. The schools on probation status share a common need—community funding for education generally and for renovation of aging and/or crowded facilities specifically.

For a majority of the 11 public high schools we studied in Maine, education leaders held positive perceptions of the accreditation process and its value in promoting school improvement. This finding is consistent with earlier survey research in other states and the New England region (Cushing, 1999; Flynn, 1997; NEASC, 2006). While education leaders acknowledged the time and stress for teachers, they emphasized the benefits of the self-study in supporting reflection, goal-setting, and school improvement. The self-study helped schools to launch new programs or structures, such as student advisory programs and school governance councils, to improve communication with students and community members, and to revise and align mission statements, curriculum, assessment, and instructional practice. Education leaders generally described positive views of the NEASC team visit, praising the team members and chair persons for their hard work, professionalism, and fairness. A few schools described negative experiences and perceptions of the team visit which, in some cases, was linked to the negative outcome or accreditation status. Most schools were not surprised by the recommendations issued by NEASC, but schools were split on whether the recommendations were fair and achievable. Schools on probation status were less positive in their view of the recommendations. Still, most

schools saw the team visit as an opportunity to have an external review against regional education standards, to obtain validation of the curriculum and practices, and to inform the broader community about the school's strengths. Most of the education leaders felt accreditation was important for their community, and something they could not drop. This finding is also consistent with earlier studies in other states (Cushing, 1999; Flynn, 1997).

There was less agreement over the importance of high school accreditation for students, particularly for gaining acceptance at post-secondary institutions. Most of the local education leaders we interviewed were unsure how non-accreditation would impact college admissions decisions. Some held the view that students from non-accredited high schools would still gain acceptance at more competitive colleges and universities, while others disagreed. Interviews with college admissions counselors from 12 post-secondary institutions in Maine and New England revealed some differences in the importance they place on accreditation. These institutions shared an expectation that most high schools would be accredited, but admissions counselors said they try not to penalize a student if their high school is not accredited. The major criteria for college admissions decisions for these institutions centers on the student's academic coursework and performance. High school accreditation was not mentioned as a major or secondary factor, except by the University of Connecticut. However, the small private and large private colleges place more value on the credential of accreditation, viewing this as an important indicator that a high school is meeting standards. These schools indicated that a student's application would be less competitive or successful if it did not include information that the high school is fully accredited. While empirical research from the perspective of college admissions is scarce, the findings of this study and earlier studies (Thrash and Hall, 1989) demonstrate the growing

importance of high school accreditation in the increasingly competitive college admissions process, particularly for more selective post-secondary institutions.

Local education leaders in the 11 schools we studied expressed varying levels of concern about the cost of the accreditation process, which runs over a ten-year cycle, and the time it demands from teachers. While a few schools indicated the financial cost has not yet been a significant challenge for their school district, most schools voiced concern about the cost and their ability to continue meeting the cost in the future. Schools on warning or probation status expressed mixed views about whether the benefits of accountability outweighed the costs, and more uncertainty about their commitment to continue the accreditation process. The challenge of securing local or state funding to address outstanding NEASC recommendations for facilities is a major obstacle for these schools, and contributes to a more negative view of the accreditation process and benefits. A majority of the schools in this study indicated concern about the impact of dramatic budget cuts that districts in Maine and elsewhere are facing. Mid-year budget recisions have particularly challenged districts. Another concern is the competing demands on the district's fiscal resources, which may include significant costs to maintain or renovate aging and/or crowded school facilities. Schools also cited the cost of personnel time to support the self-study work and report writing involved in accreditation. Some interviewees suggested ways that NEASC could reduce the cost of accreditation for schools. The suggestions included lowering the membership dues, cost of accreditation materials and publications, and reducing the number of people on the visiting team.

While local education leaders and representatives of statewide education groups were supportive of the accreditation process, they were sensitive to the external pressures of accountability and fiscal constraints. Local education leaders felt that accreditation supports

school improvement, but sometimes forces the school to delay other professional development needs and implementation of reforms. While local education leaders noted the overlap in accountability and accreditation work, they noted that accreditation addresses some areas that accountability mandates do not, such as funding and facilities. Interviewees, including a staff member of the state educational agency, said that accreditation provides a valuable, qualitative evaluation of the school, which is different than the quantitative evaluation of student assessment results that is the focus of accountability requirements. Despite the challenges of cost and time, most schools in this study indicated a commitment to continue seeking accreditation.

Areas for Future Research

The existing research focuses on administrators' perceptions of accreditation, but does not include the perspectives of teachers and parents. Future studies could explore the perceptions of other stakeholder groups, to assess their awareness of accreditation and the value they place on accreditation.

The current study allowed for in-depth interviews with a limited number of respondents and schools in Maine. A larger survey of schools and school leaders in Maine, including elementary and middle grade levels, would contribute to the literature and our understanding of the costs and benefits of accreditation, and would provide data to compare the impacts across different grade spans.

While this study collected data on the financial costs and time involved to support accreditation at the local level, many schools did not maintain detailed records of their time and expenses. Data could be collected from a sample of schools to obtain a more detailed picture of

the time spent by staff and administrators on work related to the self-study, team visit, and follow-up reporting, as well as a break-down of financial costs for the accreditation work.

