



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

SAIS-SACS Accreditation

VISIT REPORT

for

Hilltop Montessori School

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April 22-24, 2009

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Southern Association of Independent Schools and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools: **A History of SAIS-SACS Accreditation**

SAIS and SACS member schools are part of a remarkable history of quality assurance in education.

SAIS began its organizational life in 1903 as the “Mid-South Association of Independent Schools,” providing training for teachers in private schools and some early public schools in the southeastern states. In 1953, another organization began as the Southern Association of Independent Schools, providing a forum for independent school administrators to work with public schools through SACS and to contribute to the larger interest in accreditation in the southeast. MAIS and SAIS merged in 1986 to form the present SAIS, with an emphasis on accreditation through SACS for independent schools and professional development for administrators, trustees, and teachers. Today, SAIS works to help both established and emerging schools approach these issues with creativity and innovation. Working at the state, regional, and national levels, SAIS serves and strengthens member schools through the promotion of the highest quality educational standards and ethical conduct.

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

The current partnership offers schools a process for achieving SAIS-SACS accreditation. In today’s world of accountability in schooling, accreditation serves as a critical component of a school’s demonstrated effectiveness and ability to provide successful schooling for children. A school that is able to achieve accreditation demonstrates a commitment to a process that requires the school to meet a set of rigorous, research-based standards; to engage in a program of continuous school improvement; and to demonstrate quality assurance to its stakeholders through self-evaluation and peer review. SAIS-SACS accreditation provides schools access to an integrated network of services and technical assistance that supports every school’s ability to identify and meet its goals for improving student performance and the teaching and learning process.

A SAIS-SACS accredited school is part of an international network of accredited schools which have demonstrated success in educating children. As such, SAIS-SACS accreditation is recognized throughout the world as a symbol of quality in education for students and teachers.

To earn accreditation, schools must meet quality standards, be evaluated by an outside group of peer professionals, and implement a school plan focused on strategic improvement and student performance. Accreditation is voluntary and must be renewed each year.

Roster of Team Members

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The Review

A team representing SAIS and SACS conducted an on-site visit to review this school's self-study and standards compliance. The team was comprised of team members whose diverse independent school backgrounds provided an array of expertise. The visiting team sought the answers to these four critical questions within the framework of the school's self-study. The following pages contain the findings.

In conducting the on-site reviews, the visiting team was responsible for:

1. Assessing the adequacy of the self-study process;
2. Identifying strengths of the school deserving commendation;
3. Developing recommendations that may help to strengthen the programs of the school;
4. Assessing compliance with the standards of SAIS-SACS;
5. Developing a written report of the findings.

To fulfill the team's responsibilities, team members:

1. Reviewed documentation provided by the school;
2. Conducted interviews with board members, parents, school personnel, students, and community members;
3. Applied the standards for accreditation;
4. Developed a draft of commendations and recommendations;
5. Contributed to the content and focus of the written report;
6. Provided input as to the determination of accreditation.

The primary focus of the self-study process is to demonstrate the capacity of a school to meet the requirements for accreditation. A typical self-study consists of:

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

The study addresses four critical questions:

1. **PROFILE: *Where is the school today?*** The PROFILE should include clear, comprehensive information reflecting current student performance data, stakeholder perspectives, community characteristics, and analysis of strengths and limitations in the areas of student learning and school performance.
2. **VISION: *Where does the school want to go?*** The VISION is a clear, compelling purpose communicated through the school's vision and mission statements, beliefs, and core values.
3. **PLAN: *What is the plan to get there?*** The PLAN should be based on an analysis of pertinent data, research of best practices, and alignment with generally-accepted expectations for student learning at schools with similar missions.
4. **RESULTS: *How will the school know when it has accomplished its plan?*** The RESULTS are documented evidence demonstrating successful implementation of strategies that resulted in accomplishment of the school's mission and student achievement gains related to the school's mission.

The Self-Study

Hilltop Montessori School is a non-profit 501(c)(3) corporation, offering a quality, private school education based on the principles of the Montessori philosophy that was established in 1996 and has been in three locations before its move to its current facility, a LEED certified green building in the planned community, suburban town of Mt. Laurel in Birmingham, Alabama. The 2.4 million dollar facility houses one toddler (18 months to 3 years) class, three preschool (3-6 year olds) classrooms, two lower elementary classes (6-9 year olds), one upper elementary (9-12 year olds) and one middle school (7th and 8th grade). The school itself was established in 1996 as a preschool and the expansion of the elementary occurred in 1998. The school became a non-profit corporation in 1998 when it was determined that the school was sustainable and that a need existed in the Birmingham community for a third Montessori school. With a current enrollment of 160 students, Hilltop Montessori is the smallest and newest Montessori school in Birmingham but the only one located in an eco-friendly environment.

