

**MIDDLE STATES ASSOCIATION OF
COLLEGES AND SCHOOLS**

**COMMITTEE ON
INSTITUTION-WIDE ACCREDITATION**

**REPORT OF THE
ACCREDITATION FOR GROWTH
VALIDATION TEAM**

**Damascus Community School
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INTRODUCTION

The Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools is a non-governmental, nonprofit, peer-administered organization of diverse educational institutions committed to the highest quality education for students. Its purpose is to ensure the continuous improvement of its member schools through effective leadership, self-study, peer evaluation, accreditation, exemplary programs, and supportive services. For more than 75 years, the Association has provided leadership in school improvement for its member schools in six states in the United States, the Caribbean, Europe, the Middle East, the subcontinent of Asia, and Africa.

Accreditation for Growth (AFG) is a unique accreditation process that uses strategic and site-based planning as vehicles for school improvement and growth in student performance. The process, developed by the Commission on Secondary Schools (CSS), Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, provides linkages between district and site planning efforts. The primary determinants of progress are actual student results rather than the input of resources. *AFG* requires the school to base its objectives on a vision of a preferred future and thus is a future-oriented process. *AFG* provides for a continuous review of programs and services and allows diverse constituent groups to participate in charting the future of the school.

The *Accreditation for Growth* process requires that the school meets CSS standards. A school site plan, developed by a planning team of representative stakeholders from the school and community, should be consistent with the vision of the district's strategic plan. It should contain the following components: mission, beliefs, two to four measurable student performance objectives, and action plans that detail activities, timelines, individuals/groups responsible, and resources provided to accomplish these objectives.

In addition, a planning process should be in place that will ensure that the school has both the capacity and the will to implement its action plans. The planning process typically includes an internal coordinator responsible for monitoring the plan, procedures for communicating planning activities to the school community, provision for annual reviews of the plan, and one or more action plan teams responsible for implementing the plans.

By choosing *AFG*, Damascus Community School has made several commitments.

- 1) It has committed to focusing on the end result – improved student performance – as the primary priority for school improvement efforts.
- 2) It has committed to operating from a vision of where it wants and needs to go with the mission and beliefs serving as a unifying force for change.
- 3) It has committed to including a varied spectrum of stakeholders in the process of continually defining a preferred vision, in developing the means to get closer to that vision, and in implementing action plans developed by these stakeholders.
- 4) It has committed to a process where progress will be continuously reviewed.

- 5) It has agreed to participate in a peer review and external validation process by accepting outside visitors.

The Middle States Validation Team is a group of professional educators appointed by the Committee on Institution-Wide Accreditation to visit a school using the *Accreditation for Growth* process. The purpose of the team visit is threefold. First, the team assesses the planning processes used by the school in developing the plan; the team determines the school's adherence to planning requirements as outlined by the Commissions as well as whether the planning processes will ensure continuous improvement and commitment. Second, the team reviews the content of the school's plan to judge the validity and clarity of the plans along with the level of commitment to implementation. Finally, it is the team's responsibility to review the school's maintenance and implementation of the MSA standards.

The five members of the Validation Team to Damascus Community School used the three and one-half day visit to review written documents regarding the plan and its development. The Team interacted with as many of the school's stakeholders as possible regarding their knowledge, understanding and support for the plan. The groups interviewed included the internal coordinator, the Board of Education, staff, administration, student leaders, a randomly selected group of students, guidance counselors, library staff, the Planning Team, supervisor of buildings and grounds, student activities coordinator and house advisors. The Team concluded that it had a full and rich experience of the school leading to the following report and assessment.

CONTEXT OF THE SCHOOL

Located in the oldest continually inhabited city in the world, DCS has an interesting and varied history. It came into being in 1957 among the oasis of apricot orchards and farmland which formed the western limit of Damascus. Supposedly students who attended the school during these early years spent their recess periods playing in the pastures where cows grazed, and farmers came to the classroom doors to sell their dairy products.

During the last 10 years, the DCS school population has ranged between approximately 300 – 350 students. In August, 2006, the school was serving 335 students who have citizenship links to 42 countries. The largest group represented at DCS are 79 Americans (24%), followed by 62 Syrians (19%), and 33 Canadians (10%). Other nationalities which have double digit enrollment are Japan (16 students), India (14 students), Germany (10 students), and the Netherlands (10 students). The other 35 countries constitute the remaining 32% of DCS student body.

Many of the American and Canadian students are of Syrian descent, carrying both North American and Syrian passports. Approximately 112 students (33% of the student body) are affiliated with foreign government state departments or agencies (embassies, consulates, UN, aid organizations). A further 52 (15%) are affiliated with foreign companies (primarily those connected with the oil industry), 160 (47%) are affiliated with locally owned or managed businesses, and 18 (5%) are children of staff members.

The DCS staff can be characterized as extremely hard working and student-centered. Just like DCS families, teachers make the school a central part of their lives. You can find teachers on campus late into the evening during the week and during all hours of the weekend. Many teachers provide academic support to students through study groups or individual tutoring after school. AP teachers organize study sessions for their students before their AP exams in May. The school typically sends 10 – 20 staff members each year to NESAs- sponsored conferences and 10 – 15 teachers request funding to attend professional workshops or institutes during the summer months.

A constant challenge facing the school is recruiting teachers to come to DCS. Many candidates are hesitant to come to the Middle East due to the political tension that is associated with the area. American teachers are also aware of the strained relationship between the American and Syrian governments. The school has also had to overcome negative press about Syria during the heart of the recruiting season, late January – February, these last two years. In February, 2005, Syria was linked to the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri, and in February, 2006, demonstrators burned the Danish and Norwegian embassies.

However, once teachers make the decision to join the DCS staff, they tend to enjoy both living in Damascus and working at the school. For example, in August 2002, 11 new teachers joined the school. One left after his initial two year contract finished, 3 left after the third, 7 left after their 4th year, and one is in her 5th year at DCS. Many teachers in this group expressed hesitation to recruit because they were content in Damascus. In fact, due to budget constraints, the board developed and approved a policy that overseas teachers need to leave after 7 years. This policy

impacted 7 teachers who had already been at the school 7 years or longer. These teachers were given a two year grace period to make a transition to another school.

The staff's demographics are: 77% overseas and 23% local; 60% hold masters or higher degrees or higher degrees; 58% are American, 19% are Canadian, and 23% are affiliated to Syria.

The AFG protocol is an ideal structure for DCS as it will require it to increase its reflections on assessment practices. For example, while DCS grade 3 – 8 students have achieved satisfactory scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), their performance over the last seven years has remained relatively stable. The data also shows that DCS students' reading performance is significantly below their language and math skill levels.

DCS high school grade levels have shown substantial gains on the P-SAT over the last four years (A.7-2). The school profile also provides data about how well students perform on their Advanced Placement (AP) Exams.

The school's board of directors is an appointed board. The U.S. Ambassador*, as the sponsor of the school, retains the right to serve as final arbiter on matters involving the school. The board consists of nine members, 8 of whom were appointed by the Ambassador. The school policy manual dictates that 3 members come from the American Embassy Community, including the chairperson, and 5 members, including the vice-chair, come from stakeholder groups such as other embassies, foreign company expatriates, and the Syrian community. The final member, representing the school's Parent-Teachers Association, is elected by the community. A non-voting teacher representative also attends board meetings.

*The US embassy has not been led by an ambassador since March 2004 when the US government withdrew her from the country after the assassination of Rafi Hariri, the former Lebanese prime minister in February 2004. The charge de affairs officer becomes responsible for overseeing school affairs and governing structures.

The major factors that impact the school are its uncertain future on its current site, the ability to purchase and build a permanent campus, and property and construction prices which are increasing faster than the financial return the school is receiving from its investments. In addition, the strained political relationship between the United States and Syria and political uncertainty in the geographical region greatly impact the school's efforts to establish and maintain long term initiatives. With Iraq, Lebanon, and Israel as three of its five neighbors, the school constantly has to be aware of which way the political winds are blowing. Especially discouraging was a bombing attempt at the U.S. Embassy in September, 2006.

Another future situation which will impact the school is Syria's dwindling oil reserves. It is reported that within the next 5 – 10 years, Syria will go from being an exporter to an importer of oil. Oil revenue substantially contributes to the country's budget, and as this decreases it will be interesting to see how the country identifies other ways to obtain revenue. DCS's main concern will be the loss of students who are connected to oil companies.

On the plus side, the DCS community is noted by visitors to the school as being an extremely warm and supportive community. DCS could be considered the heart of the expatriate community living in Damascus. DCS's sense of community can be witnessed almost every day at the end of the school day, when the school's courtyard is filled with parents coming to campus to collect their children. There are innumerable greetings, and new families are quickly added to the social fabric of the school. Even 30 – 40 minutes after school has been dismissed, there will still be clusters of parents chatting while their children play on the school grounds. DCS has an unusual problem in that students don't want to leave school, much preferring to play sports, visit with friends, and do homework together on campus rather than go home. Having a close-knit community is one of the school's greatest strengths.

As mentioned before, one of DCS's greatest challenges has been to find a permanent home for the school. The school is under the direct auspices of the United States Embassy in Damascus and is considered by the Syrian government to be an adjunct operation of the embassy. The government agency that deals with DCS concerns is the Department of Foreign Affairs. The Syrian Department of Education does not recognize DCS as an authorized school and does not validate the coursework students completed at DCS. Therefore, it is difficult for students who attend DCS to transfer to other schools in Damascus. On the flip side, DCS has much more flexibility in designing its curriculum than other private schools in Damascus, which must adhere to educational policies and decisions made by the Department of Education.

Since DCS is not an independent entity, it cannot approach the Syrian government for permission to establish the school at another site. Only the United States government can approach the Syrian government for permission to purchase land for a permanent location for DCS. The embassy has done this on a regular basis for the last twenty years, without any success. In January 2005, the Board of Directors agreed to have the embassy send another letter of inquiry to the Syrian Department of Foreign Affairs to have permission to look for potential properties for the school. In the fall of 2005, board members and the director examined a government property in Sabboura, a rural area 20 minutes from the school's current location, but neither the embassy nor the school has received any decision from the Syrian government about its inquiries.

To complicate the situation, in 2002, the United States Department of State decided that the school needed to start paying rent for the property it occupied. Fortunately in February, 2006, the embassy's charge de affairs and DCS Board of Directors' chairperson, Steve Seche, met with officials in Washington and was able to get an indefinite reprieve from paying rent to the Department. While this news was joyfully received by the community, the situation still stifles the school.

The school over the last decade has accumulated over \$6 million dollars in building reserves to enable it to purchase land and start construction on facilities. The problem is that with rapidly escalating property prices and construction costs, DCS's buying power has shrunk significantly over the last 5 years. The school's current facilities can use significant renovations, most notably a gymnasium and more adequate classrooms for lower elementary and high school classes, but the community is hesitant to invest such funds into permanent facilities when it is

unsure how long the school will be allowed to remain at its current site. The other issue of adding additional buildings is the limited area of the current property.

Until the school is able to comprehensively and conclusively achieve resolution to this situation, the school's effort to develop long term plans is impacted.

Recent exacerbated political dynamics because of strained United States – Syrian governmental relations combined with a horrible school tragedy have impacted the school greatly

In May and April 2006, the school had difficulty in renewing the work visas for its overseas staff members (over 70% of the staff): these visas were necessary for staff members to re-enter the country. Only after numerous meetings between U.S. and Syrian officials, with the involvement of officials from other embassies and international organizations, was the situation rectified on May 17 and 18.

THE PLANNING PROCESS

The Planning Team

The Damascus Community School Accreditation Preparation Committee (APC) consisted of a diverse thirty five member group: ten teachers, five secondary students, three support staff members, two administrators, two board members, and thirteen parents. Members included volunteers as well as chosen community members who had demonstrated levels of support and commitment to DCS. Members were also selected to give the APC a comprehensive demographic range including gender, nationality, and parents of the three school divisions. The school purposefully chose a large APC to ensure continuity despite attrition; however, the group retained an admirable ninety percent of its members, all of whom consistently attended the eighteen meetings held between May 2005 and October 2006. The Validation Team has ascertained that this committee well represented the ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic diversity of the DCS community.

In February 2006, the school's middle school and high school coordinators were added to the APC as the group began the process of identifying its long term objectives. The leadership skills and curricular responsibilities of these individuals mandates that they become strategically involved with the planning process as it moves forward and that they be given every opportunity to dedicate their leadership skills and positions to the school's achievement of its objectives.

All meetings were organized and chaired by the Internal Coordinator, Mark Baker. At a meeting with the Validation Team, the committee expressed its passion and commitment to the school's plan, objectives, and vision. The APC will now be transformed to a School Improvement Committee (SIC). This committee will continue to meet two to three times a year to review the progress of the plan and to oversee the planning process.

In addition to the School Improvement Committee, a Learning Improvement Committee (LIC) comprised of administrators and faculty members, (representing different school divisions), has been created and tasked with implementing all of the three approved action plans. This LIC has also been tasked with improving the learning of all members of the DCS community, including faculty, students, and parents.

The Validation Team urges the school to clearly delineate and communicate the transformation of the APC to the SIC and to also clearly delineate the responsibilities of the SIC as well as the leadership role of the LIC.

Role of the Administration

According to the DCS Self-Study, the former school director, Mike Kent, and the elementary school principal and K-12 curriculum director, Mark Baker, along with the two administrative coordinators, Scott Creeger of the middle school and Sheena Nabholz of the high school, began discussing the accreditation requirements in the first semester of the 2004-2005 school year. Mark Baker shared his experience with the AFG Protocol and strongly felt that the protocol's structure would support and enhance the curriculum development efforts the school was undertaking. He also emphasized that the protocol would demand that the school demonstrate growth each year, as well as assist the administration in focusing staff's attention on program development and students achievement. The administrative council supported the selection of the protocol. Mark Baker presented an overview of the accreditation process and the *Accreditation for Growth* (AFG) to the Board of Directors on December 7, 2004, and the Board of Directors approved engaging in this protocol at that time.

It was decided that the director would serve on the APC but not have any specific leadership responsibilities. John Gates replaced Mike Kent as director in August 2006 and joined the APC. The Validation Team was able to confirm that the new director was completely committed to the process and plan.

In February of 2006, as the APC started the process of identifying long term academic goals, the two coordinators were invited to join the committee. By this time the high school coordinator, Sheena Nabholz, had been named to be the secondary school principal for the 2006-2007 school year.

The leadership and understanding of all four members of the administrative council is essential for the school to successfully reach its objectives. Now that the school is leaving the planning phase, it must actively involve the entire community in the implementation phase. The validation team feels that this may be a challenge since the internal coordinator was organizing and promoting the planning process without the benefit of input from the rest of the administrative council. Developing a greater sense of community ownership for the process may present challenges to DCS as it implements the necessary actions to allow the teaching staff to be successful in developing school programs that will ensure that DCS students achieve the strategic objectives of the plan.