This study examined the accreditation process and its perceived value. A future study should identify and assess the changes in teaching and learning that result from the accreditation experience.

This study identified secondary schools in Maine that are not accredited. It would be worthwhile to explore why these schools choose not to seek accreditation, and how the views of these local education leaders compare with those of accredited schools.

Finally, more research is needed to understand the impact of school accreditation for students applying to college. Indicators of student achievement, post-secondary acceptance and completion rates, and the selectivity of the four-year post-secondary institutions that accept students from Maine could be compared for a sample of accredited and non-accredited schools.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Maine Education Stakeholder Groups Included in Interviews:

Maine School Superintendents' Association (MSSA)

Maine School Boards' Association (MSBA)

Maine Principals' Association (MPA)

Maine Educational Association (MEA, representing teachers)

Maine Administrators of Services for Children with Disabilities (MADSEC)

Appendix B

Colleges and Universities Included in College Admissions Interviews:

Regional Public Universities:

University of Maine, Orono

University of New Hampshire, Durham

University of Vermont, Burlington

University of Connecticut, Storrs

University of Rhode Island, Kingston

Community College in Maine:

Eastern Maine Community College, Bangor, ME

Small Private Colleges/ Universities in Maine:

Bates College, Lewiston

Bowdoin College, Brunswick

Colby College, Waterville

Husson University, Bangor, ME

Large Private Colleges in New England:

Boston College, MA

Dartmouth College, NH

Appendix C

Interview Protocol for High Schools

Preparation for NEASC Team Visit

1. Could you describe the preparation process of accreditation in your school?
    a. When are you notified?
    b. Who are the key personnel involved?
    c. What must you do as an administrator to prepare?
    d. What is required/ expected of staff prior to team visit?
    e. Approximately how many person-hours do you and your staff spend in preparation for the team visit? Including meetings?

2. What are the financial expenses associated with preparing for the team visit?
    a. Are any staff compensated or do the receive stipends for extra hours? If so, how much and is it budgeted as costs associated with accreditation?
    b. Printing, surveys, mailings?
    c. Any other costs incurred as a result of preparation for the team visit?

3. Are there any disadvantages with respect to time spent away from other duties? For you? Other administrators? For faculty?

4. How do staff typically respond to or feel about this preparation process prior to team visit?

5. As an administrator, is there anything that you do to address staff concerns or impact on morale?

6. Are there any school benefits associated with the preparation process?

7. Are there any disruptions for students (classes, extra curricular activities)?

Team Visit -

1. Could you describe what happened during the team visit to your school?
    a. What are the costs associated with the visit? How is this budgeted?
    b. What are your duties as an administrator? (i.e., meetings with staff? meetings with team? arrangements for stay?)
    c. How long does a team typically stay?
    d. What are the expectations of your faculty and staff during the visit?

e. Are there extra hours required of staff during the visit?
f. How do staff typically respond to or feel about the team visit?
g. Are teaching duties or activities interrupted during this visit?
h. Are students interrupted during this visit?

2. Are there any benefits to the school associated with the team visit?

3. Were recommendations by the visiting team beneficial/helpful? (probe: Why or why not?)

4. In what areas did your school receive recommendations for improvement?

5. Does your school require more effort to comply with NEASC standards? What else is required and how does that affect staff and school operations?

Outcomes of Team Visits

1. Was the high school accredited? Were there any conditions?

2. Does the district need to proceed with further planning to meet standards? Describe.

3. Do you believe team recommendations are relevant and contribute to the overall quality of your school?

4. Do you believe the school meets or exceeds federal and state standards without accreditation through NEASC?

5. What benefits do you associate with school accreditation through the NEASC process?

6. Do you believe students receive a higher quality high school education as a result of NEASC accreditation? Explain.

7. How soon will changes recommended by the team be implemented?

8. Do you see long-term positive outcomes associated with NEASC approval?

9. Are the costs (financial and time) associated with accreditation a challenge for your district? Do you believe the benefits outweigh the costs? Why or why not?

10. Is there a difference in post-secondary acceptance rates for accredited vs. non-accredited high school graduates?

Consequence of Non-accreditation

1. Do you believe that not continuing to update your accreditation would affect your high school? In what ways? What would be the impact for students?

2. Would non-accreditation for your high school impact your school community? How?

Appendix D

Interview Protocol for Education Stakeholder Groups

1. Does your organization believe there are benefits to having high schools accredited by NEASC? What are they?

2. Does your organization feel there are any negative aspects to the NEASC accreditation process?

3. How important is it for Maine high schools to continue to obtain NEASC accreditation?

4. How important is it for students to attend high schools that are accredited by NEASC?

5. Is your organization aware when schools fail to be reaccredited or are "on probation" with NEASC?

6. Does your organization respond to that situation in any way? How?

7. Does your organization have a position on whether or not Maine high schools should be accredited?

Appendix E

Interview Protocol for College Admissions Interviews

1. What are the most important factors or criteria your [college/ university] considers in deciding whether to accept a student for undergraduate admissions?

2. What are some other factors?

3. Do you look at whether or not the student's high school is accredited?

4. How would you know if the high school is not accredited?

5. How important is high school accreditation in your decision?

6. How does it impact your decision when the high school is not accredited?