

**COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**

09/03/2025

To: Karen Molchanow, Executive Director  
State Board of Education

FROM: Amy Lena, Deputy Secretary  
Elementary and Secondary Education

SUBJECT: PAIS Application to Renew Accreditation Authority – Recommendation

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Pennsylvania Association of Independent Schools (PAIS) has been an accrediting body approved by the State Board of Education (State Board) for 77 years, initially as PAPAS. Within the last five years since its last renewal, PAIS has flourished. PAIS has significantly evolved, adding a wide-ranging professional development program and accrediting ten new schools. To strengthen its operations, PAIS expanded its staff, instituted a new accreditation protocol, and celebrated its 75th anniversary in 2024. The organization also secured a five-year renewal certificate from the International Council Advancing Independent School Accreditation (ICAISA).

**Professional Development**

PAIS is providing its member schools with a wide range of professional development opportunities. It has so far offered 250 programs to over 2000 faculty and staff. In addition, PAIS has received notification that its application to grant Act 48 credits has been approved.

**School Membership**

PAIS currently accredits 121 schools with ten new schools receiving accreditation within the last five years. They have added a schedule of purposeful school visits, surveys, cohort-based virtual roundtables, and other forms of outreach to make sure they are best serving their schools.

**Additional Staff**

PAIS added a Director of Programming and Research, and a Business and Office Manager, which brings the total complement of staff to three full-time staff and two part-time staff. At the time of submission, the position of Executive Director and the Director of Accreditation was being held by one person temporarily.

**Accreditation Protocol**

PAIS instituted a new accreditation protocol. The organization reviewed its entire accreditation tool, *Evaluative Standards for Accreditation* (See attachment). The new tool has been employed, and as of February 2025, 28 member schools were accredited utilizing the new instrument. The main features are the use of a rating system for indicators that inform the standards and the addition of a strategic thinking standard. A school affiliation standard was also added for seven different types of schools (Catholic, Jewish Day, Quaker, Learning Differences, Progressive, Social Justice, Residential). This has allowed these schools to do a deeper dive into their differentiating identity than they might have used the previous accreditation tool. PAIS continues

to review this document to ensure it is serving their member schools effectively through their accreditation process. A recent change was made to take the standard on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB) work out of the Governance section and locate it in the Mission section.

### **Recognition of ICAISA**

Representatives of ICAISA visited PAIS to review their operations in December 2021. PAIS was granted another five years of ICAISA support for their procedures and practices. See information on ICAISA below.

### **75 Years of Operation**

In April 2024, PAIS celebrated its 75th anniversary of providing standards-based accreditation services with an event at Milton Hershey School. The celebration featured the premiere of a new association video, a message of congratulations from Pennsylvania's Governor, and a historical exhibit showcasing association artifacts and a reflection on its 75-year journey.

### **Renewal Request**

PAIS is requesting to renew its approval from the State Board of Education to act as an accrediting body for Nursery (to include preschool and pre-kindergarten), kindergarten, elementary and secondary levels in lieu of licensure by the State Board of Private Academic Schools.

PAIS' renewal application was evaluated by a team of three professional staff in PDE's School Services Office using the Department's standard accreditation agency application rubric. The team's review consisted of an analysis of PAIS' organization, accreditation protocols and processes, including its self-study process, accreditation standards, complaint process, monitoring processes, and policy on background checks. Based on its review of the application, our team found that PAIS has strong accreditation protocols and procedures for reviewing initial applications, granting candidacy status, initial accreditation and renewal of accreditation.

The application corresponded with the format of PDE's accrediting organization renewal application. The various sections of the application addressed each of the criteria outlined in the rubric. The PDE reviewers rated the application as being of "high quality", "very good quality" or "good quality".

Based on its review, PDE recommends that PAIS be approved as an accrediting body for nursery, kindergarten, elementary and secondary levels.

### **PAIS Organization**

PAIS is a non-profit organization with headquarters located in Delaware County.

PAIS is continually improving its accreditation process. After surveying its member schools, PAIS implemented significant upgrades to its existing protocol. The organization is now considering a new initiative to tailor the protocol based on school size, which is being explored by a new task force.

Another improvement was the creation of a formalized five-year process for reviewing their Self Study document and their overall accreditation procedures. In three of the years, a subcommittee of

their Commission for Accreditation will be reviewing various sections of their Self Study, beginning this year with the Program Section. In another year, the full Commission will be reviewing the recommendations from the ICAISA Review Report. The fifth year is flexible, allowing the Commission to focus on another area that requires review. PAIS indicates that they will remain responsive to spontaneous accreditation needs, but the creation of the formalized review process guarantees that the entire accreditation instrument will get a meaningful review regularly.

### **ICAISA Organization**

ICAISA is a non-profit organization governed by a board of directors. ICAISA represents a shared commitment to excellence in independent education and accreditation by encouraging and supporting continuous institutional improvement. A primary responsibility of ICAISA is to develop a public understanding of, and credibility for, state, regional, and international independent school accrediting programs. The Council develops criteria for effective independent school accreditation practices, exemplary standards, and models of successful accreditation policies and procedures; and engages in research to inform accreditation practice.