Role of the Governing Body

The Board of Directors of the Damascus Community School has been actively involved in the planning process. In December, 2004 the Board of Directors received a presentation about the purpose of accreditation and the options for protocols available for the accreditation process. The Board of Directors actively supported the *Accreditation for Growth* protocol since it recognized the school's need for a formal planning process. In May, 2005, the Board of Directors formally agreed to use the AFG protocol and completed the MSA AFG Commitment Form.

Three members of the Board of Directors agreed to serve on the Accreditation Preparation Committee. Additional support for the accreditation and planning process is evident from the appointment of an APC member to the Board of Directors for the 2006-2007 school year.

The Board of Directors was regularly informed of the APC's progress and accomplishments, usually through the director's report. At the May, 2006, Board of Directors' meeting, the board formally adopted the school's new mission and beliefs and "gave their blessing" to the selected objectives.

At the Validation Team's meeting with the APC, one of the board members stated that the Board views the plan as "the constitution of the school for the next seven years." Board Members expressed a continued commitment to involve some members of the Board of Directors on the SIC.

Role of the Internal Coordinator

Mark Baker, the Elementary School Principal and school-wide curriculum coordinator at DCS, has served as the Internal Coordinator for the school's planning process since the process began in December 2004. Mr. Baker indicated that the Director of the school in 2004, Michael Kent, had sought him for the position due to his experience and expertise in the planning and accreditation process.

Mark Baker is well versed in the process of planning and the accreditation process as he was the Internal Coordinator at The American School of Johannesburg for five years and also served as the Visiting Team Chairperson for four site visits. He received training from Middle States Association in 2001 and met with MSA officials during the summer of 2005.

The appointment of Mark Baker supports the school's recognition of its need for a structured planning process, an experienced educator to oversee that process, and the school's timely preparation for its reaccreditation.

In his position as Internal Coordinator, Mark Baker was responsible for creating meeting agendas for the APC, chairing all meetings that dealt with the planning and accreditation process, preparing worksheets for the meetings, maintaining minutes of the meetings, distributing and organizing feedback forms, communicating APC and administrative decisions to the greater community, organizing support staff to produce, tabulate, and document the feedback received, and to keep the school on schedule in completing the AFG requirements.

Communication and Awareness Activities

There are at least three distinct reasons for communication in the planning process. One is simply to *inform*, a second is to build *understanding*, and a third is to invite *input*. Stakeholders have a need and a right to know and be involved in what is going on in their school.

The success of the plan, however, is not dependent upon how many people know about the plan. More important is the degree of *shared understanding* about the key elements of the plan, particularly among those stakeholders who must move from vision to reality.

The Validation Team was able to ascertain that the school sought to increase awareness and understanding of the AFG protocol and the planning required by this protocol through the school's weekly newsletter. The newsletter was used to announce the start of the process in 2005, to request community members to join the APC, to complete feedback forms, to publish results from the school survey instruments, and to record the completion of the AFG actions. The Validation Team was provided with copies of all pertinent newsletters and surveys as well as charts of the compiled survey results.

During the Teacher Orientation and Work Week at the beginning of the 2005-2006 school year, an overview of the school strategic planning initiatives was shared with the staff. The main message communicated to the teachers was that they would have minimal accreditation preparation assignments or tasks and that their main responsibilities would be curriculum implementation initiatives, which would be structured through their Program Improvement Plans (PIP's). In February, 2006, the APC members identified actions that the school could take to increase community awareness, understanding, interest, and support for the student learning and AFG initiatives. The members' suggestions were summarized but have not yet been implemented.

In May 2006, the APC identified additional actions the school could take to "get out the message"; however, the actions were put on hold due to events which occurred later in May: the political delay by the Syrian government in issuing new visa to overseas teaching staff and the heartbreaking death of a student on a school trip. These two situations consumed staff and administrative attention during the last six weeks of the school year.

In September, 2006, the school's revised mission was presented to the school community at Elementary and Secondary Back to School Evenings. The additional awareness and communication activities planned were again postponed when the US Embassy was attacked.

Communication and awareness activities remain one of the major challenges facing the school. The communication to all school stakeholders, including faculty, parents, and students, of the transformation of the Accreditation Preparation Committee (APC) to the School Improvement Committee (SIC) and the establishment of a Learning Improvement Committee (LIC) to implement the action plans that will achieve the strategic objectives must become one of the school's priorities. The Validation Team strongly recommends that the school create a Measurement Team to gather, analyze, and report the data obtained through both external and internal assessment tools as the school strives to reach its strategic objectives.

Action Plan / Implementation Teams

Action plans were drawn up for each of the strategic objectives by the principals. The Elementary School Principal developed action plans for reading, writing, and critical thinking for the elementary school, while the Secondary School Principal drew up reading, writing, and creative thinking action plans for the secondary school based upon the Program Improvement Plans of the secondary school teachers.

At the time that the Self-Study of the Damascus Community School was completed, the school included several questions regarding the implementation, adaptation, modification, and measurement of the success of the plans on page 6 of the Self-Study Narrative and Overview of Section C: The Planning Process. This section of the Self-Study concludes with a request: “DCS hopes that the AFG visiting team can assist the school in determining how it will address these questions.”

The original Accreditation Preparation Committee has now completed its duties. Its efforts have achieved a great deal. In an effort to engender commitment and encourage involvement by all who have a stake in the school, the *Accreditation for Growth* process asks the school to involve the broadest possible group of stakeholders in this original Accreditation Preparation Committee. DCS has admirably demonstrated this accomplishment.

The responsibility of monitoring this process, of being the watchdog that will ensure these efforts continue, must now shift to a new committee, the School Improvement Committee (SIC). This committee is now the keeper of the process and is charged with ensuring that DCS stays true to this process as it implements the action plans, evaluates student performance using multiple measures on an annual basis, and reports the annual progress in a public meeting, so that all of the school stakeholders are aware of the school’s successes and challenges. When detailing the annual review process, this report will be delivered every May. The appointment of the School Improvement Committee has now formalized and institutionalized the process – it is a part of what DCS will always do.

It is time for a committee of teachers and administrators working together to carry the work forward. Director John Gates has noted that this committee will be known as the Learning Improvement Committee (LIC). It will be this committee’s charge to annually review the strategic objectives, to reflect on what it has learned from the measurement data provided by the Measurement Team, and to devise an updated Action Plan to move DCS students forward in the areas of reading, writing, and critical thinking. This committee will meet in early September each year to devise a plan for the coming school year and beyond. Later in the month of September, it will present the annual plan to the School Improvement Committee for approval. This process will enable continued expertise where it is required and continued broad-based support for the strategic objectives by DCS’s various stakeholder groups.

Annual Review Process

Effective strategic planning requires that stakeholders understand and become involved in periodic review and updates to the plan. Key to continued improvement is a common understanding of when data is to be gathered, who will conduct analysis, and how often that analysis is to occur, as well as what procedures will be used to make updates to the action plans in response to that analysis. While Middle States has labeled this process an Annual Review, it frequently encompasses activities that happen more than once a year. Celebrations for success are often included and should be considered an integral part of any ongoing strategic plan.

As indicated in other sections of this report, the plans the school has put forth to gauge the progress it makes on the plan it has developed, remains vague. As cited above, the School

Improvement Committee (SIC) is now the keeper of the process and is charged with ensuring that DCS stays true to this process, implements the action plans, and ensures multiple measures are used to evaluate student performance on an annual basis.

The SIC will report the annual progress in a public meeting so all stakeholders are aware of successes and challenges. This report will be delivered every May. The appointment of the School Improvement Committee has now formalized and institutionalized the process – it is a part of what DCS will always do.

This annual report will be delivered by a soon-to-be-appointed Measurement Team consisting of both teachers and administrators. This committee's charge is to use the measures identified in the Strategic Plan, collect student growth data, and report. This will be followed by a report from the Learning Improvement Committee (LIC) which will detail what parts of the action plans have been implemented. The School Improvement Committee will ensure that the plans are followed and that this annual report occurs, but the delivery of the "State of DCS Students on the Strategic Objectives" will be given by the Measurement Team and its Chair, and the LIC and its Chair.

CONTENT OF THE PLAN

The school's action plans for each of the Strategic Objectives were clear and of sufficient quality and depth to reasonably anticipate that they would elicit the desired outcomes. The administration had even engaged in some activities that were not part of the action plans but which are clearly designed to engage all faculty members on pursuing the strategic objectives. As part of their teacher evaluation process, and, as a component of the goal-setting conference, teachers are to reflect and later demonstrate how they will respond individually to helping students in their classes meet the Strategic Objectives. This was in addition to the clear and comprehensive plans that had been developed for the entire school to pursue the meeting of its strategic objectives

Mission

A school's mission should reflect the school community members' deepest desires for what they want the school to represent. Therefore, it is inappropriate for a Validation Team to fundamentally alter the direction or focus that the mission sets. The same is true of belief statements. Only members of the school community can define their vision and identify their deeply held beliefs.

A Validation Team can, however, offer an objective perspective on what is unclear or seems inconsistent or incomplete in these documents. Ultimately, it is the school that has to decide if the Team's comments are legitimate and relevant. It is in this spirit that the following observations on the Damascus Community School mission and beliefs are made.

A mission statement should describe in broad and visionary terms what the school is and is striving to become. It should be outcome-based, providing clarity on the school's audience (whom it serves), its action (what it does), its aim (the purpose for which it exists), and its function (how, in broad terms, it will do it).

The Accreditation Planning Committee spent much time and effort discussing and refining the school's mission statement. This is the third act of mission statement revision that DCS has undergone in the past seven years. The APC was very insistent that the final draft of their mission statement be an accurate reflection of the organization. To that end, they developed a mission statement with more specificity than most. The trade-off for being more specific, according to the Internal Coordinator, was that it sacrificed being succinct. This was discussed by members of the APC, and they reached consensus that this was a trade-off that the committee members were willing to make.

As an APC member commented, "We felt that the former mission statement was too abstract. We wanted things defined before we added a phrase. We asked, "Are we really going to do it?" If not, it shouldn't be in our mission."

The DCS Mission states,

“Damascus Community School provides a rigorous and stimulating American education for the international and host-country students it serves, continually seeking to improve all aspects of its program. At DCS, the college preparatory curriculum fosters the development of intellectual ability, artistic skills, art appreciation, and physical fitness, as well as character development, social responsibility, and emotional maturity. All members of the DCS community will collaborate to prepare students for success in an increasingly complex world.”

Although lengthier than many MSA mission statements, the APC was insistent that it respond not only to the five components that Middle States expects in a mission, but also to enable the mission statement to be of greater specificity. An analysis of the new mission statement does identify the school’s audience (international and host-country students), its action (provide a rigorous and stimulating American education), its aim (for success in an increasingly complex world), identity (the development of intellectual ability, artistic skills, art appreciation, and physical fitness, as well as character development, social responsibility, and emotional maturity), and its function (done through an American education and college preparatory curriculum).

The APC was proud of the clarity that members brought to the mission by providing greater specificity in the area of identity. Defining those components that Committee members felt this constituted “educating the whole child”. The issue of educating the whole child surfaced during the process in which APC members were engaged to define the three areas for strategic objectives. The APC reached consensus that this detailing should be made part of the Mission Statement. The APC made a clear and concerted effort to bring this sometimes nebulous and well-used educational phrase to life for the children of DCS.

The APC made multiple efforts to share the ongoing development of the new mission statement with the stakeholders and to receive and consider their input. This lengthy process resulted in approval by the Board in May 2006. Due to the series of events which happened during that month of May, the Board and Administration chose to delay presentation and celebration of the new Mission Statement until school resumed in the fall 2006. The mission was endorsed by all constituent groups in the school.

The passion with which APC Members spoke of the new Mission Statement clearly indicates that this mission fits this school.

Belief Statements

Belief statements serve as the foundation of a strong strategic plan. They are the formal expression of a school’s fundamental values and serve as its ethical code. Beliefs describe the moral character of a school. In a planning process involving diverse stakeholder groups, they represent the composite of the personal values held by individual planning team members.

Because belief statements are a matter of faith, not a matter of fact, they express the school's overriding convictions, its inviolate commitments. They outline what members of the school community are willing to "go to the mat" defending. Because beliefs identify the "line in the sand", they can be used as a lens through which to examine the worthiness of the school's potential decisions or future actions.

Members of the DCS community believe that:

- Student learning and achievement are the school's top priority.
- High expectations and academic rigor prepare students for continuing education and successful lives.
- Critical thinking must be taught, with opportunities to apply the skills to real problems and situations, in preparation for life in the 21st century.
- The school's most vital resources are teachers who are passionate about their profession and their students. DCS teachers commit to improving their instructional skills in order to better meet the needs of their learners.
- Maturity and responsibility are developed through the shared efforts of students, parents, and teachers.
- Mutual respect across all cultures is essential for intellectual and personal growth.
- Strategic planning must occur at all levels in order for the school to become known as one of the best international schools in the world.

These beliefs were affirmed throughout the interview process. The DCS beliefs are matters of faith and they do express the school's overriding convictions. They were articulated in various interviews. Because they are of good quality and because they represent the values of the school, they can be used to examine the worthiness of the schools' potential decisions and / or future actions.

Objectives

The *Accreditation for Growth* process requires schools to have two to four measurable student performance objectives. Damascus Community School has developed the three objectives that meet all Middle States criteria for *AFG* objectives.

How DCS Chose Its Objectives

February 2006

The two long standing sources of student academic performance data that DCS uses are the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) for students in grades 3 – 8, and the P-SAT exam for students in grades 9 – 11. The last six years of ITBS results and the last three years of P-SAT results were shared with APC members. APC members were asked to examine the data and then make hypothesis statements about the "achievement" of DCS students and program strengths and weaknesses. The main observation is that DCS students scored significantly lower on their ITBS Reading test than on the Language or Math subtests. The second major observation was the substantial gains DCS high school students were making on the P-SAT.

The internal coordinator emphasized the importance of using data to determine if students were making “satisfactory” growth as learners and about making decisions about school programs and instruction. For example, a few years earlier at DCS, some concern was raised by community members about the increased admission of non or limited English speaking (ESL) students and questioned if they would “slow down” the rate of instruction for other students. Using the recently acquired computerized STAR* reading assessment software, the school can now provide data that once the ESL students exit the ESL program their reading levels are comparable to students who have spent the majority of their academic career at DCS.

The APC was informed that a major attribute of the AFG protocol was to collect, identify, and use student data to assist the school in making decisions about its instructional programs. The importance of finding valid and reliable assessment instruments was also discussed and the difficulty of measuring emotional or subjective traits (cultural awareness, tolerance, responsibility, etc.).

The APC recommended that reading and writing (due to its potential across curriculum connections and relevance) be considered as long term AFG objectives for the school, and the school should identify a third and possibly a fourth objective.

February 2006

Staff members were directed to provide feedback concerning how they felt about their students in the areas of academic performance, behavior, work and study habits, respect towards adults, and respect towards peers. They also provided information on students’ specific academic skills and ranked academic skills from area in greatest need of improvement to least need for improvement. In response to the question about student performance exceeding, meeting, or not meeting teacher expectations, the skills that ranked low or of concern were: General Critical Thinking Skills, Math Problem Solving, Writing, and Research.

