



# **Report of the Special Review Team for Islamic Saudi Academy**

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**Review Dates:  
December 7-9, 2009**

# About AdvancED and NCA CASI/SACS CASI

## Background

Dedicated to advancing excellence in education worldwide, AdvancED provides accreditation, research, and professional services to 27,000 institutions in 65 countries. AdvancED provides accreditation under the seals of the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI) and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI).

## The Accreditation Process

To earn and maintain accreditation, an institution must:

- 1. Meet the AdvancED Standards and Policies.**

Institutions demonstrate adherence to the AdvancED Standards and policies which describe the quality practices and conditions that research and best practice indicate are necessary for educational institutions to achieve quality student performance and organizational effectiveness.

- 2. Engage in continuous improvement.**

Institutions implement continuous improvement focused on improving student performance and organizational effectiveness.

- 3. Demonstrate quality assurance through internal and external review.**

Institutions engage in a planned process of ongoing internal review and self-assessment. In addition, institutions host an external Quality Assurance Review team once every five years. The team evaluates the institution's adherence to the AdvancED quality standards and policies, assesses the efficacy of the institution's improvement process and methods for quality assurance, and provides commendations and recommendations to help the institution improve. The institution acts on the team's recommendations and submits an Accreditation Progress Report at prescribed intervals following the Quality Assurance Review. Monitoring visits may be conducted during this time to ensure that the institution is making progress toward the recommendations.

## Special Reviews

At any point during an institution's accreditation, a special review may be conducted in response to complaints or information about the institution or its system (district, board, or corporation) to investigate adherence to the AdvancED Standards and policies. The institution or its system must respond to the recommendations of the Special Review Team. Monitoring teams may be sent to the institution or its system at regular intervals to ensure that progress is being made toward the Special Review Team's recommendations.

## A Process of Continuous Improvement

The AdvancED Accreditation Process engages the institution in a continuous process of self-evaluation and improvement. The overall aim is to help institutions be the best they can be on behalf of the students they serve.

# Special Review Visit Report

## Introduction

In 1998, SACS CASI, an accrediting division of AdvancED, began receiving inquiries and concerns about the Islamic Saudi Academy (ISA) in Alexandria, VA. ISA is a private school accredited through SACS CASI. Initially, newspaper articles raised questions about the curriculum at ISA, particularly the Islamic studies curriculum, claiming that ISA students were taught concepts in violation of AdvancED standards of tolerance and appreciation of diversity. Since that time, more concerns and questions have been raised from various agencies, organizations, and individuals. The following timeline provides key steps leading to the review of ISA.

- **June 2008** – The Virginia SACS CASI Office and AdvancED received several calls as well as written communication from the local community regarding issues at the Islamic Saudi Academy.
- **June 23, 2008** – AdvancED received notice that the principal at the Islamic Saudi Academy was arrested for not reporting a child molestation case at his school (related to standard 2.3-compliance with applicable local, state and federal laws).
- **July 11, 2008** – After a review of various reports concerning the ISA curriculum and textbooks and the arrest of the ISA Director, AdvancED began an investigation into the accreditation status of the Islamic Saudi Academy.
- **August 14, 2008** – The Islamic Saudi Academy submitted initial materials to AdvancED for review and translation.
- **Between June 2008 – December 2009** – AdvancED conducted a review of the reports of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, The Hudson Institute and Gulf Institute. AdvancED conducted a review of the revised textbooks and reviewed other information provided by the Islamic Saudi Academy. AdvancED staff conducted interviews and meetings with staff and leaders of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, The Hudson Institute and the Gulf Institute.
- **October 13, 2009** – After the above-referenced review, the Chief Accreditation Officer with AdvancED informed the Director General of the Islamic Saudi Academy that a Special Review Team would visit ISA on December 7 – 9, 2009.

Allegations raised by the local community and above referenced agencies, as well as AdvancED's review of material provided by ISA and other agencies, identify the following areas of concern about the ISA: course material, course curriculum in compliance with standards and non-discrimination policies, teacher qualifications, governance issues, and community and stakeholder involvement. Specifically, the institution appeared to be in violation of the following AdvancED Standards:

- Standard 1: Vision and Purpose
- Standard 2: Governance and Leadership
- Standard 3: Teaching and Learning
- Standard 6: Stakeholder Communication and Relationships
- Standard 7: Commitment to Continuous Improvement

## Purpose of the Special Review Team

1. Conduct an in-depth investigation of complaints related to accreditation.
2. Evaluate the school's adherence to the AdvancED Standards and Policies for Accreditation.
3. Provide recommendations, where and if applicable, to address the findings of the investigation.
4. If appropriate, make an accreditation recommendation for review by the Virginia SACS CASI State Council of AdvancED.

