



AMERICAN ACADEMY FOR LIBERAL  
EDUCATION  
CHARTER SCHOOL ACCREDITATION

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OVERVIEW OF  
THE  
CHARTER SCHOOL  
ACCREDITATION  
PROCESS

## ABOUT AALE

Founded in 1992, the American Academy for Liberal Education is a broad-based, bipartisan organization dedicated to defending and nurturing excellence in liberal arts education and in assuring access to quality liberal arts education to all who seek the benefits it portends. The Academy works with a distinguished and nationally representative list of individual experts and exemplary institutions to develop procedures for assessing educational programs and accrediting educational institutions with liberal arts emphasis. AALE is listed by the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education as a recognized national accrediting association for the accreditation and pre-accreditation of institutions of higher education and programs within institutions of higher education that offer liberal arts degrees at the baccalaureate level. It is currently implementing K-12 institutional accreditation of public charter schools with liberal arts emphasis.

## **Introduction**

The American Academy for Liberal Education is a national, voluntary membership association accrediting institutions and programs that offer quality education in the liberal arts, and that meet the Academy's academic, administrative, and fiscal criteria. The Academy's accreditation standards and criteria are clearly focused on matters of educational significance, including curricular design and quality, commitment to excellence in teaching, and evidence of student learning. Universities, colleges, degree-granting programs within such institutions, and public charter schools (elementary, middle, and/or secondary) may apply for accreditation by the Academy.

## **New Charter Schools**

If a charter school has been in operation for two or three years at the time of application, it must in its third year of accreditation submit an Appendix to its AALE Charter School Profile Forms; this Appendix consists of a concise revised self-study describing and documenting continued compliance with the Academy's requirements and standards. In addition to submitting the Profile Forms and Appendix, schools seeking renewal of initial accreditation status must receive a site evaluation visit in the third year.

## **Established Charter Schools**

If a charter school has been in operation for four or more years at the time of application, it must in the fifth year of accreditation submit an Appendix to its AALE Charter School Profile Forms; this Appendix consists of a concise revised self-study describing and documenting continued compliance with the Academy's requirements and standards. In addition to submitting the Profile Forms and Appendix, schools seeking renewal of initial accreditation status must receive a site evaluation visit in the fifth year. Charter schools may apply for accreditation for their entire school (e.g., K-12) or for one or more parts of their school (e.g., K-8).

Charter Schools that maintain more than one campus may in some cases be able to apply for single accreditation, depending on factors such as geographical proximity, curricular and assessment symmetry, and centralized leadership. Multi-campus charter schools should discuss such matters with AALE in advance of application. Charter schools that are members of local or national networks (e.g., Core Knowledge, Edison) must apply individually for accreditation. Accreditation is an AALE full membership status that allows charter schools to establish a formal and publicly recognized association with the Academy. Accreditation is granted for a period of up to five (5) years, at which time schools may apply for re-accreditation.

## **Estimated Timetable for the Typical Application Process**

The time required to complete the AALE accreditation process will vary from case to case, but it is possible to complete the entire process 7 months from the date of initial application. Brief descriptions of key steps in the application process are provided below, along with an estimated timetable for completing each step.

The formal accreditation process begins with submission of a completed application form and supporting materials, together with a letter of intent signed by the CEO of the applicant school, and the application fee. Application forms for charter school accreditation are available for downloading from the Academy's website as well as in printed form by request. The Academy's accreditation eligibility requirements are addressed through response to the application form.

When an application is received, Academy staff review all information and materials supplied to determine whether the school meets eligibility requirements and may proceed with the application process, or whether further information or materials are required. If all is in order, Academy staff notifies the applicant to begin developing a self-study for accreditation.

### **Self-Study**

All schools and programs applying for accreditation or re-accreditation by the American Academy for Liberal Education are required to prepare a self-study report. The Academy's Guide to Preparing a Self-Study for Charter School Accreditation is available for download from the Academy's website, as well as in printed form by request.

A self-study report is an applicant's formal and rigorous examination of its performance in light of the Academy's Standards and Criteria as well as of its own mission and educational objectives. The process leading to the self-study should involve broad participation by faculty and administrators and it should be well-integrated with the school's regular review, planning efforts, and state accountability requirements. The self-study report is a central element in the accreditation process. The process of preparing for, drafting, and completing a self-study for accreditation may take between two (2) months and six (6) months, depending on the size and complexity of the applicant school.

### **Site Evaluation Visit**

The Academy requires that all charter schools applying for accreditation, renewal, or re-accreditation receive site evaluation visits by a team of reviewers on the timetable noted above for "New" and "Established" charter schools. The Academy's Charter School Site Visit Manual is available for download from the Academy's website, as well as in printed form by request.

A typical site evaluation team consists of three members drawn from a pool of nationally-renown content experts, charter school policy-makers and advocates, representatives of

foundations sponsoring charter schools, and staff from outstanding charter schools across the United States. A list of select AALE charter school site reviewers is included in this overview and it also appears on the AALE website. In addition, the site evaluation team includes, an AALE staff member to assist the process. The Academy provides applicants in advance with the names, titles, and professional affiliations of each proposed candidate for the site visit team, and provides an opportunity for comment. Applicants may also submit names, titles, and school affiliations of candidates for review and consideration by the Academy.