With regards to the task of prioritizing academic skills from the weakest to the strongest, the weakest ones were Critical Thinking skills (32 pts. selected by 15 teachers), Writing (30 pts. selected by 15 teachers), and Reading (24 pts. selected by 11 teachers).

This data confirmed that Writing and Research were areas of concern and that Critical Thinking skills was the clear choice as an area that students needed the most assistance in improving.

Disaggregated Data Review

One of the points that came out of the APC’s SWOT activity, was the perception of the academic performance and behavior of both host national students and foreign students (both positive and negative views for both groups). Therefore, once teachers returned their feedback about student performance levels, the office staff assisted the internal coordinator in classifying students by their nationalities or geographical origin. The groups organized were: 1 – Syrian, 2 – Syrians who hold a 2nd passport, 3 – Middle Eastern, 4 – North American, 5 – European, 6 – Near East, 7 – Far East. With regards to academic performance and behavior, the group’s received the similar scores.

April 2006

At an in-service meeting, the DCS staff was presented with current data about student progress and feedback of staff’s perception about student academic skills. Also, presented to staff was a list of potential long term objectives the school could pursue. This list was developed by the teachers who served on the APC. To assist staff members with their review, a list of positive and negative aspects for each proposed objective was distributed. The staff added comments about specific objectives. Staff member were asked to reflect upon the choices and then complete a form in which they identified their top three choices and stated their level of support for all the objectives.

The clear choices were Whole Child Development (66 points) and Critical Thinking Skills (61 points). They also garnered the highest level of support with Critical Thinking receiving a 1.48 ranking and Whole Child receiving a 1.62 ranking.

This data was then shared with APC members at its April meeting and they were given the task of identifying additional reasons of support or detracting for the two proposed objectives. After these positive and negative points were identified for each proposed objective, the APC members voted to state which objective should be selected by the school: The votes were:

APC Vote Total for Choosing Between Critical Thinking and Whole Child Development					
3	2	1	1	6	10
Strongly support whole child	Moderately support whole child	Okay with either and leave it up to teachers to decide	Moderately support critical thinking	Strongly support critical thinking	Strongly support both objectives and believe both should be formally adopted

May 2006

The APC teacher and administration members met to review the two plans and voted 10 to 2 to recommend to the APC that the school select Critical Thinking as its third objective. Rationale behind this recommendation were: Critical Thinking was the top concern identified by the teaching staff; it had major ramification about preparing students for the future; it can be developed in every subject area; and it can be the consistently assessed due to the availability of assessment instruments to measure student growth. The main concern about the Whole Child initiative was the lack of a clear way to measure student improvement although many teachers favored it because it would provide the school with a non-academic goal and demonstrate support of the school’s mission which has a strong focus on whole child development. The teachers agreed that it was a worthy goal that the school could “informally” devote time and energy to improving without worrying about formally adopting and developing action plans and collecting data on it each year.

May 2006

The three objectives were presented to the DCS Board of Directors who supported the three long term objectives. The APC “approved” the three selections at their May meeting.

The three strategic objectives for DCS and their corresponding baseline data are as follows and are as presented to the Validation Team by the Damascus APC:

Strategic Objective #1: Reading - As submitted by the school

By the year 2013, all Damascus Community School students will demonstrate improved reading skills as evidenced by:

- A. 100% of DCS students will show annual reading growth on the Scholastic Reading Inventory. Students in grades 1 – 3 and older students (grades 4 – 11) who are reading below grade level will improve by a grade level each year. Older students (grades 4 – 11) who are at or above their grade level reading levels will improve their *Lexile* reading levels by 100 points annually or until they reach a 1500 (college reading level).

Baseline Data to be established by April 2007 (At this time only first year results are available.)

- B. 85% of DCS students, except for those in the school's ESL and Learning Support programs, will be reading at their established grade *Lexile* level based on their performance on the Scholastic Reading Inventory. *Lexile* proficiency level: 1st grade – 250; 2nd grade – 450; 3rd grade – 650; 4th grade – 750; 5th grade – 850; 6th grade – 925; 7th grade – 975; 8th grade – 1025; 9th grade – 1100; 10th grade – 1175; and 11th grade – 1225.

Baseline Data Established May 2006

- C. 100% of DCS students in grades 1st – 8th will show annual reading growth on the Renaissance Learning company's *STAR Reading Assessment*. Students who are below grade level will improve 1 grade level per year. Students at or above grade level will improve by a half of a grade level (.5) per year until they reach a 10th grade reading level based on the program's scoring norms.

Baseline Data to be established by April 2007 (At this time only first year results are available.)

- D. 100% of DCS students not including those in the school's ESL or Learning Support programs, will read at their assigned grade level (example 3rd grade = 3.5 reading level at the end of the year) using the *STAR Reading Assessment* tool.

Baseline Data Established June 2006

- E. 70%* of DCS students in grades 3 – 8 will demonstrate growth on the reading section of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Students below the 80 percentile will demonstrate a 3 percentile gain each year that they take the test at DCS. Those students above the 80 percentile level will remain above this level. (*Some students may get "unluckier" the 2nd time they take the test so cannot be expected improvement of 100% of our students.)

Baseline Data Established in May 2006

- F. DCS will achieve a 75 percentile averages on the ITBS reading test at both the elementary school and middle school levels by 2012. This performance level will be based on three year intervals (2000 – 2002, 2003 – 2005, 2006 – 2008, 2009 – 2011).

Baseline Data Established in May 2006

- G. DCS will achieve the following class mean percentiles on the critical reading portion of the PSAT exam by 2012: 9th grade: 60th percentile; 10th grade: 65th percentile; 11th grade: 70th percentile.

Baseline Data Established in May 2006

- H. DCS will achieve a senior class mean score of 575 on the critical reading portion of the SAT exam by 2012.

Baseline Data to be established December 2006

The composition of the student body at DCS and individual student needs has created concern regarding language acquisition, in particular in the development of reading skills in English, an area of focus over the years. 80% of the students do not speak English as a first language. Obviously, this presents some significant challenges where the mission is to prepare students for American universities. The competition for acceptance to those seats is high for non-native English speaking students. To that end, in the last four years there have been a number of initiatives tied to reading prior to this area being selected as an area of focus for one of the strategic objectives.

In 2003-2004 school year, the high school graduation requirements were changed from four to seven credits of English. In the freshman, sophomore, and junior years students are required to take one credit of English Literature as well as one credit of English Writing. Since that time, an average gain of 10 points by DCS students on the verbal portion of the SAT has reinforced the merit of that initiative and suggests positive results as a result of this initiative. At the elementary school, a similar increase in the amount of time students spend studying English Language Arts has been implemented. Students in the elementary school have seen the length of time they study Language Arts on a daily basis increase from 90 minutes to 150 minutes.

There have not been similar efforts undertaken at the Middle School level. According to the Middle School Coordinator this is due, in part, to the need to eliminate something else and that the middle school faculty very much wanted to maintain a vigorous exploratory program.

This objective is directly related to not only a historical academic concern but also is directly tied to the DCS mission to prepare students with an American education that is college preparatory. The understanding and appreciation by high school and elementary faculty members of the need to address this concern holds a direct nexus to university acceptances – part of the DCS mission to be college preparatory.

The school has sufficient energy and resources to address this need in reading and has an action plan that does address this need both in the elementary and high schools.

This objective will be measure by multiple means. Progress will be measured using the external measures of the Scholastic Reading Inventory, the Renaissance Learning STAR Reading Assessment, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills reading section, the PSAT critical reading scores and the SAT critical reading scores.

Objective #2: Writing- As submitted by the school

By the year 2013, all Damascus Community School students will demonstrate improved writing skills as evidenced by:

- A. Eighty percent of DCS students in grades 3 – 8 will demonstrate growth on the writing section of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Students below the 80 percentile will demonstrate a 3 percentile gain each year that they take the test at DCS. Those students above the 80 percentile level will remain above that level.

Baseline Data Established in May 2006

- B. DCS will achieve an 80th percentile class average for grades 3 - 8 on the ITBS writing test by 2012. This performance level will be based on a three year averages (2000 – 2002, 2003 – 2005, 2006 – 2008, 2009 – 2011).

Baseline Data Established in May 2006

- C. On the *Educational Records Bureau* (ERB) Writing Assessment, 100% of DCS grade 3 - 10 students, not including students in the school's ESL or Optimal Match programs, will demonstrate growth. Students below the 80th percentile will demonstrate a 3 percentile gain each year against both suburban and private school norms. Those students above the 80th percentile level will remain above that level.

Baseline Data To be established by May 2007

- D. 50% of DCS students at each grade level will score at the 65th percentile level against the ERB suburban school norms and at the 60% percentile level against private school levels.

Baseline Data Established in May 2007

- E. On the *Educational Records Bureau* Writing Assessment, DCS will attain school and division level (elementary: grades 3 – 5; middle: grades 6 – 8, high school: grades 9 and 10) averages that are at the 60th percentile against private school norms and 65th percentile against suburban schools.

Baseline Data Established in May 2006

- F. DCS will achieve the following class mean percentiles on the writing portion of the PSAT exam by 2012: 9th grade: 70th percentile; 10th grade: 70th percentile; 11th grade: 75th percentile.

Baseline Data Established in May 2006

- G. DCS will achieve a senior class mean score of 575 on the writing portion of the SAT exam by 2012.

Baseline Data to be established December 2006

- H. By 2009, 80% of the 11th grade class will take the AP English Language and Composition exam and will achieve a class mean score of 3.5 or higher.

Baseline Data to be established by September 2007

I. Elementary School:

Using the *DCS Elementary School Writing Continuum*, students will reach the following point totals*: 100% of DCS 2nd graders scores will be at 10 points or higher; 90% of DCS 3rd graders' scores will be at 15 points or higher; 80% of DCS 4th graders' scores will be at 20 points or higher; and 60% of DCS 5th graders' will be at 25 points or higher.

Baseline Data established in May 2006

J. Middle School

No internal instrument developed. One to be developed and baseline data to be established by Nov. 1, 2006.

K. High School:

Using the DCS High School Writing Rubric, students will reach the following point totals:

- 100% of the 9th graders will achieve scores in the average range (15 – 18.5) or higher and 30% of the students will score in the exceptional range (19 – 21).
- 100% of the 10th graders will achieve scores in the average range (17 – 20.5) or higher and 30% of the students will score in the exceptional range (21 – 24).
- 100% of the 11th graders will achieve scores in the average range (19 – 24.5) or higher and 30% of the students will score in the exceptional range (25 – 27).
- 100% of the 12th graders will achieve scores in the average range (21 – 25.5) or higher and 30% of the students will score in the exceptional range (26 – 30).

Baseline Data established in January 2006

As in the case of the first strategic objective on reading, the composition of the student body at DCS and the needs of this student body regarding language acquisition has made this an area of focus over the years, even prior to its being selected as one of the strategic objective areas of student growth. 80% of the student body of DCS is historically not English first language speakers. This presents some significant challenges where the mission of the school is to prepare students for American universities where the competition for acceptance in those seats is with native English speaking students. The renewed emphasis on Writing on the SAT and PSAT has also elevated the concern worldwide regarding increasing student skills in this area in order for students to be considered for top-flight universities in the United States.

This objective is consistent with Damascus Community School's vision of providing its students with a rigorous and stimulating education and its belief that high expectations and academic rigor prepare students for continuing education and successful lives. The commitment to continuous improvement is part of the school culture. The determined efforts made towards improved student learning are readily evident within classrooms and from comments made by teachers, students, and parents.

In 2003-2004 school year, the high school graduation requirements were changed to require the acquisition of seven credits of English. In the freshman, sophomore, and junior years, students are required to take one credit of English Literature as well as one credit of English Writing. At the elementary school, a similar increase in the amount of time students spend studying English Language Arts has been implemented.

There have not been similar efforts undertaken at the middle school level. According to the Middle School Coordinator this is due, in part, to the need to eliminate something else and that the middle school faculty wanted to maintain a vigorous exploratory program.

This objective is directly related to not only a historical academic concern and a means of addressing that concern but also is directly tied to DCS's mission to prepare students with an American education that is college preparatory. The understanding and appreciation by high school and elementary faculty members of the need to address this concern holds a direct link to university acceptances, which is part of the DCS mission to be college preparatory. The Validation Team was perplexed as to why a similar concern does not appear to be shared at the middle school.

This objective will be measured by multiple means. Progress will be measured using the external measures of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, the ITBS Writing Test, the Education Records Bureau Writing Assessment, the PSAT, the SAT, and the AP English Language and Composition exam. At the elementary school the progress will be measured by the DCS Elementary School Writing Continuum, while at the high school the DCS High School Writing Rubric will be used. There is no internal instrument developed at the middle school.

The writing objective as stated represents a desirable end result in student academic performance that is currently measurable through the multiple forms of external and internal measurement indicated at the elementary and high school level. However these measurements are still to be determined at the middle school. These same instruments can also be used to measure the desired growth on this objective. The writing objective appears to be reasonable and achievable for the Damascus Community School.

Objective #3: Critical Thinking - As submitted by the school

By the year 2013, all Damascus Community School students will demonstrate improved critical thinking skills as evidenced by:

- A. 100% of DCS students in grades 3 - 8 will demonstrate growth on the *Cognitive Abilities Test* (CogAT). Students below the 80 percentile will demonstrate a 3 percentile gain each year that they take the test at DCS. Those students above the 80 percentile level will remain above that level.
- B. 100% of DCS students in grades 9 - 12 will demonstrate growth on the *Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal*. Students below the 80 percentile will demonstrate a 3 percentile gain each year that they take the test at DCS. Those students above the 80 percentile level will remain above that level.
- C. 80% of DCS students in grades 2 – 5 will reach a composite score of 12 or higher (based on doing 3 problems using a 5 point rubric) by 2012-using the *Exemplars* math problem solving assessment material.
- D. 80% of DCS students in grades 6 – 11 will complete a Problem of the Week (indicator to be completed by October 1, 2006)

No baseline data for this objective has yet been established.

Currently there is no clearly articulated link between students' ability to critically think and the qualifications necessary to change grade levels or graduate from DCS. Rather, there was and is a desire among the members of the faculty to improve students' critical thinking skills because their belief is that doing so will improve their students' academic performance. This belief, brought forward to the Accreditation Preparation Committee, was shared by its various constituents and subsequently selected as the school's third strategic objective.

Strategic Objective #3, for all DCS students to demonstrate improvement of their critical thinking skills by 2013, is consistent and supportive of the school's mission which is to, among other things: prepare students for success in both college and the ever changing world. The ability to which DCS students are able to think critically in order to solve problems, it is believed, will have a direct impact on their success in both of those realms.

Records from the Accreditation Preparation Committee meetings document the process and voting which led to and resulted in the decision to make improvement of students' critical

thinking skills the school's third strategic objective. Each constituency group of the APC overwhelmingly supported the selection of "Critical Thinking Skills" as the third area for the school's improvement plan.

