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MERKOS L'INYONEI CHINUCH
NATIONAL ACCREDITATION BOARD

*Peer Review * Site Visitation*

HANDBOOK FOR
SCHOOLS



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MISSION STATEMENT

The mission and purpose of the National Accreditation Board is to foster the continuous pursuit of educational excellence.

The accreditation standards, training and assistance offered by the National Accreditation Board provide the mechanism and help generate the enthusiasm, which make the accreditation protocols effective and meaningful. A self-study and peer review, create an atmosphere conducive to educational progress. Strategic long-term planning sets the stage for an ongoing process of advancement toward excellence.

Through the National Accreditation Board, the Chinuch Office of Merkos L'Inyonei Chinuch can facilitate continuous educational improvement and validate the achievement of quality education in both Judaic and General studies, nationwide.

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The basic responsibilities of the chair and visiting team members

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Chapter 3: *Understanding the evaluation visit*

The school should bear in mind that a peer review visit is like conducting an orchestra. Each section plays its own instruments and the conductor (or chair) brings them all together to make beautiful music.

Chapter 4: *Developing a long-term strategic plan*

The school may or may not choose to wait for the visitation report before deciding on its long term strategic plan.

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE SCHOOL IN HOSTING A VISIT

In order for members of a visiting committee to be as effective and efficient as possible, the school must accommodate them in a way which makes it easy for them to discharge the various responsibilities involved in making a successful visit.

The site-visitation is critical to the objective validation of the school's effectiveness and is an integral part of the accreditation process. All site visitors are persons with no vested interest in the school, are familiar with the accreditation standards and procedures and are knowledgeable of sound Torah-oriented educational practices.

The visitation team is appointed by the executive director of the Education Office of Merkos L'Inyonei Chinuch in consultation with the school head. Together they choose a chairperson who will lead the team in the site visit and will organize and guide their activities. Additionally, he will be the executive in charge of all the arrangements relating to the site visit.

So that the school will better understand what is involved in a Peer-review school visit, some broad and some general details are provided below:

A. The greatest responsibility resides with the chair; His/her responsibilities are:

1. To meet each member of the team and assure the cohesiveness and unanimity of purpose of the team.
2. To outline the characteristics of the school and the self-study for the team.
3. To present the team schedule and discuss each event, up to and including the exit report.
4. To present the members of the team with a format to be used in writing reports.
5. To discuss the procedures for expense reimbursement, emphasizing that any personal charges are not an expense of the school.
6. To preside at all team conferences.

7. To confer privately with individual team members to discover how evaluation judgments are developed and to monitor the progress of the evaluation.
8. Present a twenty-minute oral summary which is to be the exit report to the school.
9. To collect the written report from all members of the evaluation team.
10. To author the written report.
11. To present the written report to the executive Director of the National Accreditation Board within 60 days.

B. The responsibilities of the visiting team are:

1. To become familiar with the Merkos National Accreditation Board Principles and Standards Manual.
2. To read the Self Study and become familiar with the school and its operations.
3. To visit classrooms, review curriculum, meet with students, teachers and parents according to the schedule established by the chair.
4. To attend all visitation team meetings and participate in all deliberations.
5. To write a draft report of the section of the visitation report assigned by the chair.
6. To be professionally neutral and personally unbiased during all interactions with students, parents, school personnel, and refrain from expressing any personal opinion regarding any school activity.

C. The chair's report

The importance of the Chair's Report as the culmination of the evaluation process cannot be overstated. The Chair's Report is not only a commentary on the school's existing program of studies and its supporting services, but it is also a document which provides recommendations to the school as stratagems to improve the quality of the educational opportunities provided for its students.

During the course of the evaluation visit, each subcommittee will generate a written summary report on the area evaluated after it has:

1. Analyzed the self-study materials prepared by the school;
2. observed the school staff;
3. Had discussions with students and school staff; and finally,

4. Presented its findings to the entire Visiting Committee.

While these written reports will form the nucleus of the Chair's Report, the Chair functions as more than just the editor of the individual subcommittee report.

It is the Chair's responsibility to formulate one single composite report which will put the individual subcommittee reports in proper perspective. The Chair will provide essential background information about the work of The Visiting Team, the purpose of the visit, and such information about the school as may be needed to set the stage, so that the report becomes a meaningful document that will stimulate the interest of the reader in the committee's findings. Major strengths and weakness which are repeatedly cited in the subcommittee reports should be clearly identified early in the report.

