HOLDING UP THE MIRROR
THE ROAD TO SMART CHANGE

M IDDL E SCH OOL PRINCIPAL Dr. Dwayne Priester sometimes picks up his laptop and comes to work in Wood Hall. He has a favorite spot to sit, he tells me, pointing to the floor at the base of a pillar: “right there.”

When Dr. Priester works in Wood Hall, he doesn’t stand out; on any given day, many of the students are also sitting on the floor. The teachers can be hard to spot, too, circulating among the students, who are working on projects in small groups. The whole scene looks less like a traditional school and more like one of those 21st century workspaces you see in the pages of design magazines, but with more kids, more backpacks, and more laughter. Many of the students are talking—“look, they’re all totally absorbed,” says Dr. Priester. “They’re talking, but they’re talking about the thing they’re working on.”

Even ten years ago, the scene that plays out every day in the sixth grade building, opened in the Fall of 2015, would have been hard to imagine. At Mid-Pacific the look and feel of Wood Hall—along with many of the changes you see at Mid-Pacific—were made possible thanks in large part to the school’s two-year accreditation process, which concluded last year.

It’s not an intuitive connection. Private school accreditation, when it is thought of at all, sounds like a stamp of basic approval: “you’re doing well, and the things you want to get better at.” And when appropriate, the entire school community was invited to give their opinion. The goal, says Byrne, was to produce “a really true, really honest representation of what our whole community feels like we’re doing well and what our whole community really wants us to work on.”

The 262-page self study that was finally produced was a complex undertaking that took 18 months to compile and involved the efforts of more than 100 committee members, and the input of many hundreds of members of the larger Mid-Pacific community.

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While previous accreditation reports had allowed each department to operate in isolation (“the English department would write their section, and the elementary school would write their section,” says Byrne), for the new process, sixteen community-wide committees were convened, making every effort to include members of each of the school’s stakeholder communities: parents, faculty from each school level, alumni, administrators, and board members.

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And then this visiting team comes—like your teachers and your parents—and they look at all your evidence and they say, ‘Yup, you’re right, we see these things too. You are really, really good at this, and yes we agree you probably need to work on this. Or, ‘Hey, did you think about this thing you could work on?’ And then you get your plan of action.”

THE PROCESS

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But when Byrne explained what she was working on to her third and fourth grade class, she used a metaphor they could understand immediately. “I always likened it to our portfolio process with the students,” she says, referring to the semesterly meetings between parents, teachers, and students in which students review and present their semester’s work. “You talk about the things you’re doing really well, and the things you want to get better at. And then this visiting team comes—like your teachers and your parents—and they look at all your evidence and they say, ‘Yup, you’re right, we see these things too. You are really, really good at this, and yes we agree you probably need to work on this. Or, ‘Hey, did you think about this thing you could work on?’ And then you get your plan of action.”
Often, the process of stepping back and asking deep questions led to decisions and changes even before the report was finished, says Byrne. “We identified these things that we needed to work on and do, and by the time we turned in the report we’d already done a lot of those.” Among them was the open and flexible, student-centered atmosphere of Wood Hall. (For others, see the following article, “Concrete Changes.)

TOWARDS ONE SCHOOL

One of the most profound results of the lengthy, school-wide accreditation process was that it both confirmed and turbocharged Mid-Pacific’s “one school” commitment.

The cross-disciplinary nature of the inquiry led, says Dr. Turnbull, to all participants having “a better understanding of the life of a school,” from the way fundraising can directly impact teaching and learning, to a more comprehensive picture of how and why decisions are made. “It cut across all the departments on purpose,” says Dr. Turnbull. “Now we have many faculty and staff that know more about what the other is doing. And [the process] asked open-ended questions that forced you to really talk to each other.”

“What’s that the WASC has done,” says Elementary School principal Dr. Edna Hussey. “We need not to work in silos—which is so easy to do—but to see the interrelationships of our work together as a school.”

Jones, the Mid-Pacific parent, who is also a partner with local law firm Marr, Jones and Wang, agrees. “At the time, I only had elementary-aged children, so I found it extremely eye-opening to encounter all these other people in other parts of the school,” he says. “It greatly expanded my understanding of the school—and it convinced me that this school is filled with extremely talented and dedicated people. Whether you are in elementary, middle, or high school— they are there.”

President Turnbull sees the WASC/HAIS accreditation process as part of an extensive and ongoing period of reflection and change that began well before his arrival on the scene. “In a way, the school had been preparing for it ahead of time,” says Dr. Turnbull. “My predecessor Joe Rice retired in June 2013, and when you go through a transition like that, you’re doing a lot of that introspective looking anyway, calling out the great parts, but tightening up the parts that need to be looked at. And then in my first year, it was part of my job to make sure I knew as much about the school as possible.” The master plan, which addressed plans for the school’s facilities, occurred in parallel with the WASC process, a snapshot of the school’s current direction and momentum.

“Now we have three major bodies of data that tell us how we are doing on a variety of different levels,” says Dr. Turnbull, who cautions that since self-reflection done right is an inherently time-consuming process, it comes with the responsibility to plan and implement: “Whenever you undertake a big study like that, it has to serve a purpose. It can’t go on a shelf and collect dust.”

The logical next step was to build a strategic plan. “The last one was seven years ago,” says Dr. Hussey, who is a member of the current strategic planning committee. The committee includes faculty representatives from the elementary, middle and high schools, administrators, board members, parents and even middle- and high-school students.