It is reasonable to believe that the school will be successful in improving the critical thinking skills of all of its students. The extent to which the objective is achievable depends upon the effectiveness of the School Improvement Committee. Its first order of business regarding this objective needs to be establishing a clear definition of "Critical Thinking Skills." Its second order of business needs to be to charge a Measurement Committee with the responsibility of selecting an appropriate, useful assessment tool by which to collect baseline data on students' current ability to think critically. Finally, the objective is achievable only to the extent the Learning Improvement Committee revises the current action plan so that it reflects the committee's research and, therefore, is owned by teachers rather than administrators.

The school has sufficient energy and resources to support the achievement of this objective. There are both the human and financial resources to do the requisite research and purchase the necessary tools and training. There is also evidence of strong belief in the objective's importance as demonstrated by the overwhelming support it received in the APC. Combined with the enthusiasm generated by the school's already documented improvement in the areas of its first two objectives, a sense of challenge was evident in conversation with staff members. When asked if frustration over the lack of a shared definition might deter them, several staff members indicated that, as a group, they are in the same place with Strategic Objective #3 that they were two years ago with Strategic Objectives #1 and #2, Reading and Writing.

The specific tool that will be utilized to measure critical thinking at the elementary level is the Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAt). No instrument has been identified for the middle and high schools. The administration researched the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal but found it to be inappropriate due to its sophisticated and college level vocabulary. The secondary principal has since consulted with Habits of Mind expert, Art Costa, who recommended an instrument developed by Cornell. She also indicated that the school may need to develop its own internal assessments.

At this juncture, the school must determine its definition of Critical Thinking and specify learning outcomes before it is in a position to determine alternative methods of assessment for this objective.

Internal Scan

The APC engaged in a lengthy process where they had teachers rate students in a number of areas with a rating of "above average", "average" and "below average". This data was collected by the Internal Coordinator who then weighted the items. Based on this activity, the two greatest perceived areas of need for strategic objectives were to develop student critical thinking skills and to develop the whole child. Previously the entire staff had recognized the need to develop student reading and writing skills and had already undertaken school wide initiatives to address

these concerns. In particular, at the high school the graduation credit for English was changed from four credits to seven credits which are comprised of both reading and writing in three of the years.

Another area and process which was utilized to complete an internal scan was the use of MSA survey data to have faculty generate a list of 93 initiatives that would address weaknesses as determined by the survey results. This was a clear and tangible outcome of looking at the school from the inside by various constituent groups. A number of these 93 initiatives have already been addressed.

The 93 initiatives to address the survey concerns on the twelve middle states standards are addressed in the standards section of this report.

External Scan

The APC conducted a SWOT analysis on September 15, 2005. This process constituted the APC external scan. A number of issues were identified through this process.

The major factors that impact the school are its uncertain future at its current site, the ability to purchase and build a permanent campus, and property and construction prices which are increasing faster than the financial return the school is receiving from its investments.

The APC identified the Quality of staff/ Dedicated Teachers as the school's greatest strength by a significant margin. Following that were small class size, providing an American style education, having a strong school community and having a positive school climate.

The Opportunities identified by the APC as the most significant was the opportunity to demonstrate the quality and rigor of the High School and all other programs. This was followed closely by having the opportunity to start a three year old program

An opportunity to improve facilities and an opportunity to change from an AP to an IB school were also identified as significant.

There were a number of weaknesses and threats identified by the APC. As anticipated, Syria's political situation and the budget constraints caused by rising rent for existing property were seen as the greatest threats/ weaknesses. Also receiving significant concern were the perception of a weak high school, the lack of an International Baccalaureate (IB) program, the quality of the school facilities (buildings, fields, and equipment) and finally shrinking enrollment and /or lowering admission standards in order to maintain the school population.

Action Plans

Action plans are the point of contact between vision and reality; they are the bridges to the future. Here is where teams shift from poetics and emotion to metrics and task analysis. Implementation of the action plans is the point in the process where idealism and creativity meet the realities of time constraints, the budget, and the natural and frustrating resistance that often accompanies innovation and change.

Action plans were drawn up for each of the strategic objectives by the principals. The Elementary School Principal developed action plans for reading, writing, and critical thinking for the elementary school, while the Secondary School Principal drew up reading, writing, and creative thinking action plans for the secondary school based upon the Program Improvement Plans of the secondary school teachers.

At the time that the Self-Study of the Damascus Community School was completed, the school included several questions regarding the implementation, adaptation, modification, and measurement of the success of the plans on page 6 of the Self-Study Narrative and Overview of Section C: The Planning Process. This section of the Self-Study concludes with a request: “DCS hopes that the AFG visiting team can assist the school in determining how it will address these questions.”

The original Accreditation Preparation Committee has now completed its duties. Its efforts have achieved a great deal. In an effort to engender commitment and encourage involvement by all who have a stake in the school, the *Accreditation for Growth* process asks the school to involve the broadest possible group of stakeholders in this original Accreditation Preparation Committee. DCS has admirably demonstrated this accomplishment.

The responsibility of monitoring this process, of being the watchdog that will ensure these efforts continue, must now shift to a new committee, the School Improvement Committee (SIC). This committee is now the keeper of the process and is charged with ensuring that DCS stays true to this process as it implements the action plans, that it evaluates student performance using multiple measures on an annual basis, and that it reports the annual progress in a public meeting, so that all of the school stakeholders are aware of the school’s successes and challenges. When detailing the annual review process, this report will be delivered every May. The appointment of the School Improvement Committee has now formalized and institutionalized the process – it is a part of what DCS will always do.

It is time for a committee of teachers and administrators working together to carry the work forward. Director John Gates has noted that this committee will be known as the Learning Improvement Committee (LIC). It will be this committee’s charge to annually review the strategic objectives, to reflect on what it has learned from the measurement data provided by the Measurement Team, and to devise an updated Action Plan to move DCS students forward in the areas of reading, writing, and critical thinking. This committee will meet in early September each year to devise a plan for the coming school year and beyond. Later in the month of September it will present the annual plan to the School Improvement Committee for approval. This process will enable continued expertise where it is required and continued broad-based support for the strategic objectives by DCS’s various stakeholder groups.

Action Plan: Strategic Objective #1

An action plan was developed to successfully meet Strategic Objective #1, preparing all Damascus Community School students to successfully demonstrate improved reading skills by the year 2013, includes research best practices in reading instruction and in developing the program and instructional units in pre-K through grade 12.

At the elementary school (pre-K through grade 5), the intent is to develop a program that encourages and monitors independent reading practice including the development of “Teaching for Learning” Policies. In the secondary school (grades 6 – 12) the action plan continues with a call for the implementation of an independent reading time, an increased use of literature circles. All this is to be done over the course of two years.

There appears to be general awareness that action plans exist, however, they were created by the two principals. The process of staff buy-in could be affected by this top-down approach. In the validation team’s opinion, the addition of a measurement implementation committee would ensure that the data is properly recorded, evaluated, and analyzed. This will guide the development of future steps in the action plans in answer to what is found in the results of the data.

In conclusion, it is the validation team’s opinion that there are sufficient human and financial resources to support the implementation of Objective #1.

Action Plan: Strategic Objective #2

An action plan was developed to successfully meet Strategic Objective #2, preparing all Damascus Community School students to successfully demonstrate student growth in writing proficiency by the year 2013, includes the following activities.

Over the next two years the DCS will work on the establishment of school research standards, the selection of a school wide research model, and the development of a K-12 writing program overview. The elementary school will work on the summary of Best Practice in Writing Instruction, and establishing characteristics and parameters of the DCS ES writing program. This will continue with the development of one standards-based writing unit, and the identification of common writing instructional resources and models. Ongoing will be the development of a writing instructional support binder, the use of DCS ES Writing Continuum, and the development of two to three “Teaching for Learning” policies. The high school action plan includes the development of one standards-based research unit, the introduction of AP English Language and Composition as the English Language 11 curriculum.

Similarly to the reading objective the Validation Team recommends the addition of a measurement implementation committee to ensure that the data be properly recorded, evaluated, and analyzed.

In conclusion, the Validation Team’s judgment regarding the action plan for Strategic Objective #2 will lead to success in its current form. There are sufficient human and financial resources to carry out this objective.

Action Plan: Strategic Objective #3

The action plan developed to successfully meet Strategic Objective #3, preparing all Damascus Community School students to successfully demonstrate improved critical thinking skills by

2013, includes coming to a common definition of critical thinking, generating a bank of instructional activities and units which effectively teach critical thinking skills, and identifying internal instruments for assessing critical thinking outcomes. At the time it was written, external assessments had been identified but have since been deemed ineffective.

The action plan to meet Strategic Objective #3 makes no provisions for action steps beyond the current year. There are seven action steps for the secondary school and eight for the elementary school. During an interview, the administration indicated that the action steps originally came from the Program Improvement Plans developed by individual teachers. Parties responsible for taking the action steps are stated in general terms, and timelines for completion are written as months and years. Three of the action steps indicate that no resources are necessary, and two steps have no “Indicators of Success”.

Based on these findings, the Validation Team is of the opinion the action plan for Strategic Objective #3 needs further clarification based on a DCS common definition of what constitutes critical thinking. As it is, the action plan’s substance is not commensurate with the challenge, nor is it realistic given the demands of the undertaking.

The action plan for Strategic Objective #3 requires actions of teachers for all students, cutting across all grade levels and subject matter. The aspect of the school that this plan addresses is students’ ability to think critically.

In conclusion, the Validation Team’s judgment regarding the action plan for Strategic Objective #3 is that it will not lead to success in its current form. However, there are sufficient human and financial resources to revisit the plan and to revise it. In that respect, the action plan to improve critical thinking skills among 100% of the students at DCS is like all action plans. Continuous improvement demands change and growth for action plans and comes about naturally as schools undertake their annual review. At DCS, this is part of the process which the School Improvement Committee will be using so that it is prepared to make its annual report to the Board of Directors.

STANDARDS OF THE MIDDLE STATES ASSOCIATION

C.1. Philosophy, Mission, Beliefs, and/or Objectives – *The institution has clearly written statements of philosophy, mission, beliefs, and/or objectives that convey the general and specific purposes of the educational programs and that express expectations for quality. Stakeholders, including staff, parents, and governing body members, understand, accept, and give input into the development of the organization’s philosophy, mission, beliefs, and/or objectives. These documents are appropriate for the groups served and are reviewed periodically.*

The Philosophy, Mission, Beliefs, and/or Objectives standard is met.

The Damascus Community School has a clearly written mission statement and belief statements that do convey the specific purposes of the education programs and that express expectations for quality. The strategic objectives were well researched, and the voices that should have been listened to in their genesis and development were, in fact, listened to and reacted upon. The three strategic objective areas of demonstrating student improvement in reading, writing, and critical thinking do match the needs of the student population served by DCS. In fact, generation of ideas for these areas came by teacher identification and review of the needs of each individual child in the school. Based on this reflection, a standard means was implemented to identify on a school-wide basis which areas needed to be of a higher priority. The translation of perceptions into actionable statements was almost magical and allowed DCS to proceed with confidence in knowing that these three strategic objective areas were of the highest need for their children.

Although the mission statement is lengthier than that which one would normally hope to find in a school, it does everything it is supposed to do for DCS and for all of the right reasons. The members of the APC wanted a mission statement that truly reflected what they were achieving with children at DCS. To do justice to this, the APC and entire faculty spent a tremendous amount of time and effort in debating, defining, and refining the mission statement. Although perhaps not short enough to be quoted by everyone on campus, the constituent pieces of the mission are able to be measured, and a nexus can easily be drawn from the mission to a plethora of initiatives underway in the school. To this end, high school students, during their community time, have engaged in exercises that enable them to internalize the mission of the school and to reflect on the underlying beliefs at DCS.

The belief statements are consistent with ethical norms and demonstrate respect for and acceptance of persons of all races, creeds, and cultures. The mission, beliefs, and objectives have been purposely detailed to allow for there to be no ambiguity, and the APC, in particular, was very critical of their work on the mission to ensure that it was not an abstract statement that would fit any number of schools in the world. These statements match the students of DCS, and, in particular, the objectives were born of a task that enabled teachers to reflect and record the challenges facing this particular student body.

The governance and administration of DCS have been vigilant historically in ensuring that the mission and beliefs of the school continue to match DCS. There have been mission statement

revisions in 2000 and again in May, 2006. This engagement of the mission is indicative of a school where the mission is kept constantly in the foreground of decision-making.

The mission statement, belief statements, and strategic objectives have been shared with the school stakeholders on a constant basis during their development and now following their acceptance. They are included in the school website, print communications, special newsletters to the families, and at Open Houses where face-to-face communication of what DCS is about and is attempting to do, occurs. The efforts in this regard by the school governance, administration, and the Accreditation Planning Committee are noteworthy. This process was undertaken in an open manner with constant attention to gathering multiple perspectives during the development of mission, beliefs, and strategic objectives.

Through multiple interviews with faculty, parents, students, administration, and governance, it is clear to the Validation Team that the mission statement, beliefs, and objectives are the basis for daily operational and instructional decision-making. There are strands of these that permeate the organization, up to and including the development of individual Program Improvement Plans (PIPs) and how the teacher is implementing the standards in their own classroom and content area. The objectives are well-understood by all constituent groups, and there is a passion for their being successfully met.

C.2. Governance and Leadership – *The governance and administration work in partnership to ensure the integrity, effectiveness, and reputation of the organization through the establishment of policy and oversight of leadership. There is an atmosphere of mutual respect and purposeful effort on behalf of students and their learning. The administration of the organization provides a productive work environment, timely and open communication, and the leadership necessary to plan both day-to-day operations and the long-term future of the institution. The school is chartered, licensed, or authorized by a state, nation, or authority, which operates in the public interest.*

The Governance and Leadership standard is met.

The status of the School is clear. No legal or proprietary ambiguities in ownership, control, or responsibility exist. The school is, however, in a unique position since the land on which the school was built is owned by the US Embassy. Therefore, the school is able to exist in Damascus, Syria, under the auspices of the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs rather than the Ministry of Education. The School is governed by a nine member Board of Directors, eight of whom are appointed by the US Ambassador. One of the Board Members is elected by the Parent Teachers Association.

The governance and administration act ethically, consistently, and fairly in all dealings with parents, students, staff, and the school community.

The governance and administration work cooperatively to establish and maintain clearly formulated written policies and practices that are consistent with the school's philosophy, mission, beliefs, and strategic objectives. These policies and practices are regularly reviewed. In addition, the governance and administration maintain appropriate and constructive relations with

the parents, students, staff, the community, and with each other in the interest of serving the needs of the students. This cooperative relationship was proven repeatedly in meetings the Validation Team held with Board Members, administrators, faculty members, parents, and students. The mutual respect and esteem of the partners was evidenced in their eagerness to embrace the accreditation process in the interests of the best they could offer for their school. The pride and sense of community of the school partners was palpable. One of the Board Members commented that he viewed the School as “an oasis of learning in Syria”.