## Activities of the Special Review Team

AdvancED appointed four educators to serve as the Special Review Team for ISA. Each team member was highly experienced in the AdvancED Quality Assurance Review process. To provide cultural and language expertise on the team, two of the team members speak Arabic fluently. One educator has previously taught Islamic theology at the university level. A third team member has served on Quality Assurance Review teams for several Islamic schools and a variety of public and private schools. The team chair has served on and chaired several Special Review Teams, as well as school and district Quality Assurance Reviews.

In preparation for the review, the Special Review Team reviewed reports from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, the Center for Religious Freedom of the Hudson Institute, and the Institute for Gulf Affairs; web memos from the Heritage Foundation; memorandums and correspondence from local and federal officials; articles from *Fox News*, *The Washington Post*, and *Slate*; correspondence from the school; and correspondence regarding concerns and allegations against the ISA. The team also reviewed policies and manuals from the school, pertinent correspondence, meeting agendas, staff training documents, community service documentation from the school, and the school's curriculum guide.

Once on-site, the Special Review Team conducted numerous interviews with various institution members and stakeholders. The team also held interviews with representatives of the U. S. Commission for International Religious Freedom and the Institute for Gulf Affairs; ISA's Chief of Staff and Director of Education; principals of the boys' and the girls' schools who are also members of the Board of Directors; five vice principals and assistant principals; 15 teachers and department heads; five support staff members including the school counselor, librarian, and security officers; 13 students; and 18 parent and community members. (The Director General was absent from the school during the entire Special Review Team visit).

In addition to the interviews, the Special Review Team reviewed artifacts including curriculum maps, lesson plans, the operations manual, teacher handbook, samples of student work, and school schedules. The team reviewed textbooks for Islamic Studies, Arabic Social Studies, and core content classes; observed 19 classrooms, including those taught in the Arabic and English languages; observed morning prayers; and engaged in team deliberations and report preparation.

## Findings

### Standard 1: Vision and Purpose

The immediate school family is able to articulate the school's vision and purpose. The vision, mission, and belief statements are visible on posters throughout the school.

Continued allegations and concerns raised by the extended political and social community indicate stakeholder doubt as to the school's purpose and operation in certain areas. This is evidenced by the repeated allegations and complaints submitted by the public. Because these concerns continue to surface, there needs to be a more comprehensive review of the way in which the school communicates and defines its vision and purpose with community stakeholders during the full Quality Assurance Review. The next Quality Assurance Review must occur during 2011 as part of the regular accreditation cycle for ISA.

### Standard 2: Governance and Leadership

The school leadership team, including the Director of Education, two school principals and assistant principals, provided requested information for the Special Review Team, but much of the data and information was not readily available or current. School leadership employed legal counsel to be on site during the teacher interviews. In accordance with AdvancED policies, the attorney was not allowed to sit in on the actual interviews. The Special Review Team requested samples of student writing, which were submitted after screening by the principal and Director of Education. While none of these and similar actions impeded the work of the Special Review Team, they represent a lack of transparency in the operation and leadership of the school. This lack of transparency does little to quell external stakeholder criticism or suspicion of the school's curriculum.

During the Special Review Team's visit, the Director General of the school was not available for interview and was not on campus. The Director General did not contact the Special Review Team or provide information to them through written or other media. During the absence of the Director General, the Chief of Staff was in charge of the school. While the Special Review Team requested interviews with the Director General and the complete Board of Directors, only those members who were also part of the school leadership were made available for interview. The chair of the Board of Directors and other non-school members of the Board were not included by the school in the interviews.

The Special Review Team did conclude that actions of the previous Director General concerning the reporting of an allegation of child abuse have been addressed by the school. The school's policies and procedures concerning proper reporting and handling of child abuse allegations appear to be in compliance with appropriate local, state, and federal laws, standards, and regulations.

### **Standard 3: Teaching and Learning**

The Teaching and Learning Standard (Indicator 3.5) requires that the school “offers a curriculum that challenges each student to excel, reflects a commitment to equity, and demonstrates an appreciation of diversity.” This is the crux of the allegations concerning the curriculum at ISA. The Special Review Team addresses evidence in three areas: 1) curriculum, 2) course material, and 3) instructional environment.