Byrne, who also sits on the strategic planning committee, adds that the WASC process made it easy to start talking strategy. “We have all that information already. All the data, all the feedback from everybody. We could just go from there.”

“For Mid Pacific, the most important thing that this whole process provided was the ability for us to truly hold up the mirror and ask ourselves: ‘Are we doing what we say we’re doing, and what we think we should be doing’?” says Dr. Turnbull. “You don’t want to survive, or just occupy a space; you want to thrive and flourish in a space. The world just doesn’t stay the same anymore.”

The Results Are In

So, how’d we do? When asked this question about the accreditation process, Mid-Pacific President Paul Turnbull grins. “We got a fantastic report.”

Dr. Turnbull says, “We got a fantastic report.” The 47-page report celebrates a school with “compelling forward motion,” and Mid-Pacific was re-accredited for seven years, with a midterm visit— the best possible outcome for the process.

“The beautiful part about this whole process is that at this level, it’s not about whether or not you are competent: it’s about how you are competent,” says Dr. Turnbull. “At this level, it’s about how we are doing, what we are doing, within a level of excellence. I see that as invaluable.”

FORWARD MOTION

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Four Changes That Came Out of the WASC Process

NEW COURSES: DIGITAL STORYTELLING AND DESIGN THINKING

“Want to see the Design Thinking class?” That’s Dr. Priester’s immediate response when I ask where I can see the fruit of the WASC accreditation process at work. Design Thinking, which refers to the iterative methodology used by innovators to solve new and complex problems, is a new middle school course that encourages hard-to-teach values like grit, resilience, and using feedback constructively. It’s only in its second year, but already demand has been high enough to add an Advanced Design Thinking course for Grade 8.

Schools have always tried to prepare students for the world they will encounter, but what happens when the pace of change is so fast that no one knows what the career options will be even a decade from now? Mid-Pacific’s answer has been to provide students with thinking tools infused with academic content that they can take anywhere.

The thinking and momentum generated by the accreditation process has led to traditional courses like Language Arts and the medium-dependent News Broadcasting giving way to courses like Design Thinking and Digital Storytelling, a new course that fuses a serious writing and critical thinking component with an array of digital platforms students can use to communicate most effectively. “When you introduce a student to a tool, it’s nothing more than a pro: ‘So you can make it better. If people don’t like the first one, you figure out ways to make it how they like it.’”

Why do so many versions? Kaitlyn answers like an eighth-grade game’s potential users, fused it with her ideas, and gone through the design thinking process: she’s gathered information from her students with thinking tools infused with academic content that they can take anywhere.

Back in the Design Thinking class, where I’ve dropped in unannounced, teacher Leilani Sills invites me to speak to any student. I approach eighth grader Kaitlyn Au and ask her what she’s up to. Kaitlyn explains the digital game she’s creating, and along with it, the design thinking process: she’s gathered information from her game’s potential users, fused it with her ideas, and gone through several versions already, collecting user feedback as she goes. Why do so many versions? Kaitlyn answers like an eighth-grade pro: “So you can make it better. If people don’t like the first one, you figure out ways to make it how they like it.”

“Is this version better than the first one?” I ask, pointing to the screen. Kaitlyn smiles. “I like to think so.”

MORE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

At any school, faculty learning is crucial to positive change. Ever wonder what the new half-instructional days sprinkled throughout the school year have been for? Those are the days when things move forward, says Dr. Hussey. Part of Mid-Pacific’s “one school” momentum—which Dr. Turnbull describes as “interdisciplinary, multi-age, interdepartmental”—has been about teachers in the same discipline meeting across every grade level to make sure that the curriculum flows from one grade to the next and that teaching philosophies are aligned.

For example, Grade 3/4 teacher Tiffany Byrne, “I’m on the science committee, so I meet with all the science teachers in the school. We’re trying to align our curriculum, assessment, and teaching from Preschool through high school.” Byrne says it’s “a pretty significant thing, and it’s unique to our school. I don’t know of any other K-12 schools that are doing this, on this scale. It’s a pretty big deal.”

So far, working with renowned educational consultants Anne Davies and Sandra Herbst of Canada-based Connect 2 Learning, the meetings have centered around assessment, a topic that reaches deep into every facet of teaching and student experience. It’s a challenge, but Middle School principal Dr. Priester says these meetings strengthen the kind of robust continuity and cross-school communication that allows teachers to build a community of adult support around each student: “The more you talk about it, and the more you get educators all at the table, the more the complexities fade away.”

INTERDISCIPLINARY LEARNING

The middle school schedule is getting an overhaul, says Dr. Priester, standing eraser in hand in front of the white board in his office. It’s covered in a schedule grid, and he’s erasing some of the lines. “Now, all the grade levels work and plan instruction together. [For example,] for the first time, we’re taking socials studies and language arts and connecting them together with blocks of time.” The rags-to-riches novel The Great Gatsby, which normally appears in literature courses, could also be used to pique discussion about American history in the 1920s, says Dr. Priester. “These subjects used to exist in silos. We’re tearing down those silos;” he says, so that learning can be continuous, and engaged across traditional lines.

THE END GOAL

Every good school keeps in mind the kind of person it wants to send out into the world after graduation. With the help of the WASC process, Mid-Pacific is currently revising its Extended School Learning Results, or ESLRs, to help prepare students for the changing world they will find when they leave Mid-Pacific. The old ESLRs, about cooperating, working hard, and being healthy, could have been written any time in the last fifty years. The new Student Learner Profile hasn’t been released yet, but watch for an update, coming soon.
A replication of the content in this document is not available.