The Board of Directors has four committees: a Finance Committee, a Facilities Committee, a Policy Committee, and a Security and Safety Committee. The governance and administration comply with all applicable statutes and governmental regulations.

The governance and administration definitely undertake operational, long range, and strategic planning aimed at accomplishing the school’s philosophy, mission, and strategic objectives of improved reading, writing, and critical thinking. This commitment to long range strategic planning is evidenced by the Board of Director’s and administration’s endorsement of the *Accreditation for Growth* protocol, the appointment of Mark Baker as the Internal Coordinator, and the time and attention devoted to the Accreditation Preparation Committee.

The most recently scheduled annual orientation and goal setting work session of the Board of Directors was postponed due to the attack on the US Embassy in September 2006. There is a definite plan to arrange an outside facilitator to provide an instructional opportunity for the Board of Directors later this school year. However, the Validation Team was able to discern through discussions and multiple meetings with the entire Board, as well as the separate Board Committees, that all members understand their responsibilities and roles.

The membership and organization of the governance provide the school with solid leadership and effective support. Though several of the members are new this year and there is a great deal of transition on the Board of Directors, the members continue to provide cooperative leadership. The governance thinks and acts strategically, reflecting on its decisions and the consequences of its actions.

At this time, the Board of Directors does not have a system for evaluating its own effectiveness in performing its duties; however, when the Validation Team explained the benefits of this exercise to both the Board and the school as a whole, the board members expressed a commitment to developing a system of self evaluation, since they readily recognized that this exercise would strengthen their performance as board members and ultimately benefit the school.

The governance focuses its activities on selecting, evaluating, and supporting the director. Though the director assumed this leadership position at the beginning of this school year, the cooperation and mutual respect of the director and the board members was repeatedly demonstrated in interviews with the Validation Team. The governance also focuses upon policy development, planning, assessing the school’s performance, and ensuring adequate resources to accomplish the school’s philosophy, mission and strategic objectives of reading, writing, and critical thinking. The Governance refrains from undermining the authority of the administration to conduct the daily operation of the school.

The governance is in the process of developing and approving a clearly defined performance appraisal system for the director. They are working with the director to develop this tool. The director is formally evaluated by the Board of Directors at least once a year.

The director of the school is accountable to the governance and is responsible for creating a productive learning environment for the day-to-day operation of the school.

The director, the elementary school principal, and the secondary school principal ensure that all school programs and activities are adequately and appropriately planned, supervised, resourced, and staffed with qualified personnel. The administration maintains timely and open communication with all members of the school community, stays well informed of educational developments, and ensures that all statements and representations relating to programs, services, and resources are clear, accurate, and current.

C.3. Organizational Design and Staff – *The organizational structure of the institution provides the vehicle for carrying out the established philosophy, mission, beliefs, and/or objectives of the educational program and support services. A clearly defined set of reporting relationships exists and administrative, instructional, and support staff are qualified, competent and sufficient in number to allow the effective delivery of quality education to students. Staff assessment procedures are in place, are clear to all involved, and are collaborative. On-going professional development, clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and collegial relationships among staff and administration are evident and conducive to cooperative action.*

The Organizational Design and Staff standard is met.

A clearly understood table of organization exists. DCS is completing a major revision of all job descriptions, an initiative that was embraced as a priority by the new Director, John Gates. This initiative is scheduled for completion by the end of Semester One 2006-2007.

The administrative, instructional, and support staff are qualified, competent, and sufficient in number to meet the needs of the total educational program, student services, student activities, and the students enrolled. A concern expressed by faculty members and students alike was that with only the services of one PS – 12 music teacher for 335 students. They have suggested that the Board consider additional staffing if the school is to properly address their mission component of “fostering the development of artistic skills and art appreciation.”

Staff members are well-prepared academically, and they possess the preparation, experience, and commitment that contribute to effective learning. There is an annual Professional Development fund of \$ 1,000 per teacher to maintain these skills. In addition, faculty members are able to apply for additional funding to pursue summer study opportunities. There is an understanding by faculty that the summer funds may not be utilized to engage in “for credit” experience. The administration affirms this limitation and bases it on the fact that teachers are being compensated for this study when they are advanced on the salary schedule.

There are designated and qualified school leaders who provide coordination and direction for the instruction, activities, and services that the school provides. There has been a pronounced raising of the bar in recent years relative to expectation for teachers to become more engaged, reflective practitioners. Consequently, there are some teachers who feel over-taxed by this expectation. The Validation Team saw no expectations that would be considered excessive at an accredited international school striving for excellence.

There has been an unusual amount of transition in leadership both in personnel and the position responsible at the Middle School level. The 2005-2006 school year saw teacher evaluation being included in the duties of the Elementary Principal while the Secondary Principal/ Director dealt with student personnel issues and discipline. In 2006-2007 the responsibilities have changed. Currently, there is a secondary Principal responsible for faculty and students in grades six through twelve and there exists a separate Superintendent position. This Secondary Principal position was filled by the person who previously served as the High School Coordinator. The Elementary Principal is no longer responsible for teacher evaluation at the Middle School, however, while wearing his additional hat of PS – 12 Curriculum Coordinator, he still engages with them on curriculum initiatives.

Through interviews, the Validation Team was able to identify a feeling of disconnect by the Middle School faculty. They are concerned that middle level education will not be a priority for the new Secondary Principal given her high school background and that they are assigned to whichever administrator has a lesser load. The Validation Team is concerned in this regard due to the fact that the Action Plans do not share the same support at the Middle Level as they do at the High School and Elementary Levels. In addition, there are significantly fewer activities detailed for middle level students and staff in the Strategic Objectives. The Validation Team would encourage whoever is responsible administratively for the Middle School to encourage greater support and involvement in the three Strategic Objectives by Middle School faculty members.

The Board Policy manual contains all personnel policies and regulations for the operation of the organization. Although visible in a number of offices to the Validation Team Members, at the elementary faculty meeting there was an expressed concern that they were “less available” to faculty than in previous years. During discussions with the Administrative Team, there was no support in the validity of this perception.

There are adequate procedures in place for determining adequate compensation, arriving at reasonable workloads, insuring acceptable working conditions, and defining just and fair treatment. When the issues of wages, hours, and working conditions were raised with faculty by the Validation Team, there were no expressions of concern regarding compensation. As detailed above, there were, however, limited expressions of concern regarding workload with the new standards expected for reflection as part of the Program Improvement Plans of individual faculty members.

Morale among all segments of the school’s staff is generally good, and the longevity of teachers’ stay at DCS would indicate that this is not an area of concern.

There does exist a clearly defined system of appraisal of staff, and it is based on predetermined criteria. The process has been improved during the 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 school years. It now requires all faculty members to reflect on how they will promote the three strategic objectives of improving students' skills in the areas of reading, writing, and critical thinking individually in their classrooms. Although not appreciated by all faculty members, there were numerous faculty members who supported this change as a necessary step to more fully engage the entire faculty in this important DCS work.

The transformation of the Internal Coordinator's duties to the Learning Improvement Committee will also promote this standard. The LIC will be responsible for developing and implementing strategic objective action plans for student learning. In addition, it will have a corollary responsibility to advance teacher professional development that supports these strategic objectives being met by the students.

The school will form a Measurement Team comprised of faculty members and administrators which will carry out the annual assessments in April of each year as defined in the Strategic Objectives and will report the results to all of the school stakeholders at an annual meeting each May. The School Improvement Committee, which will be comprised of staff, faculty, parents, Board Members, students, and administrators, will ensure that this reporting process takes place and that any modifications to the Action Plans are presented to them for their approval. In addition, the school has budgeted a \$1,000 per teacher for professional development plus additional funds for school program development initiatives such as summer training programs.

C. 4. Educational Programs – *The educational programs consist of both carefully planned and well executed curriculum programs that include appropriate standards, solid instructional pedagogy, and appropriate assessment based on research and best practices. The educational programs are sufficiently financed, periodically reviewed, and mission-appropriate. They are developed to meet and address the needs of students and are designed to produce student learning at all levels. Effective policies and practices are in place, along with instructional materials, technology, and equipment that are appropriate, functional, and well maintained.*

The Educational Programs standard is met.

The K-12 educational program at Damascus Community School is a reflection of the curriculum guides, both hard copy and online, made available to the *AFG Accreditation Team*. Upon review, it was determined that the curriculum guides prescribe a course of study that is consistent with the school's philosophy and mission of providing a college preparatory education based on an American curriculum. When asked about the purpose of the school, the students affirmed the school's purpose and mission as being that of a school in which to prepare for college. A board meeting of May 2005 approved the math and writing curriculums. The standards for science, reading, and social studies were developed during the 2005-2006 school year and scheduled to be approved in the May board meeting, but due to the teacher visa crisis, as well as the student fatality, the final approval process has not been completed to date.

The curriculum is standards based. The learning objectives are directly tied to standards that have been researched, modified, and written by the faculty at DCS. Standards from various

sources have been tailored to meet the needs of the DCS students, with each core area of standards being drawn primarily from one source. For example, math standards draw upon those adopted by the Province of Alberta, and reading standards are based upon the state of Virginia's. The standards for DCS were prepared by K-12 committees.

Curriculum guides are available both in hard copy and on the school's website. They map the year by month and by unit. Information contained within them reflects objectives as well as assessments.

Review of the school's annual budget provided evidence of adequate financial resources to implement the educational program. In addition to financial resources, the school utilizes alternate Tuesday afternoons to work on the programs. The school day is shortened, and students are sent home early to provide time for teachers to work on their program improvement plans. One high school teacher who has been at DCS for five years expressed gratitude for her administration's commitment to providing this time.

As noted above, the school's budget designates adequate funds for providing and updating instructional materials. There was no evidence indicating that a need for resources and materials exists.

The instructional program provided at Damascus Community School is designed to meet students' needs. There is an admissions process which ensures appropriate grade level placement. Consideration for varying abilities is evident in unit plans collected by the principals. English language support is provided at the level a student needs upon their arrival, not according to a student's age. There is evidence in the school's self study that documents the Accreditation Preparation Committee's review of the school's current educational program and its correlation with the mission statement key ideas.

A curriculum implementation cycle is in place. It outlines the steps between 2005 and 2012, starting with the development of standards and ending with a review of the curriculum and the assessments.

The implementation cycle provides for both vertical and horizontal teams to develop standards in reading, writing, math, science, and social studies. This is evident in the school's approach to evaluating writing. The elementary uses continuums, and the secondary school uses rubrics. Consequently, both divisions' teachers have a common language for discussing students' writing. The high school has taken steps to assign teaching duties in such a way that there is more than one teacher teaching a class. This is the principal's way of creating opportunities for teachers to collaborate with one another, an example of horizontal coordination.

The Validation Team was provided with copies of the admissions test (Iowa Test of Basic Skills) and admissions procedures. The packet provided to prospective families includes an outline of the process. Tests are administered by the counselors and then scored and reviewed by the administration. Students are not excluded based on their proficiency in English. Rather, students with limited English only take the math section of the admissions test and meet with an ESL teacher for an evaluation in order to make an appropriate placement.

Each level has a student handbook. This is provided to each student. Middle school students are required to sign and have their parents sign a contract acknowledging they have read the handbook, understand its contents, and agree to abide by the rules and procedures.

The educational program provided by DCS is a standards-based program developed using standards exclusively from North America. There is a process in place by which the standards and corresponding curriculum are reviewed. Furthermore, DCS uses a variety of external assessments to validate the quality and continuous improvement of the education provided. Progress of students is formally reported a minimum of eight times throughout each academic year, and records are kept securely in the newly created “Records Room” adjacent to the counselor and high school principal’s office.

The Elementary School Program

In the school’s Faculty Handbook, the Damascus Community School’s school philosophy states “We believe that the school should encourage creativity, inquiry, critical thinking, a desire to learn and a search for truth. The school must help students to develop their ability to work independently.”

Although not specifically delineated as an Early Childhood Program, the educational program begins in pre-kindergarten. The kindergarten classrooms are spacious with age-appropriate materials and furniture. There is easy access to an outdoor playground.

The elementary program provides a balanced program in core curricular classes as well as specialized instruction in art, music, foreign language, and PE. Beginning in Grade 1, elementary students have the opportunity to take Arabic two times per six-day rotation in grades 1 and 2 and three times in grades 4 and 5.

Students receive direct technology instruction two times per six-day rotation. As mentioned in another section of this report, the technology teacher also encourages integration and connection between the computer lab and the classroom. Beginning in grade 4, students develop an electronic portfolio which can be then used for a variety of purposes such as student-led conferences.

In addition to the core curriculum, elementary students also have the opportunity to develop their physical, social, and emotional well-being through a variety of extracurricular activities. DCS offers a range of after-school activities for students in grades 1 – 5. The elementary school gathers together for whole-group community time and divides into smaller group, cross – grade houses.

The Middle School Program

The middle school educational programs provide instruction in language arts (including literature/reading, speaking, writing, and listening skills), mathematics, science, social studies, languages, physical education and the arts.

Students learn effective techniques of study, research, and use of the library/media resources. This is delivered through collaboration between the librarian, technology teachers, and classroom teachers as students pursue research projects in core content areas. The middle school educational program includes instruction in effective uses of information technology. Technology skills are taught in context as students use technology to enhance their learning in their core classes.

The middle school educational program offers opportunities for the development of social skills in interaction with adults and peers. The school also provides activities and experiences that assist early adolescents in identifying their aptitudes and interests, self-decision making and building of self-worth. The advisory program, exploratory classes, and Week Without Walls program are instrumental in providing these experiences. These programs provide experiences aimed at promoting critical thinking, reasoning, and problem solving skills.

Providing a smooth transition from the elementary school to middle school and from the middle school to the secondary school is an ongoing effort.

The Secondary School Program

The secondary school educational program provides a college preparatory education. It is a liberal education which specifies a minimum number of credits in each of the core classes: Literature, Composition, Math, Science, and Social Studies. In response to students' historically low PSAT scores in the areas of reading and writing, each student takes two English classes, one is literature based; the other is writing based.

The high school program requires students to take fine arts, health, physical education, and a world language in order to graduate. These requirements are outlined in the new student information packets, on the school profile, and in the student handbook.

The students learn effective techniques of study, research, and use of information resources in more than one way. There are stand alone classes in computers which include a research component and computer literacy skills. Study skills are addressed during the advisory in the middle school.

The secondary school educational program includes instruction in effective uses of information technology and provides opportunities for application in several ways. A sixth grade exploratory program spans six weeks and provides an overview in technology literacy. An eighth grade graduation project requires students to create a multi-media presentation. In the high school, there are three computer electives that students are able to take. The first provides a deeper understanding of computer literacy. In addition, there are electives in business computing and web development.

Opportunities for the development of social skills in interaction with adults and peers are evident at DCS. One example of this within the context of the school program is the House program and the House League activities. Each House has an adult "member."

