

STHS gets second chance by accreditation team

By Kathryn Reed

While a bit of apprehension fills the halls of South Tahoe High School because of next week's visit from the accreditation team, optimism also abounds because there is the belief the original decree handed down last spring was based on faulty assessments.

Being an accredited high school is huge, especially when it comes to colleges looking at applicants.

South Tahoe High is accredited.

The issue is that instead of receiving a six-year accreditation, the school received a two-year probationary status. The district is appealing it based on three issues. In the letter to the certifying board Lake Tahoe Unified School District Superintendent Jim Tarwater and STHS Principal Chad Houck said the grounds for the appeal are:

- We believe there are errors in carrying the prescribed procedures on the part of the evaluation team;
- We believe there was demonstrable bias or prejudice on the part of one or more members of the evaluation team which may have materially affected the commission's decision;
- We believe the evidence before the commission prior to and on the date the decision which is being appealed was made, was materially in error and misrepresented; potentially a result of the first ground for appeal.

The entire appeal letter is one page with no supporting documentation for why the district believes the above statements.

"I think it's most valuable that the public realize we have an amazing facility with an amazing staff," Tarwater told *Lake Tahoe News*. "The fact the WASC process didn't turn out the way we wanted was a kick in the gut. Many said it was not right and that is why we appealed. Regardless of the process we won't stop trying to be awesome for kids."

While it's normal for the team to talk to the superintendent, they skipped Tarwater. That isn't going to happen during the re-evaluation.

"When they come talk to me, I have the data," Tarwater said.

On Nov. 30 a team of three from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges will be in town to reassess the high school. One person was part of the original team, two will be new. The original team had three teachers, two principals and a field rep from the state Department of Education. The new ruling will come out in January. The two likely outcomes are either the probationary status remains in place or a longer non-probationary accreditation is granted.

"They didn't find anything we didn't already know and weren't already working on," Houck told *Lake Tahoe News*.



Some question whether sports are taking a greater priority at STHS than academics. Photo/Provided

Looking within

“I take it a little personally because I know we do great things for the kids that were not reflected in the report,” one teacher told *Lake Tahoe News*. No teacher would let *LTN* publish his or her name.

LTUSD is very much a top down district with site administrators taking their cues from the district office. Houck, like all principals, is on a year-to-year contract.

A lack of communication exists between the district office and school sites. But there is also a chasm at the high school with some instructors believing Houck caters to his favorites.

“You have to develop a culture of trust where people feel comfortable saying there is a problem, otherwise you never address it,” one educator told *Lake Tahoe News*.

While the evaluation team looks at hard data, members also do a series of interviews. They try to get a feel for the

atmosphere on the campus. They care about a lot more than athletics, which some people believe has been a growing priority at STHS to the detriment of academics.

A veteran of the process on both sides of the aisle – meaning as an evaluator and being evaluated, summed it by saying, “They are making sure you are being honest.”

While Tarwater defended the district’s incremental approach to Common Core, there are board members this year who have questioned the slowness – though not publicly. Tarwater told *LTN* that all teachers who are supposed to be trained in Common Core are trained.

Even though the district believes the outcome was unjustified, changes have taken place since last spring. Common Core is being implemented to a greater degree. Viking Goals are being discussed with students. Student outcomes are not just measured by the letter grade, but new metrics that have been initiated, according to Houck.



The new facilities received high marks by the accreditation team.

The evaluation process

Schools do a self-evaluation that is long and involved. Then a team of educators convened by WASC does a multi-day visit to basically grade the site on the self-evaluation. It's normal for schools to point out deficiencies. What WASC looks for is having a plan in place to rectify the shortcomings.

That self-evaluation was done under Houck's first year as principal of STHS. This is his third year.

Teachers and administrators from other districts make up a visiting WASC team.

Fred Van Leuzen, executive director of Western Association of Schools and Colleges which is based in the Bay Area, did not return multiple calls. Staff told *LTN* he is the only one who can talk to the media.

This means WASC can't explain:

- Why they didn't meet with the superintendent.
- Why they didn't meet with the entire leadership team.
- If the outcome was directly tied to school leadership.
- How they ensure the district-to-district evaluation is equitable.
- If past performance was considered when finalizing the assessment.
- If they evaluated all the evidence provided by the school. Much of STHS' data is digital and there isn't any way to prove they looked at it and considered it in their evaluation.
- If there is an evaluators' evaluation or how they

assess the credibility of the people who make up the evaluation team.

The seven accreditation principles are:

- Accomplishment of school purpose, such as core beliefs, vision, mission, and schoolwide learner outcome.
- High achievement of all students based on schoolwide learner outcomes/curricular standards.
- Use of multiple ways to analyze data about student achievement.
- Program evaluation in relation to schoolwide learner outcomes, standards and research-based Accrediting Commission of Schools-WASC criteria and indicators.
- Alignment of findings to a schoolwide action plan.
- Evaluation of ongoing improvement and impact on student learning.
- Total involvement/collaboration of all leaders, board members, teachers, staff, students, parents, and others.

In the 30-page initial report to the district, the team had several concerns. Most centered on the district being slow to implement Common Core, and no real way to know students are learning what is being taught.

Highlights from the report include:

- The self-study had one year of data on attendance rates, EL/LEP population, teacher, class sizes and dropout rates.
- While the expected learner outcomes are measureable, the school is trying to determine how these goals will be monitored. When informally asked about the Viking Goals many students did not have knowledge of them.

- The school provided very little data about students and student achievement in the self-study. The data that was provided had little analysis.

- While the school has a Schoolwide Action Plan, there is no evidence on a long-range action plan regarding the school's areas of need. The administration acknowledges that they need to develop and implement an accountability system for monitoring the schoolwide learner outcomes.

- Staff appear to be involved in shared responsibility and actions; however, accountability for student learning is less clear.

- The lack of collaboration time for teachers is viewed as an obstacle to success that is complicated by contract issues, including the use of prep minutes.

- Teachers at STHS have taken advantage of a number of tools and resources in the adoption and implementation of [Common Core State Standards], however, there is much to be done in terms of a comprehensive approach toward the implementation of curriculum that requires a more contemporary pedagogical approach. ... Discussions with the staff and school's administration confirmed that great strides are currently under way but the process lacks consistency due to minimal support at the district level as well as a lack of allocation of funds to support an increase of common planning time for the teachers.

- STHS does not have a formal process in place for the evaluation of courses by continually assessing the effectiveness of their course offerings and making adjustments as needed.

- Common Core State Standards implementation is a stated weakness in the self-study report. Teachers have received little or no training about the CCSS and implementation is sporadic to nonexistent.

- (Need to) provide courses that meet the needs of all student subgroups.