Over the course of a 10-year cycle, associations prepare a self-study demonstrating compliance with the *Criteria for Effective Independent School Accreditation Practices*. The Criteria provides common ground for member associations by delineating best practices, policies, and procedures. In addition, associations use the *Core Standards*, a set of “ideal” standards, in assessing their own standards.

As part of the process of “accrediting the accreditors,” each member association hosts a visit from a team composed of ICAISA members, receives written recommendations from the ICAISA review team, and engages in follow-up activities designed to improve the state, regional, or international accreditation process. This supports both institutional improvement and quality assurance.

### **Self-Study Process**

PAIS’ self-study consists of an extensive review process when ICAISA leads a review process of the Association and PAIS’ accreditation process every five years. PAIS submitted their self-study to ICAISA and following that submission, ICAISA representatives visited PAIS and conducted a comprehensive analysis for the PAIS accreditation process. During their visit, ICAISA met with 4 PAIS staff members, one recently departed staff member, and 35 PAIS school professionals from 27 different schools, including heads of schools, self-study coordinators, visiting committee chairs and members, the PAIS Board, and Commission for Accreditation members. ICAISA submitted a report to PAIS highlighting commendations and recommendations for improvement. A year later PAIS submitted a letter of progress back to ICAISA. PAIS listed some of the growth and improvements from that visit and report.

- In 2019, the Executive Director of PAIS launched an extensive listening tour and visited over 40% of member schools. Information received from the listening tour and results received from a comprehensive membership survey helped to identify a clear consensus on opportunities for the Association, which included compelling recommendations for improvement in the accreditation process, improved communication with all constituents, and more robust and timely governmental affairs news and advocacy. In addition, a long-term assessment of the Association’s financial model following a reduction of dues during the pandemic was deemed necessary.

- Further, the PAIS staff and board explored a forward-looking direction through a strategic sprint exercise. Input provided from Heads helped shape strategic imperatives to provide tools, guidance, and advocacy to support their leadership efforts. The final product, PAIS Strategic Directions, identified strengths, challenges, and plans for moving forward and now serves as a guiding document for the Association.
- PAIS also piloted a New Model of Accreditation with four schools during the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years. The goals of the pilot included greater recognition and a reflection on best practices of different types of schools (Social Justice, Jewish, Quaker, Catholic, Progressive, Learning Differences, among a few) and an effort to create a more forward-looking experience for all schools by addressing specific strategic questions.

The review team of ICAISA found PAIS to be in compliance with all Criteria. The review team also found that ICAISA's core standards are reflected in PAIS' standards, which include:

School's Mission  
 Full Disclosure  
 Governance and Fiscal Responsibility  
 Program  
 Professional Staff  
 Culture and Climate  
 Health, Safety and Well Being  
 Recruitment, Admission, Enrollment and Retention

The New Model of Accreditation being piloted is a direct response to improving PAIS' process and better meets the needs of their member schools. PAIS completed a review of their 26 Standards and over 180 Indicators with the goal of enhancing their process. New and distinctive elements of the process include updated language and perspective in the indicators, a rating system rather than a narrative Self Study, development of eight school profiles for specific school types, and a series of strategic narratives.

Recent changes in leadership and the addition of new staff members have moved strategic questions and processes to the forefront for the Association. Regular staff meetings provide opportunities to assess the strategic landscape for PAIS and its member schools. The adoption of a new strategic plan with specific goals for accreditation, connections, and programming reflects an assessment of the needs and aspirations for the Association. In addition, the Association is tracking three trends on behalf of its membership: national social unrest, teaching and learning adaptations as a result of the pandemic, and enrollment fluctuations.

The changes in, and additions to, staffing have resulted in increased strategic thinking and adaptations to the accreditation process and improved the Association's capacity to meet current and future challenges. The association's revitalized professional development program will further enhance the capacity of school personnel to move forward in an evolving educational landscape.

PAIS has a process in place to evaluate the pilot program for the New Model of Accreditation and will continue to assess and incorporate feedback to enhance their accreditation practices.

### **Accreditation Process**

A school is evaluated by the Association's standards in light of the school's own philosophy. PAIS requires each member school to conduct an extensive self-evaluation. A committee of professionals from peer member schools and other experienced educators is appointed to visit each school on its appointed cycle for 3 ½ days to review the school's self-study and to conduct the evaluation. The visiting evaluation committee writes a comprehensive report of its observations that the PAIS Commission for Accreditation considers before recommending accreditation for ratification by the PAIS Board. The PAIS evaluation program strives to assist a school in school improvement; identifying areas needing improvement or areas that do not meet standards and codes. The cost of all evaluations, inspections, and visitations shall be borne by the school. A copy of the Evaluative Standards for Accreditation is attached.

### **No Changes to the following:**

School site visits

A school's self-study

Accreditation renewal and monitoring