Since the Visiting Team has viewed the school in its entirety in terms of the school's own stated Philosophy and Objectives and the educational needs of the community are identified in the self-study, a well-written report can play a very important role in encouraging the improvement of education.

PREPARING FOR THE VISIT: ARRANGEMENTS TO BE MADE BY THE SCHOOL

1. The school's responsibility is to provide for all the physical needs of the team, this includes

- Lodging arrangements: The team should be hosted in relative comfort. Some may be traveling a distance and will have an opening meeting in advance of the visit, all visitors will have spent a full day at work and they will need a good night's rest.
- Transportation to and from various venues
- Meals
- Physical arrangement to facilitate the team's work in the school building

2. All members of the visiting team should receive the following:

- Information concerning sleeping arrangements
- Directions to the school (include parking areas) and to the hotel/motel
- The school's Self Study and associated reports
- The school's daily schedules
- The school's floor plan (including outside areas)
- Any other materials about the school as decided by the principle or self-study chair(s)

3. Materials/equipment in the visiting committee workroom:

- There should be at least one computer/printer in the workroom.
- There should be a completed Faculty Profile for each teacher.
- There should be an ample supply of paper and pencils, as well as staplers, tape, etc., for use by the committee members.
- Snacks should be available – coffee, juice, water, fruit, etc...
- A photo display of all faculty members should be posted in the workroom.
- The master schedule should be posted in the workroom.

Although we ask the school to provide a computer etc. in the workroom, many team members do have laptops or notebooks of their own. In your correspondence to them, encourage them to bring these along!

UNDERSTANDING THE EVALUATION VISIT

A. **The orientation:** (which either proceeds or follows opening dinner with the school administration)

At the orientation meeting on the first evening of the visit, the visitation team will meet to get acquainted with the team and to emphasize some important points.

What generally takes place is the following:

- The team introduces itself.
- The Chair will outline the responsibility, mission, and the authority of the Merkos L'Inyonei Chinuch National Accreditation Board. He will describe his preliminary visits to the school and his meetings with the school's principal and steering committee.

B. **In preparation to the visit:**

All those involved with a visit must realize that:

1. The visit as a time of intensive work.
2. All information must be kept extremely confidential this includes before, during and after the visit.
3. As they go through the school and will form impressions as to both the learning process as well as the general climate the team will listen and avoid expressing any personal opinions about what they observe in the school. The time for reactions and interpretations is during visiting committee conferences.
4. The team approaches the work as colleagues and guests. Members of the team do not express opinions or act as consultants. The team's purpose is to learn as much as possible about what is going on in the school community, nothing more.

C. **The visitation process:**

All visitation team members receive a complete list of classroom visit and interview assignments. If there is any problem with any part of the assignment schedule the Chair is notified immediately.

The visitation team members receive information from a number of sources:

- Self-study materials
- Interviews with school self-study committees
- Interviews with students, parents, and community members
- Meetings with individual teachers and school administrators

The job of the visitation team members is to observe and validate the data they receive from all the above sources. Validation is possible through checking and observing on different levels.

D. Interviews

Team members will be conducting group interviews with the parents, community members, students, support staff, teachers, building administrators, school board members, and central office administrators.

The team's task is to elicit as much information about the school as possible without expressing personal views. Constantly reminding themselves that the peer review process puts the school in a highly sensitive state and all steps must be taken to avoid having group meetings degenerate into argument or gripe sessions.

Spontaneous interviews may also take place between team members and the school's staff, parents, and students. Some meeting, of course, need to be planned but others occur unexpectedly.

E. The schedule and team assignments

1. Each team member will review the work schedule for the entire length of the visit. All members will become involved in the areas they are most comfortable with.
2. Each team member will summarize the findings of the areas of the self-study which he/she observed, particularly as they relate to the Standards.
3. The team, as a whole, is being asked to collectively judge the quality of the self-study as it proceeds with the evaluation process. Individual points of view do not take precedence over group opinion.

F. Visiting team meetings and its report

Team members meet constantly to share and compare. Whether with the entire team or with smaller segments, team meetings are conducted in a highly professional manner..

The report and Commendations and Recommendations develop from these meetings. It is essential is that the school understands that:

1. The Visitation report and the Commendations and Recommendations emanate from the experience within the school and how the school as it is measured against the Standards.
2. A properly conducted visit opens the school and all its components to the team. The more information the team is privy to, the more thorough and meaningful the report will be. The full and absolute cooperation of all the members of the school faculty and staff is essential.
3. The team will develop their full report and Commendations and Recommendations and vote on the level of accreditation to be granted. They make a recommendation to the full Board which meets and confers accreditation.