The carefully planned, self-motivating nature of the Montessori environment helps each child develop naturally at the child's own pace. The environment promotes a child's discovery, learning, teaching and growth. Hilltop Montessori School is dedicated to the development of the whole child: academic, social and emotional. Students, teachers and parents play an integrated and active role in the educational process. The educational environment celebrates cultural, ethnic and economic diversity such that children from various backgrounds are taught to live to their greatest potential. With approximately 160 students and 25 staff, including specialty and part-time employees, Hilltop is a small school that works to individualize education for each child, facilitate learning and provide a unique niche in the Birmingham community. Hilltop's enrollment is open to all children and their families without regard to race, color, religion, creed, gender, disability or national origin. The Montessori philosophy embraces the differences in everyone and celebrates the unique individual within. Even though our local communities have approximately an 80% Caucasian population and an 11% ethnic population, Hilltop remains very diverse, given the local communities that it serves.

The board of Hilltop Montessori hires the Executive Director who oversees the Preschool Coordinator, Elementary Coordinator, office staff, and Parent-Teacher Organization. Under the organizational structure, lead teachers and specialty teacher report to their respective coordinators. The bookkeeper, receptionist, and volunteers report directly to the Executive Director.

Hilltop Montessori School's self-study presents a profile on the many aspects of the school and its history of progress to its present state. Over a period of a year, the Steering Committee brought together members of the board, faculty and staff to gather information for the school. On the 2008 board retreat, members developed a strategic plan for 2009-2013 with action steps, timeline, resources outlined, and a coordinator for each goal. In conjunction with board goals, faculty members and staff worked collaboratively meeting bimonthly in a collaborative process to develop their present plan of action and to develop action plans to integrate board goals appropriate to the school program. All constituencies were involved in the process.

PROFILE

PROFILE: *Where is the school today?*

Since its founding in 1996, the school has created a model that will best address their needs as an emerging school. Through their Montessori affiliation and SACS accreditation, Hilltop Montessori recognized the need to move toward an independent school model and have been working toward the SACS and SAIS dual accreditation since 2003. As a Montessori school, the faculty and staff have been diligent in holding to the traditions of a Montessori education while working towards an independent school model.

The Visiting Team read the reports provided by the school and interviewed many members of the school community. The school's origins are that of a small proprietary school that incorporated as a 501c(3) as it grew in size and scope. They have completed their first major capital project and the construction of a stunning classroom building. They indicate in both reports and interviews that they are aware that they are poised at the beginning of a new phase in their history. The new phase will most likely include another capital project to expand classroom capabilities and to provide needed support space.

In a proprietary school one would typically see the founder and her friends running a small school effort. In the first phase of moving to a not-for-profit scenario it is typical to see the founder and friends as new board members. That's where Hilltop school finds itself today. By their choice of undergoing dual accreditation of SACS-SAIS through SAIS, and by talking to members of the school community, it is apparent that the school is ready to make the choice to evolve into a model that is in line with a more traditional independent school model. It is important to note that this is a crossroads for this school and there are many choices along this path. Because the school seems ready to move in the direction of a traditional independent school model, the accreditation team is highlighting areas of consideration to assist the school in this process.

Commendations:

The visiting team commends Hilltop Montessori School for:

- The school community on the philosophy and mission of the school which appears to be well internalized and lived by all members of the community.
- The instructional staff who exhibit high levels of professionalism.
- The board and administration for providing a plant which is clean and inviting. Classrooms are child-centered and enriched, as much as possible, with learning materials and resources. The materials reflect both traditional and Montessori methodologies.
- The School administration, faculty, staff, and students for their efforts to maintain a campus that is beautiful, student centered, and equipped to support a rich academic environment.
- The Faculty for its strong connection to its mission, philosophy, and Montessori pedagogy.
- The outstanding modeling of respect that was observed among the Faculty, Staff and Students.
- The Executive Director for being approachable well liked, respected, and supportive of Faculty and Staff.
- The Executive Director for encouraging and facilitating professional development opportunities.

- The Faculty for effectively sharing and using Montessori materials along with other methodologies to meet the varied needs of students. The enthusiasm and dedication of faculty and staff which is evident throughout the day and from all community members.
- The exemplary manners, the obvious good citizenship, and the happy and respectful student body.
- The students who are poised, confident and articulate about the importance of Hilltop Montessori and its environmental mission.
- The PTO for all their contributions to the school.