Another example of the opportunities for students to develop social skills is within the context of an Outdoor Recreation class, referred to also as the Leadership Class. This class allows students to imagine, plan, and organize events for the secondary school. Sometimes they work in conjunction with the PTA such as in an upcoming High School Recreation Night.

Providing a smooth transition from the middle school to the high school is an ongoing effort.

The educational program of the high school is designed for students who plan to attend college. Its offerings and requirements are consistent with its mission statement. It makes no claims to prepare students to be “work ready” after completion of the program.

C.5. Learning Media Services and Technology – *Learning media services and technology function as important tools to enhance classroom instruction and other school activities as grade level appropriate. Well-organized information resources reinforce knowledge, skills, and attitudes learned in other program areas and broaden minds by providing opportunities to conduct research and interact with information.*

The Learning Media Services and Technology standard is met.

The Damascus Community School library is both well-equipped and well-organized. Information resources and technology are of adequate scope, quantity, and quality to support the total educational program and encourage students and staff to broaden and extend their learning. There is ample room for several groups of students to use the facility at the same time and there is also a designated research area for students with six computers. Students also have access to an additional four computers for accessing the online public access catalog (OPAC). There is a resource area for staff in one section of the library. The library furniture has recently been upgraded and attention has been given to easy access of books. The library is staffed with one librarian and one secretary. Facilities and technology are up to date and offer a variety of resources to the school community including books, magazines, videos, and internet access for research. Regarding the impact of technology for her program, the librarian mentioned how far they’ve come in the past eight years from when there was not even e-mail. She referred to the DCS technology growth as an “explosion.”

In addition to a computer in each classroom with internet access, there are three computer labs and the above-mentioned pod of library computers. Two of the computer labs are used for technology classes and staffed by technology teachers. One lab and one computer teacher serve the needs of the elementary school. A second lab is available for the middle school / high school program and is staffed by a teacher who is also the technology coordinator for the school. The third lab is called the Open Access Lab where teachers can bring their classes. The Open Access Lab is staffed with an assistant. In addition to the two technology teachers and assistant, DCS employs a system administrator for the network and a computer support technician. DCS enjoys a well-staffed technology department that serves to move the school forward, keeping pace with the advances in technology and telecommunications that are presently available in Syria.

Computer Resources

Location	Number
Elementary Lab	23
MS / HS Lab	21
Open Lab	19
Library	10
Classroom	42
Administrative Area	13
Laptops	4

An information skills curriculum is delivered that enables students to develop research and information literacy skills. In the elementary school a technology skills checklist guides delivery of the technology proficiency skills. Students meet two times per six-day rotation during which time integration into the curriculum is encouraged. Middle school and high school students also experience a combination of technology specific classes as well as activities that are integrated into the curriculum. DCS makes use of the *National Educational Technology Standards* and encourages teachers to make use of the Open Access Lab for curricular integration. There are also technology specific classes. An exploratory class is offered to all sixth graders in technology literacy. The content is based on the *North Dakota Content Standards for Library / Technology Literacy*. There is also an eighth grade graduation project. At the high school level there are several courses offered including a Computer Literacy elective, Business Computing, Web Development, and Publications. The middle school / high school program also encourages integration, collaboration, and team teaching between the technology teacher and the classroom teachers.

Teacher input is solicited for the content of what is covered in the technology classes. Teachers also have the ability to order their own software. The technology coordinator commented that a next step will be to create a school-wide inventory of software in the same manner that is done by the elementary computer teacher.

The librarian elicits input from the staff when ordering materials for the library. Orientation to the learning media resources is provided on an as needed basis to the staff. Additionally, the librarian publishes a bulletin on a regular basis to inform the school community of “what’s new / what’s changed”.

The learning media and technology staff appear to be satisfied with the level of financial support provided for resources. The technology staff members are not involved in budgeting for technology. However, they feel that their voices are heard, and they feel comfortable making recommendations. The librarian does not have a designated budget, either. However, the library received 1,600 new books last year to add to its 16,000 titles.

The library media center uses the Follett system for ordering, processing, and cataloging books. Their OPAC (online public access catalogue) contains all the library materials that have been processed in the library. OPAC is available on classroom, open access lab and library computers. There is a system in place for periodic “weeding out” of books that are out of date.

Long-range planning activities are in place to ensure that the school keeps pace with information and technological changes. There is a technology plan through 2006. The technology coordinator shared that a new technology plan is in the process of being developed. Technology planning is evident throughout the school system and is one of the school board's strategic objectives.

C. 6. Student Services – *The school provides services to students that optimize their preparation for learning. Chief among these services are health services and, at appropriate levels, guidance including academic and personal counseling. Preventive and emergency health care services are provided and health and safety policies are clear and well understood. Other services that may be provided include transportation, food service, services for special needs students, and admissions and placement.*

The Student Services standard is met.

Guidance and Counseling Services:

In the words of one of DCS's two counselors, "Our goal is to make sure that the individual needs of each child get met." In working toward this goal, DCS has maintained staffing the counseling position from at 1.5 FTE. For the last two years, the school has provided both personal counseling and college counseling having one person devoted exclusively to counseling and another who divides her time between counseling and secondary administrative duties. The process by which emotional and social needs are addressed has two specific facets. The first is a combination of teacher referral and the proactive actions of the counselors themselves, such as building relationships with students through classroom visits, individual appointments, and maintaining high visibility so as to be accessible. The second method by which the counseling department meets the needs of the students is a proactive initiative to integrate social and emotional education into the curriculums of the elementary classrooms. In addition, an advisory program has been designed and implemented at the middle school to respond to the needs of students of this age group. Plans for the future also include developing a guidance curriculum that will be embedded in the health class for high school students.

Guidance and support for DCS students comes from various sources, the most significant of which are the Guidance Counselors. In addition, middle school students have a traditional advisory period.

Also Optimal Match and ESL teachers guide and support students whose needs fall within the realm of learning difficulties or English language learning, each having her own caseload of students with which to work. Additionally the secondary principal shares direct responsibilities for guidance and counseling. She delivers a series of workshops to high school students, starting in grade 9, that prepare them for the college application process. These are mandatory workshops each student takes during the six visits to their English class each year. The grade 9 workshop is about "Knowing Yourself," and includes a personality inventory; Grade 10 students learn how to use the internet to research colleges; Grade 11 students prepare for all the steps necessary to have a specific list of colleges to which they want to apply; Grade 12 students complete the college application process.

Guidance services at this time are limited to individuals unless they are undertaken within the context of a classroom setting where a counselor may tackle a topic such as “bullying,” or “anger” or “making friends.” Plans are in place for group counseling activities to begin second semester of the 2006-2007 school year as the counselor new to DCS, identifies issues that need to be addressed and individuals who may benefit.

Middle school students are made aware of potential careers through a unit in both grades seven and eight. Ninth grade students complete personality inventories as a means to learn more about their interests and unique characteristics, an exercise which then helps them identify potential colleges and careers.

Academic support at DCS is extensive and includes counselors, teachers, and parents. Between mid-quarter progress reports, quarterly report cards, teacher referrals, and bi-weekly staff meetings, students with academic difficulties are identified to the counselors and/or Optimal Match teacher. A variety of actions follow ranging from diagnostic testing to academic contracts to meetings between parent/student/teacher/counselor. As the guidance and counseling department looks ahead, they anticipate building additional academic support into the middle school advisory program by working with students on study skills, organizational skills, and time management strategies.

DCS just created a specific, secure “Records Room” adjacent to the Student Services office. Complete with file cabinets large enough for all student records, it is updated and maintained by a full time Registrar/Guidance Secretary. Students are not admitted to DCS before they produce official records from previous schools in addition to completing medical/health forms that document immunizations, allergies, or any other health concerns.

The implementation of Graduate follow up studies has just begun, starting with the graduating class of 2006. This is new to DCS, so there are no records of previous graduating classes.

Health Services:

DCS employs a full-time nurse who has her own office. Her services meet basic health needs such as treating students for, but not limited to, respiratory infections, throat infections, nosebleeds, asthma, administering of medications, and headaches. Her office is equipped with medical kits including epi-pens, cold compresses, a wheel chair, two stretchers, crutches, and specific medication that students bring to school for her to administer. She has an oxygen tank in the event a student was to have an asthma attack and doesn't have his/her inhaler.

When there is a medical need beyond basic health services, the nurse makes arrangements to have a student picked up by one of the parents. If she is not able to reach a parent, she will accompany the student to a 24-hour emergency care clinic located within five minutes of the school. For concerns requiring the services of a hospital, the nurse will accompany a student to the hospital of choice indicated by the parent on the student health form which is on file in the Nurse's office.

The school has recently written a comprehensive emergency manual that details the manner by which all school personnel and students should respond to accidents, illnesses, and emergencies.

It was created and compiled by security personnel from the US Embassy working with members of the DCS administration and staff.

All students, upon enrollment, are required to have a completed medical history form. The nurse receives these from the registrar, creates a file, and then makes the information available to teachers on a confidential basis. On or before the opening day of school, each teacher is provided with a list of his/her students who have any medical issues or concerns. The school has recently received two bids from local instructors who would train staff in CPR and first aid. The plan is to offer a course here at school sometime during the 2006-2007 school year.

The nurse has organized an agreement between a local hospital and the school's medical insurance provider, Aetna. She has brokered an arrangement that allows teachers to access the hospital's services without having to pre-pay. Additionally, a list of the community's health services has been generated in order to refer students and teachers, unable to be served by the nurse, to the most suitable office in Damascus.

Providing students with information about health is done within the context of physical education and health classes.

Food Services:

A private catering company handles the DCS cafeteria services. It has been the same company for over ten years and also serves the US Embassy. The Nurse is the onsite inspector for the cafeteria's cleanliness and addresses any issues directly to the owner of the catering company who is on campus multiple times a week, almost daily.

Additionally, at least once a year a regional health inspector from the US State Department visits campus to inspect the cafeteria facilities and food workers. This service is available because the school falls within the auspices of the embassy; the Validation Team applauds DCS for taking advantage of this opportunity. The accreditation team was provided with a copy of the "Food and Sanitation Inspection Report" completed on January 19, 2006. It reflected excellent ratings and cited four minor concerns which have all already been addressed by the school.

The school's catering service has, in the past, provided nutritional information about each of its meals. This practice no longer continues. However, the nurse, the director's wife, and the caterer work together to design the menu. The elementary has a choice of two menus. The secondary students have one menu. The caterer's operating principle is to offer each meal with a vegetable for vitamins, meat for protein, and bread or potatoes for carbohydrates. Health classes in the high school include units on diet and nutrition.

Services for Special Needs Students:

The guidance and counseling department makes referrals to local agencies based upon students' need for psychological or psychiatric counseling. In May 2006, when a student was fatally injured on a school trip, DCS brought in two counselors from Cairo American College to provide grief counseling for students.

Students with special needs are identified both at the time of admission and by teacher referral throughout the course of the year. The admissions test has a writing component which is used to assess English language proficiency. Also, the principals interview each student who is admitted. The review team was provided with copies of the ITBS tests which are used for admissions to grades 3-12. The scores provide a percentile ranking and grade level equivalent. It is then used in combination with past school records and an interview with the division principal.

Admissions and Placement:

There is evidence that the school has a well-defined admissions process with clear criteria upon which admissions decisions are made. Prospective families are provided with a complete folder of school information upon their initial inquiry to the school. Contained in this packet are the details related to documents necessary for a completed application, application fees, and tuition fee schedule. It also provides a school calendar, a school profile, a records release form, the school's mission statement, application, and graduation requirements.

Through the application screening process, students who have needs beyond the scope of the school's services are not offered admission. In the words of one of the administrators, "Our main interest is setting up students to be successful, and it's really not in a student's interest to be here if we can't help them succeed."

C. 7. Student Life and Student Activities- *A healthy atmosphere exists for all students. At all levels, non-discriminatory, appropriate student activities that supplement classroom experiences or community life are provided. An appropriate student activities program fosters a positive intellectual, cultural, and social climate, promotes growth in student leadership and social interaction skills, and encourages students' interests.*

The Student Life and Student Activities standard is met.

The Validation Team was readily able to observe and confirm reports from students and staff alike that excellent relationships exist between them based on a high degree of respect, fairness, and understanding. Much of this respect is developed in instructional classes, however, a range of student activities offers less formal situations where healthy working relationships are able to grow through shared interests. Parents affirmed the positive social climate of the school. Several students reported that they have a voice that is listened to with fairness and consideration, and they feel that teachers are readily available, open, and willing to help them.

The student body comes from a diverse range of backgrounds; however, during our visit there was no perception of bullying or racism. The climate appeared quite harmonious in this respect with a good level of tolerance and understanding displayed.

DCS elementary school offers a variety of after school activities to provide students with social and enrichment opportunities. The program features three components that include social activities and clubs supervised by teachers, sports programs organized and supervised by the PTA, and specialized instruction supervised by outside instructors. Staff members, parents, and others who participate in these activities are suitably qualified and provide appropriate supervision to students. These activities run four afternoons a week and sometimes the sports

programs have sessions on Saturday. Sessions run five weeks on with a five week break. The elementary school also organizes several family events during the year and a drama production. The students also have the opportunity to serve on the student council.

Due to a limited number of students most of the middle school extracurricular activities concentrate on athletics that include volleyball, soccer, and basketball. DCS is a member of the International School Activities Conference (ISAC). There are ISAC sponsored tournaments in the sports mentioned above, and the students travel to different counties in order to participate in these events. There is also a very popular intramural program featuring softball, kickball, and several other sports. A large percentage of the students take part in this program.

The middle school conducts what is known as community time. This hour is used to acknowledge student birthdays, academic achievements, good behavior, and student presentations of exploratory work accomplished throughout the month.

Other non-athletic middle school programs sometimes include private music lessons offered by instructors from outside the school, an after school art program, and a middle school play. The students also participate in the Week Without Walls program and attend advisory classes. There is also an annual middle school campout.

DCS secondary school provides an interscholastic program intended to provide a wholesome environment for the development of teamwork, school spirit, individual skills, and self esteem. DCS, at the high school level, is a member of both ISAC and Middle East Triangle (MET), which provide organized events throughout the Middle East.

Secondary students have the opportunity to participate in intramurals and other activities such as: Student Council, National Honor Society, Model United Nations, Leadership Conference, and Yearbook. In addition the physical education department provides Recreational Leadership classes. Students are also encouraged to initiate clubs based on personal interests such as the Short Story Club. Students at the high school are also required to perform at least 30 hours of community service as a graduation requirement.

All students in grades 1-12 participate in house activities. The purpose of the house structure is to increase social interaction between students of different grade levels and promote school spirit. The elementary school usually has a house event each month in which students compete in friendly competitions such as relays, number of minutes spent reading, brain bowl competitions, and creating posters for special events. Similarly, middle and high school students have their respective house leagues. Both levels participate two hours per month in a variety of activities and events. The faculty, the Recreational Leadership class, and the student council coordinate these events jointly.