DEVELOPING A LONG-TERM STRATEGIC PLAN

A. Why is the long-term strategic plan necessary?

- School improvement works best when you build support and commitment from the school community, including students, teachers and parents. When everyone works together to establish priorities and set goals, they have a vested interest in succeeding. Having a strategic plan helps you stay focused on the long-term while dealing with the daily school routine. A teacher suddenly takes ill, the copy machine in the teacher's room is broken; the busses are late.

We need supervision in the lunchroom; someone got hurt on the playground. Running a school can at times seem like a never-ending game of Whack-A-Mole. Who has the time or patience to focus on the school's long-term needs? Having a strategic plan can help you keep your eye on the big picture.

- The accreditation process involves collaboration and collaboration is key to the development and actually carrying out a successful long term strategic plan. As a principal, it can be easy to think that your way is the right – and only – way. However, by collaborating with others including administrators, faculty, staff, students and parents you gain valuable perspectives and gather new ideas.

All schools can improve. By setting goals and establishing a framework to reach them, schools across the spectrum – from the highest performing to those in need of improvement – can outperform their past performance. Without a strategic plan that includes a clear mission, vision and markers to drive the school and school system forward, you risk the chaos of teachers and staff rowing in different directions and students left to tread water until they graduate.

- So how do you go about developing and implementing a comprehensive strategic plan that is meaningful and will help drive school and student improvement?

The accreditation process helps schools and school leaders focus on where you are, where you are going, and how you can get there. The process pushes you – and your school community – to define what you expect your students to be like when they graduate and identify what it will take to achieve those expectations.

The standards represent the building blocks required for a quality school and educational program and provide the framework for a strategic plan. Through the self-study process, the school determines which areas of its curriculum and organizational capacity are the priorities for growth and improvement, sets measurable goals to address these priorities, and then establishes a plan to achieve its objectives.

When the school community involved from the start, it diffuses the all-too-common refrain “no-one asked my opinion” that often obstructs new programs or new ways of doing things, leading to more of the status quo. Accreditation is about pushing beyond the status quo, pushing beyond the mandates to truly provide the best education you can provide for your students from the very first day they enter your school through graduation.

B. How does the visit help the long term strategic plan development?

A School may decide on an improvement plan without any input from the accreditation visitors. Having completed a thorough review of all its functions it will have discovered areas for improvement. So it is not necessary to wait for a visitation report to decide where the school need to place its focus for the future. It is helpful however, to find out how other, like minded but outsiders, see the school and to consider their recommendations.

Many schools however, prefer to wait until after the visit to have the benefit of the report as they decide on a plan.

APPENDIX

* SAMPLE QUESTIONS ON THE STANDARDS

* SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- FACULTY
- STEERING COMMITTEE
- PRINCIPAL-HEAD OF SCHOOL
- RABBI/LAY LEADERS
- PARENTS
- STUDENTS

SAMPLE QUESTIONS ON THE STANDARDS

SECTION 2 STANDARDS 1-3 *PHILOSOPHY GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATION*

FUNDEMENTAL PRINCIPLES

1. Did you take part in the development of the Mission statement, philosophy or objectives as presented in the self-study?
2. Was the document presented to the faculty?
3. Do you think the Mission and Philosophy address and identify the needs of the school?
4. How does the present Mission and Philosophy differ from a previous one?
5. Do you think the Objectives are reasonable and achievable? Why? Why not?
6. Are you aware of plans to periodically review the appropriateness of the Mission and Philosophy?
7. Do you think the students and their parents are aware of the present Mission and Philosophy or of the one that existed before the present one was developed?

GOVERNANCE

1. Are you aware of the administrative structure of the school? Is it effective?
2. Are there written clearly defined job descriptions of the administrative personnel?
3. Does the administration work well with the faculty and staff?
4. Are school policies clearly defined and generally understood by all those affected or effected?

FISCAL MANAGEMENT AND ACCOUTABILITY

Chances are that issues of Fiscal management will not be subject to committee discussion rather, team members will discuss and review the records in a private setting. Only team members who have some background in the financial end of administration should be assigned this task.

It is not appropriate for site visitors to seek to review donors, and contributors' lists. Rather their job is to verify record-keeping practices and the overall fiscal health, and solvency of the school.