Recommendations:

The visiting team recommends that Hilltop Montessori School consider:

- Developing ways to engage a high level of stakeholder involvement with well-defined communication feedback systems.
- Creating avenues to benchmark and network with other schools that are similar to Hilltop Montessori in the Birmingham area.
- That the Executive Director create a process to delegate and reassign the many responsibilities that she has assumed over time.
- Pursuing its faculty and staff recruitment efforts to enable the school to develop quality candidate pools for every position opening.
- Cultivating benefactors who support the mission of the school.
- Providing family socialization opportunities that foster an even deeper sense of community and involvement by the PTO and administration working in collaboration.
- More fully integrating standardized test data and student progress measurements into the development of instructional strategies.
- Prioritizing available funds to be used for the more immediate needs of the school; i.e. Montessori materials for the classrooms, books to build up classroom libraries, classroom cabinetry, technology to enhance student learning etc.

VISION

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

Hilltop Montessori School sees the next five years as a period of growth which includes increasing enrollment to two hundred. The higher enrollment requires expanding the existing facility or building a new building to accommodate Hilltop's enrollment. The School also wants to expand its current facility with the addition of a library, gymnasium, and other areas deemed as multi-use. The vision includes good community relationships to allow for physical expansion and sharing of resources within the community.

Commendations:

The visiting team commends Hilltop Montessori School for:

- Excellent use of space and resources in the first building phase.
- Commitment to and accomplishment of LEED Certification.
- Building a student body of academic, social, and cultural diversity.
- Eco-education with the children.
- Fundraising success.
- Incorporating their vision into community action by working with the local Bistro to grow tomatoes and involve students in cooking.

Recommendations:

The visiting team recommends that Hilltop Montessori School consider:

- Developing both an internal and external marketing program to share the wonderful opportunities Hilltop Montessori has to offer children and families.
- Expanding the admissions pool and creating a waiting list to maximize the potential for most appropriate placement in classrooms.
- If it is the policy of Hilltop to accept children with special needs, adding a staff member who can accommodate and assist each child as well as provide support to classroom teachers.
- Using some interim measures like covered shelters and outdoor sinks to accommodate P.E., Art, Performing Arts and Science lab classes on rainy days.
- Becoming more visible in the immediate community with more service projects, hosting community events, etc. that allows the students to give "give back" to the community.
- Building a strong parent community with more social events hosted by the school.

PLAN

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

The school developed a plan during the initial planning process that focused on building a new campus and moving the school. Sufficient funds were not raised to build the entire campus envisioned. The board and the Executive Director have taken the remaining plans and captured them in a Phase II. The Executive Director meets with a significant number of individuals during the course of her duties including: every administrator, every faculty member, parents, board members and community members. As a direct result of her outreach, she has been able to refine and enhance the needs to be addressed in Phase II.

The phase II portion of the plan has been communicated honestly and effectively to all constituents. Indeed, the visiting team could not find experienced or new faculty or staff who did not have a good understanding of the plan. Hilltop Montessori is clearly a young school well on its way to becoming a mature, independent school. What remains to be added to the plan is the internal support needed in terms of admissions, fund raising, facilities maintenance and business services. The planning process is ongoing.

Phase II has the following components:

1. To provide needed support space for staff.
2. To provide additional classroom space for the areas of most need.
3. To provide a library or access to library facilities.
4. To provide covered PE and play space whether owned by the school or shared with the community.
5. To continue to integrate the school into the community where the school now resides.

What remains to be added to the plan is the internal support needed in terms of admissions, fund raising, facilities maintenance and business services. The planning process is ongoing.

The Phase II Plan is clearly evolving. Input is being gathered from all parts of the community. The completion of Phase I was monumental for this community and the level of interest and enthusiasm for continuing their efforts are to be commended.

Commendations:

The visiting team commends Hilltop Montessori School for:

- The Board and the Executive Director for providing superb classroom facilities using an environmentally friendly template.
- The Board and the Executive Director for seeking and obtaining LEED certification for their classroom building.