The student activities program receives adequate financial support from the school, and the finances are under the control of school authorities. Students in interscholastic sports are expected to pay a portion of their travel expenses. The school pays 15% of the transportation expenses. There is no expense for the elementary after-school activities that are teacher led, although there are fees for activities run by professionals, and there is an equipment fee for

parent-run activities. All teachers are required to organize and supervise at least one activity. For any additional activities teachers receive a stipend.

In summary, Damascus Community School appears to maintain a desirable balance among academic, social, co-curricular and service activities and endeavors to ensure appropriateness according to the age, development, needs, and interests of students.

C. 8. Facilities – *The school facilities, consisting of the site, building(s), and equipment, provide a safe, well-maintained physical environment that supports optimal student development and achievement. The school facilities are appropriate to implement the stated philosophy, mission, beliefs, and/or objectives of the school.*

The Facilities standard is met.

The property of the Damascus Community School is owned by the United States Embassy and was originally intended to be used as an embassy office complex. Although there is a desire to move the school to another site, there are a number of reasons why this move may not happen in the foreseeable future. A major obstacle to the move is the fact that DCS cannot make an appeal directly to the Syrian government. The United States government must make the official appeal for the school to purchase another piece of property, and, due to the current political climate, these requests have not been granted. The school has resources in place to make the move as soon as it is feasible. It is obvious that this move is of high priority, and, as one long-term member of the school board stated, the present location does not meet the needs of the community as they would like. They will continue to try to develop in the best way possible. That said, the present facilities of the Damascus Community School are sufficiently maintained to meet the school's philosophy, mission, beliefs, and/or objectives, including achievement of desired student learning outcomes. The physical room size is ample for the number of students in each class. The number of rooms meets the needs of the educational program.

The campus is comprised of eight buildings, two of which have two floors. These buildings surround an open interior area which functions as a central gathering place, giving the campus an airy, outdoor feeling. Access to all classrooms is through outside doors. All windows are protected by metal grills. Many of the exterior walkways are not covered, however, the school's Capital Improvement Plan mentions a plan to cover the walkways during the 2006-07 school year. All buildings have stairway access protected by sturdy guard rails. All open areas on the second levels are protected with similar railings.

The entire campus is enclosed by a wall which serves as a protective barrier from the busy streets surrounding the school. The location of the school campus is a concern, and plans are in place to acquire a new piece of property including seeking a quieter area. Several locations have been identified as potentially better to serve the needs of the school. At the present time, however, this is not possible because, as mentioned in other parts of this report, the Syrian government will not allow the school to purchase its own land at this time. In the meantime, the facilities are upgraded on a regular basis, and there is a Capital Improvement Plan outlining these upgrades.

One example of a planned upgrade is for the primary school playground, which is located just inside the perimeter of the north wall. Mention was made by several staff members as to the need for additional protection for the playground. This concern is addressed in the Capital Improvement Plan with a line-item that describes the intention to raise the wall in December and January of the 2006-07 school year.

The present facilities offer a variety of spaces for providing high quality programs and services and include appropriate accommodation for instruction, administration, conferences, student activities, and student services for all segments of the school population. Despite the fact that there is a desire to move the facility, the existing space is adequate for the present needs of the school. It is, however, apparent when talking to different segments of the school community that there are several potentially large projects that may need to be provided for in the future. Many individuals and groups of people mention the need for a gymnasium. There is also a building for the custodial staff located near the center of the central classroom area that could be better utilized for instructional purposes. It is also apparent that students would very much like to see a swimming pool added to the grounds. Due to the uncertain timeline for relocating the campus, DCS does an admirable job of balancing its vision for the future with the realities of the present. The Capital Improvement Plan is comprehensive, and progress continues to be made to ensure that the existing campus provides for a quality educational program.

C. 9. Health and Safety – *A safe and healthy environment for teaching and learning is provided. Both preventive and emergency health and safety procedures are clear and well documented. The school environment is productive and orderly.*

The Health and Safety standard is met.

Damascus Community School (DCS) is committed to meeting the health and safety needs of the students. From the time the students enter campus, there are procedures in place for maintaining the whereabouts of each and every student. Records of daily student attendance are ultimately recorded in an electronic student management system called Admin Plus. Although records of student attendance are stored electronically, the process of taking attendance is still by paper and pencil. School custodial staff collects the attendance slips and deliver them to the office manager and school nurse, who are responsible for verifying the student's absence with his/her home. During school hours students must check-in and check-out through the office. Those leaving campus are given a pass. There are guards at the front gate who collect these passes before allowing students to leave the premises.

The mental well-being and safety of the students is also evident in their code of conduct. The student handbook emphasizes not only a code of conduct but also a Human Rights Code as well as a list of unacceptable behaviors. The director remarked that, as a new staff member, he noticed from the start that the code permeates throughout the school community. There is also evidence of a feeling of satisfaction with safety and security in the responses to questions addressing this in the AFG survey sent out to the various stakeholders in the community.

Physical safety is addressed very well at DCS. School policy states that students must have a physical examination before being admitted to DCS. Students must also submit their current

health records. School policy states that there will be visual and auditory acuity screenings. The onsite school nurse performs these screenings on an annual basis. The nurse also provides first aid and basic emergency care. Another of her responsibilities is to maintain the student health records and to notify teachers as to individual health concerns. Additionally, she has contact with various health care facilities in the immediate area of the school and is prepared to accompany students in a school-owned vehicle if a situation arises in which a parent is not able to do so during the school day. At the present time the school nurse handles all medical emergencies. In an interview, the director stated his desire to provide the staff with basic first aid training. The nurse has looked into the possibility of using the local Red Crescent for this training. There are visible fire extinguishers in numerous locations around the campus. According to the director and nurse, the staff has recently been trained to use these fire extinguishers.

On a larger scale, the school has detailed policies and procedures for addressing emergencies through a procedure called Risk Analysis Process and thorough emergency campus drills. The Risk Analysis Process serves to analyze activities that could be considered to be high or medium risk and covers off campus trips. The emergency drills as stated in the Manual, are comprehensive and well-planned. Each classroom has a shortened, bulleted list of the procedures for each drill posted near the door. There is an Emergency Management Team that oversees the entire Emergency Management Process which is defined as “a management process that develops strategic policies and procedures in response to emergency situations by utilizing the existing skills of pre-selected trained staff (the Emergency Management Team) and pre-identified internal and external resources to manage and minimize injury and death, protect property, and ensure the safety and well being of the students, staff, visitors, and the community.” (DCS Emergency Management Manual, 2006-2007)

Damascus Community School is fortunate to have resources from the American and Canadian Embassies in the form of Regional Security Officers to assist in planning for and developing strategies for the process. The RSO from both the Canadian Embassy and the American Embassy serve on the Board Safety and Security Committee. DCS’s Emergency Management Manual is clearly written and comprehensive. The most recent physical assessment survey was performed six-weeks ago as a part of the regular inspection of the American Embassy. This inspection is done every one to two years and includes the DCS campus. In the meantime, there are informal checks of safety and security on the campus. These are frequent but not formally stated in the Manual. The director expressed his desire to put the informal inspections on a regular schedule.

An emergency lock-down drill was conducted on the last day of our visit. As in most cases of emergency drill practices, the Regional Security Officer of the United States Embassy was alerted in advance so he could monitor the drill. The drills are being refined and the school is making very good progress in ensuring the safety of the staff and students. This refinement includes education about and practice with fire drills, classroom lock-down, cafeteria lock-down, and evacuation

To ensure the safety and security of students while off premises, the DCS nurse researches the phone number of the nearest medical facility to the location of the trip. This is in addition to the

Risk Analysis Process. The supervising adult is given a school-owned cell phone. As an additional safety measure in those areas where cell phone service is not available, DCS may look into the possibility of obtaining a satellite phone.

In location and place where safety and security is foremost on people's minds, the Damascus Community School strives to provide a safe and secure environment. It is evident that policies and procedures are firmly in place.

C. 10. Finances – *Financial resources are sufficient to provide the educational opportunities defined in the school's philosophy, mission, beliefs, and/or objectives. The business practices of the institution promote confidence in the organization's ability to manage fiscal and material resources in a responsible manner and to follow prescribed budgeting and accounting principles. The majority of resources raised for school purposes must be dedicated to school operations.*

The Finances standard is met.

The DCS does exercise prudent control over all financial operations and, in fact, is in the process of making some alterations which will give it even more usable budget planning data. Prior to the 2006-07 school year, financial records were kept utilizing Excel spreadsheets and the entire budget process was centralized, with the Director being the key decision-maker for most decisions.

The philosophy of switching to a site-based or cost center approach is well under way. The director stated that this change was implemented to bring greater accountability to the system and to have those closest to the expenditure decisions being responsible for them. This, coupled with a switch to Black baud software and the use of fund-function-object definitions that will provide greater specificity for line items, will now allow financial information to be tracked and for historical data to be part of the decision-making process in budget building and management. The Black baud software also incorporates depreciation schedules into the system to enable generation of accurate capital and capital investment data.

The school uses the services of Ernst & Young for their external audits. Audits are conducted on an annual basis. A Board representative on the finance committee also noted a change was made this year to utilize International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRSs). This was the result of the negotiations with the United States Embassy regarding the payment of rent. During the course of these discussions, the need to switch to IFRSs was identified.

There are adequate resources to attain the organization's philosophy, mission, and objectives, and these resources have been utilized appropriately. They will be utilized even more fully with the software changes and basic financial philosophy being adopted as defined above. There is adequate opportunity for stakeholders to provide input into financial plans, and the staff is involved in determining the priorities for instructional needs. Again, with the shift to site-based budget decision-making, this will be promoted to an even greater degree now.

Upon review of three audits covering 2002-2003, 2003-2004, and 2004-2005 school years, income and expenditure are in appropriate balance. In 2005-2006, when enrollment was less than that which was assumed in the budget development, the school was able to make decisions to bring the budget in balance without impacting the instructional program.

The current director, Mr. John Gates, brings strong expertise in this area of finances and has already actively constructed historical data with the limited resources available to him. He has the benefit of having a Business Manager who has a 12-year history with the school. The Business Manager is in communication with other comparable schools and is provided annual professional development to continue to maintain her expertise. The Business Manager is well respected and is a positive and trusted colleague as well as a respected resource for the Board. It was she who suggested the software change in order to bring greater accountability and the advantage of historically tracked data to the organization.

Tuition and fee information is openly shared and is explained in detail prior to the admission of children at DCS.

The school has a sizeable building reserve fund which is income generated from a three-year contribution of \$1500 per student per year for this purpose. The audit for July 31, 2005 indicated a Special Reserve of \$ 7,727,842. The Finance Committee is currently reviewing the investment options available to it, as there is increasing concern about the purchase potential of these funds as property prices in Damascus continue to rise. Property prices in Damascus and much of Syria are escalating exponentially as prices are driven up with the weekly influx of 10,000 people from Iraq.

C. 11. Assessment of Student Learning – *The assessment of student learning outcomes enables students to monitor their own learning progress and allows teachers to adapt their instruction to the specific learning needs of students. The school's effectiveness is assessed by examining areas such as student learning and performance, program evaluation, performance results for support services, graduate success, and client satisfaction. Results are used to develop strategies for improving service and program quality. Assessment results are communicated appropriately to parents/guardians, students, staff, and school community.*

The Assessment of Student Learning standard is met.

Evidence indicates that the school has identified specific criteria for assessing student learning and performance. In speaking with the administrators, they indicated that one of the criteria was the ability to get immediate feedback. Consequently, they selected two computer based assessments, the Scholastic Reading Inventory and Renaissance Learning STAR Reading Assessment. They also identified the need to have both internal and external assessments.

There is evidence to support the school's use of appropriate and varied methods to assess student learning and performance. There are computerized, internal, and external assessments for students from grades 2 to 12. The tests are different depending upon the grade level of the students. Those in grades 2 through 8 take the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, Educational Records

Bureau (WRAP) Writing Assessment, Scholastic Reading Inventory, Renaissance Learning STAR Reading Assessment, Gentry Spelling Inventory, and Exemplars Math Problem Solving and complete both formative and summative writing samples. The computer based tests are taken twice at the beginning of the year and twice at the end.

Student progress at all levels is regularly evaluated, accurately interpreted, and reported in an understandable manner. Teachers cited the use of the data provided by the tests. Students referred to the results of the tests, as did parents. Each student in the secondary school meets individually with the counselor to review test results. Furthermore, administrators meet with teachers to discuss external test data to identify trends, strengths, and areas for growth.

External assessments, internal assessments, parent and teacher surveys, and college acceptances all indicate that students in the aggregate are achieving learning outcomes at an acceptable level. Where dissatisfaction exists, in reading and writing for example, there are action plans for school improvement. Double-period English classes for high school students, K-12 “Drop Everything and Read” time, and the school utilization of the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) are examples of steps the school is taking to raise achievement in reading and writing.

The school’s top priority is the learning and achievement of its students. To achieve that end, the school has created a coherent K-12 program. It is standards based and includes a variety of internal and external assessments to measure improvement. Additionally, specific steps are being taken to align instruction with the strategic objectives. An example is the professional reading groups established by the administration. Currently, faculty at each level is studying and incorporating into their instruction specific strategies to teach reading. Furthermore, the administration is requiring teachers to invite them to observe lessons which incorporate these strategies.

Assessment results are used to evaluate the effectiveness of the school’s curriculum, instructional practices, and professional development. Based on assessment results, the school develops strategies for improving student learning. In the school’s action plans to meet its three strategic objectives, workshops are included for the purpose of improving teachers’ strategies for helping students read, write, and think critically.

Across content areas, grade levels, programs, and personnel, there is evidence of joint ownership for student achievement and learning. The Validation Team heard students, teachers, and parents take pride in the improvement that DCS students have made in their PSAT scores.

DCS communicates its assessment policies and practices in a variety of ways. Currently, there is an ongoing push to publish all the curriculum maps and units online. Each map or unit plan will identify the assessments used. Additionally, all of the secondary teachers are required to provide students with a written explanation of grading and assessment criteria. In an interview, the secondary principal stated that many teachers send these grading policies home to be signed by parents.

There is evidence to support DCS' frequent and rigorous use of assessment results for individuals and groups as they move through school. Data was provided for the Validation Team and examples of student records were provided.

Assessment results are used in making decisions regarding the allocation of resources. The entire school committed time in their schedule to add the "Drop Everything and Read" (DEAR) program. Professional Development has been designed to build teachers' capacity to teach reading skills. Early release twice a month is provided for professional growth and work on teacher Program Improvement Plans.

Grade reports are sent home eight times a year and parent/teacher conferences are conducted twice a year. As required, the counselors work more closely with specific parents to improve their child's achievement. According to the counselor, these meetings are productive. The Validation Team was also provided with copies of letters mailed to parents. One such letter was a letter expressing concern about a child's academic achievement. Another was informing the parents that a student was being placed on academic probation.

There is evidence to reflect a monitoring system in place to provide current and longitudinal data on student performance. Individual student records and whole class records were provided.

