Starting a New
Independent School

You are embarking on an exciting adventure! Whatever the reasons are for starting a new independent school, we applaud you and offer this brief overview of some items to consider. This is not intended as a step-by-step manual nor should it be thought of as the only way.

The first section is an overview of the major steps to consider. The second section focuses on the characteristics of school that is eligible to become a SAIS candidate school. The final section includes the steps involved in becoming accredited by SAIS.

We hope that these pages will be helpful and provide the foundation to start a great school.

Part 1: The Major Steps

Determine the grade levels for your school.
- How many and which grades will you start with and how many will you eventually grow to include?
- Many private schools start with fewer and lower grade levels and add upper grades over time.

Write a mission statement for the school.
- This statement will be the driving philosophy for your educational plans and a way to gather community support.
- The mission statement should include a rationale for starting the school as well as the school’s values, educational approach, curriculum focus, goals, and planned outcomes for students.

Assemble a committee.
- The committee will eventually become the core members of your board of directors.
- Committee members should be experts in different areas, including education, legal, accounting, business, and construction.

Research your state's educational requirements.
- In some states, private schools are overseen by a division of the Department of Education.
- Other states have individual accrediting agencies for private schools, while still others have no applicable regulations.
  https://www2.ed.gov/admins/comm/choice/regprvschl/index.html
Create the business entity.
• Determine if the school will be proprietary (for-profit) or non-profit.
• Most private schools incorporate and apply for tax-exempt status. File the appropriate paperwork with your Secretary of the State and the IRS. The founding committee attorney should handle this step.
• Consider speaking to your local city hall about acquiring a business license with limited liability (so that parents can’t sue you for your own personal assets).

Write a business plan.
• Create a 5-year business plan, including operational plans (such as financial and marketing) and educational plans (such as educational focus, curriculum, implementation, and assessment).

Determine the budget and secure funding.
• The budget should include capital expenses.
• The committee accountant or financial specialist should help with the budget, or you can also seek expert professional advice.
• If operating as a non-profit, solicit contributions by asking for donations from foundations, applying for grants, and inviting donations from private donors.

Find a location.
• Locate a current facility or develop plans to build one.

Interview and hire critical staff members.
• The first two staff members to hire are the head of school and the business manager. This should be done approximately 18 months prior to opening so that these experienced professionals can help implement the final steps.
• The head of school can handle the educational and staffing aspects of the school plan, while the business manager can oversee duties such as enrollment and purchasing.

Promote to prospective parents and students.
• Advertise for students through community, church, and service groups. You can also advertise through local newspapers and magazines and submit the school to online and private school directories.
• Design a website that includes admissions and enrollment information.
• Join national associations such as NIPSA.org and NAIS.org.

Open the business office.
• Begin the admissions process for students.
• Order curriculum materials, furniture, and educational supplies.
Interview and hire faculty.
- It is extremely important to find highly-qualified teachers and staff, so be competitive in the area of compensation.
- States vary in requirements for private school teacher qualifications.
- Provide faculty training sessions several months before the start of school to familiarize the teachers and staff with the school, policies, procedures, expectations, curriculum, and the vision of the school.

Open the school.
- Plan the opening for the same time as other schools in the area.

Part 2: SAIS Candidate Membership

Once the school is in operation, consideration should be given to establishing a connection with an accrediting organization designed specifically for independent schools. SAIS is one of the premier regional accrediting associations in the country.

The first step to SAIS accreditation is joining as a candidate school. This is a multi-step process and typically takes 6-12 weeks. Please review the information at www.sais.org/membership to see if your school meets the criteria.

STEP 1: SELF-ANALYSIS OF CANDIDACY CRITERIA

The candidacy criteria were developed to help predict that schools will be successful in the SAIS accreditation process. These criteria are well represented throughout the SAIS standards for accreditation and are available for review at www.sais.org/criteria.

STEP 2: SUBMIT FULL MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION, DOCUMENTATION & APPLICATION FEE

After reviewing the candidacy criteria, you may be invited to complete the full SAIS application, submit documentation (a list of the required documents is available here), and pay the $500 application fee.

STEP 3: SAIS ANALYSIS OF FULL APPLICATION AND DOCUMENTATION

The SAIS review of your full application and materials takes approximately 10 days. We may request more information if any part of your application is incomplete or unclear.

STEP 4: SCHOOL VISIT

After the supporting documents have been submitted, a SAIS staff member or representative schedule a school visit. You are responsible for travel expenses.
associated with this school visit. A visit to your school made prior to this point may or may not satisfy this step.

STEP 5: DUES & CANDIDATE STATUS

After your school has been accepted as a candidate, you will receive an invoice for annual dues based on your school’s operating budget. Paying dues is the next step to becoming a candidate for membership. All schools are considered candidates until accreditation is received from SAIS, which must occur within three years. More info can be found at www.sais.org/acc.

Part 3: SAIS Accredited Membership

Accreditation is a voluntary process of self-evaluation and continuous improvement that reflects compliance with required standards/indicators, involves a self-study, and includes a peer review by educators from outside of your school.

Independent schools that seek accreditation through SAIS understand that our process is designed specifically with you in mind. SAIS accreditation allows you to tell your story, to set your goals, and to be independent while still fulfilling the stringent and focused compliance requirements of our process. SAIS accreditation focuses on your school and your efforts to fulfill the school’s mission.

The Guidebook outlines the accreditation process from beginning to end, highlighting the milestone markers along the way. It is available at www.sais.org/guidebook.

Attending an accreditation workshop is also an extremely helpful way to deepen your understanding of the process. We offer regionally-based workshops as well as workshops on your campus. Visit www.sais.org/accworkshops to learn more.

Once accreditation is achieved, the school will be considered a member of SAIS.

If you have any questions, please contact membership@sais.org.