1. How effective are tuition and refund policies?
2. How effective are the school's scholarship policies?
3. Is the public aware of the availability of tuition reduction and/or scholarship policies?
4. Are financial records kept in a safe place?
5. Are billing and accounting procedures in keeping with standard, sound practice?

SECTION 3 STANDARDS 4 -7
PERSONNEL AND STUDENT ADMINISTRATION

PERSONNEL

1. Describe the procedure used in hiring personnel. Is it fair?
2. What is the procedure for evaluating personnel? Is it fair?
3. Is there a faculty handbook? Does it actually reflect the administrative practices of the school?
4. Does the faculty feel that assignments are equitable and fair?
5. Is there adequate help and assistance for both new and existing personnel aimed at making them more effective?
6. Are you aware of how the school evaluates its employees? Is the process thorough? Does it provide accurate information? Is it a fair process?
7. What processes does the school employ to upgrade the professionalism of its faculty and other employees? Do the processes actually do what they intended to do? Does the school make sure that all staff do in fact participate?
8. Is there a climate which fosters personal growth? Can you specify?
9. Describe any recent school-sponsored faculty in-service program which dealt with teaching techniques and methodology, the learning process, the use of equipment and technology testing procedure and analysis etc.

10. Which areas do you think additional staff is needed? Have you made your thoughts known to the administration? If so, how did it respond?
11. In which area do you think the school is over staffed?
12. Does the climate in school create an atmosphere conducive to teaching and learning and foster the attainment of educational goals?

SECTION 4 STANDARDS 8 - 11
DESIGN FOR LEARNING

CURRICULUM AND LEARNING PHILOSOPHY

1. How does the school provide for the development of pre-school students in terms of their physical, social, emotional and spiritual needs?
2. Is the curriculum realistic in meeting the overall objectives of the school?
3. How does the curriculum develop the skills which foster independent learning?
4. What opportunities exist for horizontal expansion of the curriculum?
5. Which programs are most successful at instilling Torah values among students?
6. Are the programs in place in keeping with, and adequate to meet the mission and objectives of the school?
7. Describe opportunities for child initiated learning experiences with the program.
8. Is there room to meet individual needs within the Judaic and general program?
9. Are the resources required to implement the educational programs adequate? Are they utilized?
10. Are instructional materials up to date? Are books and supplies available when needed?
11. How is the progress/mastery of children evaluated?
12. What procedures are in place, to follow-up evaluations of a program/class/individual?

13. What opportunities are available to students requiring special education Services?
14. How does the Chumash/Navi instruction qualitatively change from one class to the next?
15. What programs are in place to foster the practice of the Halachic values which the children learn? Are they effective?
16. What programs exist, to help children, bridge the torah values gap between school and home?
17. Does the Tefilla experience in school carry over to Shul? How?
18. Are students adequately prepared for the next level of Jewish education?
19. What kind of institution do graduates attend?
20. Is there a program for school alumni?

AREAS OF LEARNING

1. Which academic programs do you consider most effective? Why?
2. Are the subject/academic programs adequate to meet the objectives of the school?
3. Are there any learning area which you think should be expanded?
Abandoned? Modified?
4. Are there opportunities for cross pollination of ideas between subject areas?
5. Are special education programs adequate to meet the needs of the school population?

PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE

1. How are school programs evaluated in order to maintain alignment with the school philosophy and objectives?
2. Does the school adequately serve the needs of the whole school community?
3. What programs augment the regular curriculum? How effective are they in meeting their goals?
4. Are media and technology based learning programs available?

SECTION 5 STANDARDS 12 - 13
PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT, HEALTH AND SAFETY

SCHOOL FACILITIES

1. Do you believe that the facilities and equipment adequate for the school's educational program?
2. Do you feel the school is a safe place to work and learn? If there are problems, where are they? How can they be remedied?
3. Are classroom repairs done in a reasonable and timely manner?
4. What suggestions would you make to improve the facility to make it more effective?
5. Describe the immediate or long-range plans for replacement or addition to the physical facilities.
6. Describe the housekeeping and maintenance programs in effect.