Recommendations:

The visiting team recommends that Hilltop Montessori School consider:

- Reviewing current by-laws and structure for board, PTO, administrative and organizational staff to better meet the needs of the school's constituencies over the next five years.
- The Board should consider the governance issues of a maturing school and adjust in ways that will further the mission of Hilltop Montessori. By reviewing other types of governance and administrative models, areas of improvement can be identified and changes initiated to ensure the long-term sustainability of the school.
- Expanding the administrative structure (particularly admissions, marketing, and development) to provide the necessary staff and support for moving ahead into Phase II of their plan.
- Developing and implementing an integrated five-year plan that incorporates all major facets of the school's Phase II building program and its programs: mission and vision, budget and finance, staff, curriculum, technology, development and fund-raising, admissions and facilities.
- Developing a finance committee to oversee long term budgetary projections. In the event that there is need in the Hilltop community, this committee could also serve to review, approve and award any financial aid.
- Creating a financial plan that will allow Hilltop Montessori to enable the school to develop quality candidate pools for every position opening.
- Given the potential of a four to five year window before new facilities might be acquired, the Executive Director consider addressing some of the program needs with temporary solutions where feasible.
- Developing a professional development plan to continue best practices in Montessori education including joining professional organizations that will enhance teacher instruction.
- Setting up a system where level coordinators standardize classes and Montessori materials at each level.

Additional Area of Study: TECHNOLOGY

Description of the Program

The Hilltop Montessori School developed a five year Technology Plan to provide technology for students and teachers. Although technology is not an integral part of a Montessori education, the school recognizes a need to integrate technology into their curriculum to better prepare graduating students or students who may leave their program earlier for non-Montessori school programs as well as an instructional tool.

The Hilltop Montessori School's plan addresses funding their technology through initial setup and a plan to maintain and upgrade laptops, desktops and other technology within the school. Their software plan is to continue with Accelerated Reader and funding other computer assessment skills that are appropriate for their school.

Commendations:

The visiting team commends Hilltop Montessori School for:

- Developing a plan that stresses student understanding of technology and using those abilities to engage in meaningful projects utilizing technology as a tool for student learning.
- Maintaining a website that is current and provides basic information about the school and its programs.
- Their planning process that recognizes technology is dynamic and therefore addresses the need to update hardware and software for the future.

Recommendations:

The visiting team recommends that Hilltop Montessori School consider:

- Developing the school website to be utilized as an informational resource for students, parents, and the community. Work toward developing the web site to become a useful tool in collecting and disseminating information while investigating other avenues to develop the community's desire to visit the website.
- Investigating possible distance learning opportunities with other schools including other Montessori schools.
- Identifying an approach that will integrate a seamless advancement in technology (hardware and software) while focusing on student learning. For example: addressing a continual evaluation of software development and utilization as well as investigating/researching best practices in incorporating technology into the classroom.
- Creating a short and long range plan to meet the technology needs of the school that are in conjunction with the overall budgetary goals. This includes exploring alternative funds (i.e., grants, ERATE) to help supplement technology budget.
- Providing additional professional development in the area of integration of technology into the curriculum and train all teachers in the use of new technology resources currently available within the school.

RESULTS

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

Within the self-study, the school documents how the recommendations from the previous SACS visit and report have been addressed within the school community. The evidence suggests that recommendations were carefully considered and implemented where feasible and amended where appropriate.

As the school begins the implantation phase for achieving its current goals, it is important for all members of the school's constituencies to continue to review its progress and look for ways to measure the effectiveness of the action plans to meet short and long-term goals. As indicated in the report, the school is aware that they are poised at the beginning of a new phase in their history and ready to make the choice to evolve into a more traditional independent school model. Recommendations made throughout the report provide avenues by which this can be achieved.

Progress should be documented annually.

SUMMARY

The visiting committee wishes to thank the faculty and staff of Hilltop Montessori for the manner in which we were “immersed” into the life of the school. It was evident from the beginning that we were in a community that completely understood and lived up to the school’s mission ***“to provide a quality Montessori education in an environment which fosters a child’s love of learning and a respect for self, others, community, and the world.”***

The openness and willingness of all constituencies to share their experiences, both of their successes and of their challenges, enabled the committee to review effectively the school’s self study and strategic plan. This inclusive atmosphere not only allowed the committee to identify those areas to be singled out for special commendations, but also provided the documentation and reflection needed for the committee to provide appropriate assistance in the formulating of recommendations. The committee wishes to recognize the hard work and dedication of the Hilltop Montessori community and especially to Ms. Michele Scott, Executive Director, for all the assistance provided to the visiting committee team. This community truly walks on an exciting pathway as it speaks with pride in telling what has been accomplished and what is yet to be achieved.

The visiting team presents this report to the Hilltop Montessori School with the hope that it will be received with the intent to thoroughly study its contents and accept and implement those recommendations believed to be valuable to the school’s improvement initiatives.

CONCLUSION

The visiting team finds:

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