



National Council for Private School Accreditation

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ACCREDITATION/REGULATION OF PRIVATE SCHOOLS: A SKETCH

Since the Commission on Excellence in Education—the "Blue Ribbon" panel appointed by former President Ronald Reagan and spearheaded by Reagan's first secretary of education, Terrel Bell, released **A Nation At Risk: The Imperative For Educational Reform**, the issue of increasing accountability of schools by applying more stringent standards has been widely discussed at both state and federal levels. Congress, state legislators, governors and other policy makers have enacted laws, regulations and policies designed to make schools (in most instances, specifically public schools) more responsive and effective. Reagan's second secretary of education, Bill Bennett, maintained the momentum with his **What Works** and **James Madison Schools** publications.

Regulation of private schools and certification of private school faculty members and administrators have also been recurring themes in during the discussions on school reform. Inevitably, there are claims that private schools are unregulated or underregulated and therefore not sufficiently accountable to the public. Also, many perceive that private school teachers are not adequately credentialed. The fact is, both these claims are unfounded. An overwhelming majority of private school children attend schools that are accredited or approved by state and regional agencies, or private school accrediting agencies which are recognized by federal, national, regional or state agencies. And an overwhelming majority of private school teachers hold at least a bachelor's degree.

Recent figures from the U. S. Department of Education (**Private Schools in the United States: A Statistical Profile, With Comparisons to Public Schools**) indicate there are over 5.4 million children attending over 28,000 private elementary and secondary schools. This is approximately 12% of the total school age population and 25% of the total number of elementary and secondary schools.

Of these 5.4 million private school children, over 65% are in grades K through 8. Also, of these 5.4 million children, approximately 86% attend church-affiliated schools.

Staffing the 28,000-plus private schools are 404,000 full and part-time teachers. Private school teacher certification is mandatory in only about a dozen states. However, 62% of private high school teachers are state certificated, and 95% of all private school teachers hold at least a bachelor's degree.

Surveys conducted by the Florida Department of Education (1980) and the U.S. Department of Education (1985) vividly illustrate the diversity among the states in their approaches to regulating private schools. Three states reported mandatory accreditation programs for private schools; however one exempted church-affiliated schools and another state exempted high schools. Thirteen states administered mandatory approval programs, while twenty-eight states administered voluntary accreditation and/or approval programs. Several states provided private school administrators with the option of selecting either accreditation or approval.

Approximately twenty states, including Florida, Connecticut, Washington, Mississippi, New Hampshire, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia "unofficially" or "officially" recognize private education accrediting associations.

A 1992 unpublished, informal survey conducted by Dwight Crum (Mr. Crum served as U. S. Commissioner of Education Sidney Marland's private education advisor in the U.S. Office of Education and as deputy to the Executive Assistant to the Secretary for Private Education indicates approximately 4,500 private elementary and secondary schools are accredited by the six regional accrediting associations.

However, in addition to the 4,500-plus private schools which are accredited by the regional associations, schools belonging to private school associations administering their own accreditation programs for member schools frequently enter into joint or reciprocal arrangements with the regional associations (e.g., General Conference of Seventh Day Adventist Schools, Lutheran Church Missouri Synod Schools, Association of Christian Schools International, etc.)

Also, for the past twenty-five years or so, in states such as those previously cited, state departments of education have recognized -- officially or unofficially -- accreditation programs operated by independent school organizations, state Catholic conferences, Seventh Day Adventist unions, Lutheran synods, and other private school agencies. In some instances, state department of education accreditation/approval site visits are conducted concurrently with private school accrediting association site visits. In other instances, state agencies will accept accreditation by the private school association in lieu of state accreditation. And, on occasion, state department of education officials serve on private school associations' accrediting commissions.

The concept of self-accreditation for private schools has become increasingly popular over the past seven years. Several states, including New Mexico, Oklahoma, Hawaii and Kentucky are seriously considering moving in that direction. One of the catalysts for its expanded use was the National Association of State Boards of Education's (NASBE) *Public and Nonpublic School Relationships: Lighthouse Approaches For State Policymakers*. In 1984, NASBE, with funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Private Education and Office of the Secretary, prepared and disseminated a report profiling four states maintaining favorable working relationships between public and private education. Partners in this project were such diverse organizations as the National Conference of State Legislatures, Education Commission of the States, Council for American Private Education, and the American Association of Christian Schools. The Association of Christian Schools International and the Council of Chief State School Officers were also "unofficially" involved in the development of the report.