The site visit lasts three days. It usually takes place at least one month following completion of the self-study for accreditation and at least two months prior to the applicant's scheduled accreditation review by the Academy's Board of Trustees. Site team members are charged with the responsibility of evaluating an applicant's fulfillment of the Academy's Charter School Standards and Criteria for accreditation and for production of a site visit report that is presented to the Academy's Charter School Board of Review and Board of Trustees. Charter Schools applying for accreditation are required to submit a formal response to the site visit report.

Please note that the site evaluation team report and any statements therein regarding compliance with the accreditation standards and criteria of the American Academy for Liberal Education represent only the considered opinion of the evaluation site team members at the time of the visit. Definitive evaluation of compliance and the accreditation decision will be made by the Academy's Board of Trustees, upon recommendation from the Charter School Board of Review. It is made only after thorough review of application materials including, but not limited to, the self-study, the site evaluation team report, and any official responses to the site team report.

### **Review by the AALE Charter School Board of Review and Board of Trustees**

Approximately one (1) to three (3) months after the site evaluation visit to an applicant school or program has been completed, application materials are sent to members of the Academy's Charter School Board of Review and Board of Trustees for review. A distinguishing feature of the Academy's accreditation process is its two-tier system for reviewing applicants' educational quality. The AALE Charter School Board of Review is composed of recognized scholars from universities and colleges, leaders of government education agencies, national and local policy experts, charter school founders, and officers of educational foundations.

The AALE Board of Trustees includes distinguished scholars and administrators from the higher education community, AALE member schools, and nationally recognized representatives of other public and private organizations. The award of Accreditation status by the Academy thus confers broad, and truly national, recognition. First, the Charter School Board of Review independently reviews the academic requirements, practices, and performance of each applicant school or program and reports its findings to the Board of Trustees.

The Board of Trustees, which is charged with responsibility for all accreditation actions, then conducts its comprehensive review of applicants' educational, administrative, and

fiscal performance. This system of dual review ensures that the educational performance of applicant schools and programs receives the highest level of professional and independent appraisal.

### **Accreditation Action**

Definitive evaluation of applicants' compliance with the Academy accreditation standards, and the accreditation decision, are made exclusively by the AALE Board of Trustees, upon recommendation of the Charter School Board of Review, following a thorough review of application materials. These include, but are not limited to, the school self-study, the site visit evaluation report, and the response to the site team report submitted by the school. The actions that may be taken by the Board of Trustees include approval of an application, denial of an application, and deferral of an application.

#### Approval

In the event of an approval of an application for accreditation, the school or program will be notified in writing within ten (10) business days of the Board's decision. The Board's letter of notification will include any conditions or requirements. Schools or programs have ten (10) business days to respond to the decision of the Board of Trustees of the Academy, indicating their acceptance of the Board's decision including any conditions or requirements. Schools accepting accreditation may indicate their affiliation through an approved statement of membership. These are described in the Academy's Policies and Procedures Manual, "Statements of Membership."

In the event an application for accreditation is approved, the school and the Academy will issue a press release. This will be developed by the Academy and approved by the school prior to release; it will then be faxed, by the school and/or the Academy as agreed, to local, state, and national news media and other interested parties. If the press release receives coverage in any newspaper or other source, the school is responsible for sending a complete original copy of the notice, including masthead, full page where the notice appears, internet link, etc., as appropriate. Examples are available upon request.

#### Denial

In the event an application for accreditation is denied, the school or program will be notified in writing within ten (10) business days of the Board's decision. The Board's letter will indicate the reason(s) for its decision to deny the application for accreditation. Schools or programs that have been denied accreditation may seek a reconsideration of the decision or appeal the decision. For detailed information please refer to the Academy's Policies and Procedures Manual, "Reconsideration" and "Appeals," available for download from the Academy's website, as well as in printed form by request.

### Deferral

In the event of a deferral of action on an application for accreditation, the school or program will be notified in writing within ten (10) business days of the Board's decision. The Board's letter will indicate the reason(s) for its decision to defer action. For more information on deferrals of action on applications for accreditation, please refer to the Academy's Policies and Procedures Manual, "Deferral of Accreditation Action."

## SAMPLE ACCREDITATION TIMELINE

During all phases of the application process AALE staff is available to assist school staff as they complete their application and self-study and also to assist with them with their preparations for the AALE site visit.

### Month I

Step I. School submits a completed application

Step II. AALE staff reviews application materials and conducts visit to assist school with self-study and site visit planning

Step III. School begins self-study process

### Months III-V

Step IV. Institution completes and submits self-study

Step V. AALE staff reviews self-study and make suggestions where necessary

Step VI. AALE selects a team to conduct the site evaluation visit

Month IV-VII:

Step VII. Evaluation team conducts site visit (3 days), prepares report

Step VIII. School submits formal response to site visit report

### Months VI-VIII

Step IX. Application materials to AALE Charter School Board of Review for review and recommendation

### Month VII-X

Step X. AALE Board of Trustees takes formal action on application