The school relies on a variety of assessments, both internal and external, at every level in order to assess the effectiveness of its educational program. The school is working toward making its curriculum and instructional decisions based on the data these assessments provide. Already, the school has altered its schedule to improve reading achievement for all students. This is evident with the introduction of the DEAR program and the high school's requirement for every student to simultaneously take both a literature class as well as a composition class.

An interview with the registrar and examples of school records provided to the Validation Team indicate student records are kept, maintained, and secure from unauthorized personnel. A new "Records Room" was created to ensure security and confidentiality. Handling of the transcripts falls within the job description of the registrar. She prints them on special school paper, has the embosser with the official school seal, and prepares them according to the guidelines set up by the administration. Consequently, the credibility of the transcript is protected by standards, practices, and procedures that are in place.

There is evidence that DCS practices commonly held norms to maintain the legitimacy of their educational program and credibility of their records (report cards and transcripts). There is a minimum attendance requirement before students are eligible for credit or for advancing to the next grade. In addition, there are minimum academic achievement levels that students must meet before they earn credit or change grade level. School records are produced only by authorized school personnel and in accordance with guidelines provided by the administration.

Part of DCS' plan to meet its strategic objectives and improve is to continually analyze student assessment. A structure for that already exists. The computerized assessments for reading are scheduled four times a year. The teachers and administrators study data from the fall in order to align the curriculum and instruction so that the spring assessment shows improvement.

C. 12. Planning – *The school makes use of strategic, long-range, and operational planning to continuously improve its educational programs and services. Improvement plans focus on student performance and organizational growth and engender continuous improvement across all aspects of the school organization. Externally validated processes for evaluation, strategic planning, and school/district improvement are continuously maintained. Systematic analysis regarding student performance and organizational growth is coupled with analyses of instructional and organizational practices to ensure alignment with the school’s philosophy, mission, beliefs, and/or objectives. Trends in outcomes and results are projected and goals of demonstrated strategic merit are identified.*

The Planning standard is met.

The Validation Team has ascertained that a school improvement plan, developed by the Accreditation Preparation Committee under the direction of the Internal Coordinator, has been developed and communicated to the community. Action plans for each the three strategic objectives of reading, writing, and critical thinking exist for the elementary school and for the secondary school.

The Accreditation Preparation Committee, under the direction of the Internal Coordinator, has organized, managed, and planned this improvement plan and process. The Validation Team was able to ascertain that the APC has taken ownership of the plan. A meeting with the DCS PTA also confirmed that the school improvement plan has community support.

The administration plans to form a School Improvement Committee to take the place of the APC. This SIC will assume the responsibility for monitoring the plan and for reporting the progress of the plan. In addition, the administration is forming a Learning Improvement Committee comprised of administrators and teachers to develop the means to advance the plan and to complete the action plans. This LIC will be tasked with the improved learning of faculty as well as students.

The School provided multiple opportunities for representative elements of the community to offer input into the school’s improvement plan. Through surveys and faculty seminars, the school obtained feedback on the mission, beliefs, and strategic objectives of reading, writing, and critical thinking.

Given the learning specific objectives of reading, writing, and critical thinking, the school has demonstrated that the strategic objectives of its plan will directly enhance student achievement and performance. The school plans to measure this performance through external as well as internal assessments and has established baseline data for the reading and writing objectives. However, for improvement to be measured in the third objective of critical thinking, the school needs to arrive at a definition of what critical thinking encompasses. Methods of measuring this objective must also be determined.

The Validation Team believes that in order to engender continuous improvement the leadership role taken by the Internal Coordinator must devolve to a wider group of educators. The

Validation Team commends the plans to establish the SIC and LIC to continue the school's planning process and to assume the ultimate responsibility for the continuity of improvement. However, structures and/or positions must be put into place for the existence and performance of these committees to be demonstrated.

In addition, the school must establish clear responsibility and roles for the continuation of its improvement plan. The roles of the Directors, the principals, and the teachers in the school improvement planning process must be clearly delineated.

The Validation Team urges the development of a Measurement Team to assume responsibility for determining the external and internal assessment tools for the three strategic objectives and to assume responsibility for collecting the data gathered from these assessment tools according to standardized documented procedures. The Measurement Team should also become responsible for publishing all of the improvement actions and the measured results for the three objectives, as well as analyzing the results of the data collected.

The School must also continue to disseminate the mission, beliefs, objectives, and progress so that a culture of planning becomes the ethos of the school, rather than the responsibility of one or more individuals.

ACCREDITATION RECOMMENDATION

As a Validation Team we are asked to make an accreditation recommendation to the Committee on Institution-Wide Accreditation at the conclusion of our visit. Our five person team has unanimously concluded that

- 1.) The school has clearly defined appropriate objectives.
- 2.) The school has established conditions under which they can be achieved.
- 3.) The school is working toward achieving the objectives now.
- 4.) The school should be able to continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

In addition, the Validation Team believes that **Damascus Community School** has shown evidence that each of the following *Accreditation for Growth* parameters are in place.

A Focus on Student Performance and Growth

- There is a focus on student performance and school improvement efforts are aimed at student learning, student performance, and student results.

A Culture of Accountability in Student Performance

- The objectives are measurable, there is a viable internal monitoring process, and an accountability system for monitoring the accomplishment of the action plans has been developed.

A Planning Ethic

- The school is engaged in a continuous clarification of its unique mission, beliefs, and expected student performance objectives. The school is action-oriented as shown by the development of long-term strategic action plans that integrate program, services, facilities, and support to address growth needs.

Commitment to Continuous Improvement

- The school is committed to continuous evaluation, an annual review process, peer review, and a dynamic process with the flexibility to modify action plans.

Involvement of Representative Constituents

- There is a climate of inclusiveness and evidence exists of the involvement and collaboration of stakeholders in the planning process.

The Validation Team will be pleased to recommend continued accreditation for Damascus Community School.

Recommendations

The following steps must now be taken at Damascus Community School and validated prior to the meeting of the Middle States International Schools Advisory Committee meeting in mid-February 2007. It is at this meeting where the Validation Team's recommendation for accreditation of DCS will first be considered.

By January 15, 2007:

1. Provide Members of the Learning Improvement Committee with a list of possible critical thinking components.
2. Convene the Learning Improvement Committee and develop a single PS-12 definition of what "Critical Thinking" means at DCS.
3. Establish and appoint members to the DCS Measurement Team.
4. Provide a single DCS definition of Critical Thinking to the Measurement Team in order for the Measurement Team members to reflect on this definition and to research possible measurement tools prior to deciding which measurement tools that will be utilized at DCS.
5. Convene the Measurement Team to rewrite the Strategic Objective Measurements for Critical Thinking based on the DCS definition of Critical Thinking. Submit this document to James Green at MSA for approval.
6. Convene the Learning Improvement Committee to review and reflect upon the Action Plans as they currently stand.
7. Convene the Learning Improvement Committee and prepare updated Action Plans for each of the three Strategic Objectives. Upon completion, these will be immediately provided to Director Gates for dispersal to School Improvement Committee Members.

By February 15, 2007:

8. Convene the School Improvement Committee to review, revise, and approve the updated Action Plans for each of the three Strategic Objectives.
9. Convene the Learning Improvement Committee to initiate the implementation of the updated Action Plans as approved by the SIC.
10. Submit to James Green of Middle States Association* each of the agendas for the meetings identified in Recommendations # 1-9, as well as the minutes and finished products of these meetings:
 - Single DCS definition of Critical Thinking
 - Revised Action Plans for each Strategic Objective with LIC member input
 - Revised Measurement component of the Critical Thinking Objective.

* For DCS to be considered for accreditation in spring 2007, this documentation must be provided prior to or on February 15, 2007.

NEXT STEPS

As Damascus Community School proceeds with the implementation of its strategic plan, there are a number of “next steps” the school will be expected to take in order to maintain accredited status. These include the following:

- Conduct Annual Reviews

While Middle States does not “collect” evidence of the school’s annual review, Damascus Community School is expected to conduct a review each year. The purpose of the annual update is to review progress that has been made on action plans, update the plans as needed, and pause to celebrate successes. Damascus Community School should keep a record of what transpired during each annual review. The meeting agenda, minutes, documented changes to the plans, and summaries of progress made over the past year are examples of evidence to collect. The Mid-Point Reviewer and the next Validation Team will want to see these examples of growth.

- Host an On-site Mid-Point Reviewer

In a sense, the annual review conducted by the planning team takes the place of the traditional progress reports that used to be submitted to MSA. In addition, however, the Committee on Institution-Wide Accreditation will appoint a reviewer prior to the midpoint of the seven-year accreditation cycle to make an onsite visit to the school, typically at the two and one half year mark. Where possible, the reviewer will be someone from the original Validation Team since this individual should require less explanation of what the school is aiming to do in its planning activities. S/he should be able to readily see the progress that the school has been made.

Typically, the visit will last one day; the school will be responsible for the Mid-Point Reviewer’s travel expenses. The school will not be expected to prepare extensive materials in advance of the visit. Rather, the visit should be perceived as an “informal visit from a critical friend.” The school will want to show the reviewer evidence of progress to date and interviews with key people should be scheduled.

- Prepare for Reaccreditation

Some time during the sixth year of the school’s accreditation cycle, thought will need to be given to the visit of the next Validation Team. However, if the *Accreditation for Growth* process has been an ongoing process as expected, preparing for the team visit should be an extension of work already underway.

As the school prepares for the Validation Team visit, the planning team will want to do the following:

- Revisit the mission statement to ensure that it still describes the preferred vision for the school.
- Reconfirm commitment to the belief statements.
- Conduct internal and external scans.
- Examine the objectives to determine if new objectives need to be developed, if current objectives need to be modified, or if current objectives need to be recycled.

Recommendations

The following steps must now be taken at Damascus Community School and validated prior to the meeting of the Middle States International Schools Advisory Committee meeting in mid-February 2007. It is at this meeting where the Validation Team's recommendation for accreditation of DCS will first be considered.

By January 15, 2007:

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2. Convene the Learning Improvement Committee and develop a single PS-12 definition of what "Critical Thinking" means at DCS.
3. Establish and appoint members to the DCS Measurement Team.
4. Provide a single DCS definition of Critical Thinking to the Measurement Team in order for the Measurement Team members to reflect on this definition and to research possible measurement tools prior to deciding which measurement tools that will be utilized at DCS.
5. Convene the Measurement Team to rewrite the Strategic Objective Measurements for Critical Thinking based on the DCS definition of Critical Thinking. Submit this document to James Green at MSA for approval.
6. Convene the Learning Improvement Committee to review and reflect upon the Action Plans as they currently stand.
7. Convene the Learning Improvement Committee and prepare updated Action Plans for each of the three Strategic Objectives. Upon completion these will be immediately provided to Director Gates for dispersal to School Improvement Committee Members.

By February 15, 2007:

8. Convene the School Improvement Committee to review, revise, and approve the updated Action Plans for each of the three Strategic Objectives.
9. Convene the Learning Improvement Committee to initiate the implementation of the updated Action Plans as approved by the SIC.
10. Submit to James Green of Middle States Association* each of the agendas for the meetings identified in Recommendations # 1-9, as well as the minutes and finished products of these meetings:
 - a. Single DCS definition of Critical Thinking
 - b. Revised Action Plans for each Strategic Objective with LIC member input
 - c. Revised Measurement component of the Critical Thinking Objective.

* For DCS to be considered for accreditation in spring 2007, this documentation must be provided prior to or on February 15, 2007.

CONCLUSION

The Validation Team again congratulates the entire DCS community on all of its efforts as it begins to follow the AFG Strategic Planning Protocol. By following the recommendations made for completion prior to February 15, 2007, the school will be properly aligned to carry forth its initiatives. Specifically, those recommendations are:

By January 15, 2007:

1. Provide Members of the Learning Improvement Committee with a list of possible critical thinking components.
2. Convene the Learning Improvement Committee and develop a single PS-12 definition of what "Critical Thinking" means at DCS.
3. Establish and appoint members to the DCS Measurement Team.
4. Provide a single DCS definition of Critical Thinking to the Measurement Team in order for the Measurement Team members to reflect on this definition and to research possible measurement tools prior to deciding which measurement tools that will be utilized at DCS.
5. Convene the Measurement Team to rewrite the Strategic Objective Measurements for Critical Thinking based on the DCS definition of Critical Thinking. Submit this document to James Green at MSA for approval.
6. Convene the Learning Improvement Committee to review and reflect upon the Action Plans as they currently stand.
7. Convene the Learning Improvement Committee and prepare updated Action Plans for each of the three Strategic Objectives. Upon completion these will be immediately provided to Director Gates for dispersal to School Improvement Committee Members.

By February 15, 2007:

8. Convene the School Improvement Committee to review, revise, and approve the updated Action Plans for each of the three Strategic Objectives.
9. Convene the Learning Improvement Committee to initiate the implementation of the updated Action Plans as approved by the SIC.
10. Submit to James Green of Middle States Association* each of the agendas for the meetings identified in Recommendations # 1-9, as well as the minutes and finished products of these meetings:
 - a. Single DCS definition of Critical Thinking
 - b. Revised Action Plans for each Strategic Objective with LIC member input
 - c. Revised Measurement component of the Critical Thinking Objective.

* For DCS to be considered for accreditation in spring 2007, this documentation must be provided prior to or on February 15, 2007. Provide that these components are in place, the Validation Team feels that the health and quality of Damascus Community School is good. The planning protocol is tailor-made for a school moving into formalizing its ethos of planning and ensuring that student growth is the key to all of its planning efforts.

VALIDATION TEAM ROSTER

CHAIRPERSON:

Dr. Bernard A. Mitchell, Superintendent
The American School of Kuwait
Hawalli, Kuwait

Ms. Iola Cook, Teacher
Al Bayan Bilingual School
Safat, Kuwait

Mr. Daniel P. Gordon, High School Principal
American International School of Jeddah
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Ms. Rose C. Puffer, Superintendent
International School of Islamabad
Islamabad, Pakistan

Mrs. Cathi Zunigha, Technology Coordinator
Saudi Aramco Schools
Dhahran, Saudi Arabia

MISSION STATEMENT

Damascus Community School provides a rigorous and stimulating American education for the international and host-country students it serves, continually seeking to improve all aspects of its program. At DCS, the college preparatory curriculum fosters the development of intellectual ability, artistic skills, art appreciation, and physical fitness, as well as character development, social responsibility, and emotional maturity. All members of the DCS community will collaborate to prepare students for success in an increasingly complex world.

BELIEF STATEMENTS

Members of the DCS community believe that:

- Student learning and achievement are the school's top priority.
- High expectations and academic rigor prepare students for continuing education and successful lives.
- Critical thinking must be taught, with opportunities to apply the skills to real problems and situations, in preparation for life in the 21st century.
- The school's most vital resources are teachers who are passionate about their profession and their students. DCS teachers commit to improving their instructional skills in order to better meet the needs of their learners.
- Maturity and responsibility are developed through the shared efforts of students, parents, and teachers.
- Mutual respect across all cultures is essential for intellectual and personal growth.
- Strategic planning must occur at all levels in order for the school to become known as one of the best international schools in the world.