A factor which prompted NASBE to undertake the Lighthouse report was the volatile 1981-1985 confrontation between the state of Nebraska and the Nebraskans for Religious Freedom. In this situation, the state required that for a private school to be approved its faculty members must hold state teachers' certificates. Consequently if the school were not state approved, the parents would be violating the state compulsory attendance requirements and be subject to imprisonment. Several Christian schools refused to comply with the teacher certification requirements, maintaining that their teachers were ministers; therefore, not subject to secular licensing. A pastor and seven parents were imprisoned for several weeks and over one hundred ministers were bodily evicted from the church/school by state authorities. At issue was the fact that the schools wished to be judged by the outcome of their educational programs i.e. student achievement as measured by national standardized tests. Ultimately, the governory recommended testing of private school students as a legitimate alternative to state approval.

In 1985 several of the private school organizations which accredited their member schools worked with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Private Education in seeking Federal recognition of their accreditation programs. However, the Department's General Counsel ruled that there was no statutory authority for the Department to recognize any elementary-secondary accrediting agency -- including regional associations such as the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, etc.

As a result of General Council's memo, efforts to obtain recognition of private school accreditation programs ceased. At the same time, state education reform initiatives and difficulties resultant from the lack of recognition of private school self-policing (e.g., eligibility to participate in corporate and matching gift programs, transferability of student records, etc.) illustrated the need for some mechanism which would address their concerns.

FORMATION OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR PRIVATE SCHOOL ACCREDITATION

The concept resurfaced in the Spring of 1992, when the same organizations began exploring the possibility of developing a national entity (not Federal) which would essentially serve as an "accrediting association of private school accrediting associations".

Organizations representing the diversity of private education, such as the General Conference of Seventh Day Adventists, Association of Christian Schools International, International Christian Accrediting Association (Affiliated with Oral Roberts University), Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church, Assemblies of God, National Christian School Association (Pentecostal), National Society of Hebrew Day Schools (Orthodox Jewish schools), Catholic schools and independent schools have all expressed interest in pursuing the concept of self-policing of private schools through a nationally-recognized self-accreditation program.

In September 1993, nine of these organizations agreed to formalize the process, and established the National Council For Private School Accreditation (NCPSA). Since September, six other associations have become members of the Council. And, in order to assure that NCPSA recognition is credible, former U.S. Secretary of Education Terrel Bell, Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools Elementary School Commissioner John Stoops, Independent Schools Association of the Central States President Emeritus Tom Read and Connecticut Department of Education Private School Approval Consultant Marie Della Bella were asked to serve on the Council as at-large representatives.

Support for the effort was provided by the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), several state departments of education and national public school organizations.

NEXT STEPS

NCPSA will be incorporating as a 501-C3 nonprofit organization (Attachment 1: Articles of Incorporation) within the next month. Our Washington D.C. address is 601 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Suite 900, Washington, D.C., 20004). We shall naming additional at-large representatives.

Because NCPSA's membership includes respected leaders of private school accrediting/membership organizations as well as such highly respected educators as Terrel Bell, John Stoops, Tom Read and Marie Della Bella, the establishment of the National Council For Private School Accreditation (NCPSA) -- an accrediting association of private school accrediting associations -- will serve to assist governmental agencies in accepting private school accreditation as a welcome alternative.

In this way, those who advocate increased private school regulation and those who advocate private school autonomy should both be satisfied. States would save valuable dollars previously spent on enforcement or on litigation.

As the education reform movement continues, the issue of private school accountability should be addressed by private education leaders, state policymakers, and the key associations. Cooperation among these groups to implement reasonable state policies should ultimately result in establishing appropriate regulatory processes for private schools which utilize their existing systems of assessment, evaluation and credentialing. That way everyone -- especially kids-- will win!

