



It Depends on What You Mean by “Accredited”

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By: Susan Pendergrass

Parents: Read the fine print. A recent [blog post](#) on chronic student absenteeism was written under the assumption that a school that displays a “Fully Accredited” banner does so for the same reason that school *districts* claim full accreditation—because of the school’s score on the state’s Annual Performance Review (APR). Actually, there’s a difference. Missouri’s Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) accredits districts, not individual schools. And because accreditation is a district matter, any school in a qualifying district can fly a banner like the one shown above, even if the school’s APR score on its own wouldn’t pass muster.

In other words, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has developed a system for evaluating school districts by evaluating schools, but the accreditation label is only applied at the district level. If you find this a bit confusing, you aren’t alone. On my commute to work, I drive by schools in St. Louis that proudly display “Fully Accredited” banners. Like any reasonable parent, I assumed that the banner and the status apply to the school. Apparently, the fine print at the bottom suggests that it’s actually the St. Louis Public School District that is fully accredited, and therefore any public school in the district can advertise under that blanket designation. Given that all but six of over 500 school districts in Missouri are fully accredited, one could assume that nearly every school in the state could fly the same banner. If public schools were subject to consumer protection laws, then a number of parents might be the victims of false advertising.

What does any of this tell parents? The Missouri School Improvement Program (MSIP) 5 system, in which schools and districts are rated on the percentage of possible points attained, is very confusing on its own. It's unlikely that a parent would know that an APR score of 67 means that their child's school got 50 out of 75 points on a scale with five sets of indicators. Why doesn't DESE make information more easily available and understandable to parents? Why is DESE providing cover for low-performing schools.?

My colleagues and I try to be careful in our analysis; still, mistakes happen, and we need to own them. We also believe that those who serve the public need to own their mistakes. We will continue to press DESE to provide parents with accurate, complete, and usable information on each school in our state.

About the Author



*Susan Pendergrass
Director of Research and Education Policy*

Susan Pendergrass was Vice President of Research and Evaluation for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools before joining the Show-Me Institute. Prior to coming to the National Alliance, Susan was a senior policy advisor at the U.S. Department of Education during the Bush administration and a senior research scientist at the National Center for Education Statistics during the Obama administration. She earned a Ph.D. in Public Policy from George Mason University.

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Show-Me Institute

5297 Washington Place
Saint Louis, MO 63108
Phone: (314) 454-0647
Fax: (314) 454-0667

3645 Troost Avenue
Kansas City, MO 64109
Phone: (816) 287-0370

Email: info@showmeinstitute.org

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