

Does Accreditation Matter?

It's not only your child who gets evaluated in the private-school system. Schools themselves get put through the wringer on a regular basis.

It's a process known as accreditation. Whether a school is accredited or not, says the Hawai'i Association of Independent Schools' executive director, Robert Witt, is an important factor to consider in your private-school search. "Accreditation is a Good Housekeeping seal of approval," Witt says. "It assures a parent that a school means business. It's a much higher standard."

The largest accrediting body in Hawai'i is the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, known to most of us as WASC. WASC works with the Hawai'i Association of Independent Schools to accredit many of the state's private schools. Hawai'i Catholic Schools has a collaborative accreditation process with WASC, as do Seventh-day Adventist schools, Waldorf schools and Christian schools.

Beyond a basic license to operate, accredited schools have to be evaluated every few years. They do what's called a self-study, then get audited by an outside accrediting committee. If a school doesn't get the committee's approval, it can be denied accreditation.

"A parent looking at a private school that has been accredited knows two things," Witt says. "No. 1, the school has been through a rigorous self-evaluation which was reviewed by peers. If it says it does X, Y and Z, you can be pretty sure it does X, Y, Z. No. 2, you can also be sure that, at whatever level the school is today, it will be better tomorrow because the school must develop an action plan for the future, an ongoing process of improvement. Good schools know enough about themselves to identify what they need to get better."

"The schools have to invest a ton of time and money to get accredited, but it really pays off for the kids," says Witt. This may be especially true for high school students going on to higher education. Some colleges and universities may accept students from unaccredited schools, but it's not easy. "You need to take more steps to show that you've had a comprehensive education," Witt says. Student transcripts are stamped with a school's accrediting body, an immediate sign to college admissions officials.

How do you know if the schools to which you're applying are accredited or not? See our comprehensive Guide to

Hawai'i Private Schools, starting on page 46. We've noted all the schools that are accredited and the accreditation body. Of course, the guide will look like an alphabet soup of acronyms, but here's a list of primary ones:

AACS - American Association of Christian Schools. National Christian accreditation body with member schools in all but four states. www.aacs.org

ACSI - Association of Christian Schools International. Recognized by the National Council for Private School Accreditation. Accredits Christian schools from kindergarten through 12th grade. www.acsi.org

AMS - American Montessori Society. www.amshq.org

AWSNA - Association of Waldorf Schools of North America.

Carden Educational Foundation - Accreditation through a not-for-profit, national foundation based on the Carden Method. www.carden.school.org

CARF - Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities.

H AIS - Hawai'i Association of Independent Schools. Local umbrella organization that is part of the National Association of Independent Schools. www.hais.org

NADCA - North American Division Commission on Accreditation. Seventh-day Adventist accreditation organization. www.nadeducation.adventist.org

NAEYC - National Association for the Education of Young Children. National association of early childhood educators. Accredits preschool to third-grade programs including childcare and before- and after-school programs. www.naeyc.org

NLSA - National Lutheran School Accreditation. Nationwide accrediting body for Lutheran schools.

U.S. Dept. of Labor - Accreditation overseen by U.S. Department of Labor for national Job Corps centers. Job Corps educates and trains low-income young people. www.jobcorpsworks.org

WASC - Western Association of Schools and Colleges. One of six regional accrediting associations for schools and colleges. WASC covers California, Hawai'i, other Pacific Basin areas and East Asia. www.wascweb.org

WCEA - Western Catholic Education Association. Accredits Hawai'i Catholic Schools.