SAFETY CONTROL

1. Are you aware of the health services provided to students? Do you feel they meet basic health needs and are adequate to deal with emergencies?
2. What avenues of communication exist between the Health Department and the faculty? Do you know what to do in the event of an emergency? Are you alerted to health or physical problems that exist in your students that may interfere with their learning?
3. Is the school environment safety conscience? Does safety come up regularly in teachers meeting? In discussions with students?
4. Is the school adequately prepared for emergencies? Are there personnel within school who are trained to deal with emergencies?
5. Is there a child-safety policy which addresses abuse, bullying etc.? Do you feel there adequate consciousness among faculty about child-safety issues?
6. Is there adequate precaution regarding all safety issues on the school campus? On the playground? When children are on field trips?
7. How affective is the school transportation system? Is safety practiced? How and when? How are discipline problems on the buses (trains) handled

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

PARENTS

1. Why did you choose this school for your children?
2. How would you describe the school's relationship with the parents?
3. Describe the religious atmosphere in the school.
4. How does the school respond to expressed educational concerns?
5. Are parents given an overview of school expectations?
6. How adequate is communication about student progress?
7. How would you rate discipline procedures in the school?
8. Are the children's experience in school followed up at your home?
9. Are your children happy going to school here?
10. What are you most proud of in this school?
11. Describe the most obvious positive points about the school environment.
12. What are some improvements needed in the school?
13. Is the school responding adequately to changes in the community?
14. In your opinion, are there any changes needed in the curriculum?
15. Are you satisfied with current levels of individual attention given to your child?
16. What else do you believe we should know about the school?

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

FACULTY

1. How were you involved in the self-study process? Was it a productive process? Do you feel the whole accreditation protocol has real value?
2. What have been the personal and professional benefits resulting from your participation?
3. How has the school benefited from conducting a self-study?
4. Which issues, raised in the self study is of special interest to you? Why?
5. What is the greatest asset in your school? What is the one thing which you hope never changes?
6. Which one thing would you change within the school if you had the opportunity?
7. What are the lines of communication within the school? Are they effective?
8. In what way are teachers involved in curriculum development? Is the process a meaningful one which actually yields change?
9. What provisions are made for staff development?
10. Other than teaching, what role do the Rabbayim play? General studies teachers?

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

STEERING COMMITTEE

1. How were you selected for the Steering Committee?
2. How frequently did the committee meet?
3. When was the self-study formally begun?
4. What methods were used to inform the faculty and community of progress?
5. Was there consensus reached on each section?
6. Describe how was faculty input gathered? Do you feel you were adwequately represented in the process?
7. How much input did the Steering Committee have in the development of the philosophy statement?
8. What effect did the work on the self-study have on the faculty?
9. What are your hopes and dreams as a result of this evaluation?
10. What do you see as the next steps in assuring continuous improvement in the school?

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

PRINCIPAL/HEAD OF SCHOOL

1. Tell us about your professional background which prepared you for this position, how long you have been with the school, and about your future plans
2. Describe the religious philosophy of the school? Are you comfortable with it?
3. Describe the key elements of the educational philosophy.
4. Describe the relationship between the school and the community. What is your role in that relationship?
5. What is the organizational structure of the school? Are you comfortable with the structure or would you like to see it adjusted?
6. What are your priorities as the administrator of this school?
7. Describe the religious environment which you have created.
8. What is the philosophy behind the curriculum development within Limudei Kodesh and the General Studies?
9. Describe staff development activities. Are they adequate?
10. Describe the frequency and format of faculty meetings. Do you feel that are able to get through to the faculty so that they carryout you requests and directives?
11. How are children with special needs handled? Describe the school's responsibilities to individualize the educational processes and the school's referral process?
12. What is your role in preparing the budget?
13. Is enrollment stable? What is the projected enrollment for this coming year?
14. What is your role in public relations?
15. What is the role of the school vis-à-vis "Kiruv"?
16. Where do your graduates go to school after graduating from your institution?

17. Is there an Education Committee on the School Board? What is its role and is it effective?
18. What kinds of fund-raisers do you have and how are they run?
19. Describe your goals for the immediate and long-term future of the school?

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

STUDENT

1. What do you like best about this school?
2. If you could change one thing, what would it be?
3. Is the school a friendly place? Do you have many friends at this school?
4. Do the teachers seem to like you and care about what happens to you?
5. Are you assigned a lot of homework? Does it make you better at the subject?
6. Do the teachers give you extra help if you need it? From whom?
7. How often do you have the chance to use the library? (Beth Midrash?)
8. Are there any activities to participate in outside of the classroom?
9. What special programs do you enjoy most?
10. Who has the most influence upon the students in school? The Rabbayim, teachers, or the principal?
11. Would you recommend this school to your friends in other schools?