**Curriculum:** The Islamic Saudi Academy is committed to the implementation of the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum. The school has received certification for the IB diploma in grades 11 and 12. A timeline is in place to add IB certification in the Middle Years Program over the next two years, and then add the Primary Years Program in subsequent years. The IB program involves a rigorous and challenging curriculum. As such, the school has conducted an internal curriculum audit for grades 11-12. The results of the audit required the school to revise its curriculum to reflect the rigor of the IB program. The school is engaged in similar professional development and curriculum revision in the middle grades in preparation for that level of certification.

In grades 1-10, the school models its core academic curriculum after that of the Virginia Department of Education, specifically aligning ISA’s curriculum mapping after the school system in Spotsylvania County, Virginia. While the school does not administer the state Standards of Learning (SOL) tests, it does follow the preparation curriculum to ensure that students follow a research-based curriculum with clearly defined expectations for student learning.

In addition to the state-modeled curriculum, the school offers program studies in Arabic, Islamic Studies, and Arabic Social Studies. Arabic and Islamic Studies are offered in grades 1-12, while Arabic Social Studies is offered in grades 4-10, intended for those students who may lack requisite English language skills to pursue the English social studies or who plan to transfer to Arabic schools abroad in the future. The Special Review Team reviewed the Islamic studies and Arabic Social Studies curriculum. The Islamic curriculum would benefit from a more rigorous development process with defined learning objectives comparable to the core academic curriculum. A more comprehensive review of the curriculum will be conducted during the full Quality Assurance Review in 2011.

**Course Materials:** Allegations that the school teaches a curriculum of intolerance focused on course materials for Islamic Studies and Arabic Social Studies have been the primary concern. Although we cannot ignore the problems with the previous textbooks used by the ISA, the revised Islamic Studies texts were introduced during the 2008-2009 school year. Special Review Team members and consultants for AdvancED reviewed the revised course materials for grades 1-12, and Special Review Team members reviewed texts for Arabic Social Studies. They found no inflammatory language or materials of concern during this visit. Additional review of course materials will be conducted during the full Quality Assurance Review visit in 2011.

Selection of materials is under the autonomy of the Islamic Saudi Academy. Islamic Studies faculty collaborated internally and with American university consultants to compile a comprehensive course of study in grades 1-12 to meet the needs of ISA students. The Arabic Social Studies texts include references to religions practiced around the world. Core content texts are from American publishers, reflecting curriculum based on that of the Virginia Department of Education.

**Instructional Environment:** The school takes steps to ensure that the climate is conducive to student learning and diversity. According to the IB website, its program for which ISA has been certified “encourages international-mindedness in IB students.” ISA’s commitment to the IB program is, in part, to provide such a climate.

Diversity among the 124 faculty members reflects citizenship of 12 nations, and all three major world religions are practiced among the faculty. Four faculty citizens of Saudi Arabia include two administrators (one of which holds dual US-Saudi citizenship) and two teaching assistants, while 105 faculty members are American citizens. Diversity among the student population is also extensive. The current enrollment of approximately 750 students includes students from 24 countries in addition to students from the United States. Approximately one-third of the students are Saudi. Over 60 students are Americans born of American parents. An additional one-third of the ISA students are US citizens. All current students are Muslim, although this has not always been the case in past years. It is estimated that as many as 20% of the students have one Christian parent.

Graduates of ISA attend a variety of institutions of higher learning. The most popular choices expressed by the 51 members of the Class of 2010 are George Mason University, Catholic University of America, NOVA, and Marymount University.

Interviews with students, staff, and parents reflected a respectful learning climate. The administration vetted and submitted student work for review by the Special Review Team. Signage, student conversations, and samples of submitted student work reflect appreciation of other individuals and cultures. Selections of literature include a wide spectrum of cultures and belief systems. Student projects address global topics. In future visits, any and all student work must be available to the visiting team.

The school presented evidence of extensive community service projects and community partnerships. The Special Review Team spoke with representatives from some of these partnerships who were commendable of the work of the school in the community. Curricular and extra-curricular activities further support a sense of community and appreciation of diversity, such as the school’s participation in Model UN and a variety of athletic programs.

### **Standard 5: Resources and Support Systems**

All teaching staff are recruited and employed by the school and assigned to areas commensurate with their qualifications. All teachers have earned a bachelor’s degree or higher. Most teachers have applied for Virginia teaching certification, are in process of receiving certification, or hold this certification. Islamic studies teachers participate in an in-house certification program closely aligned with that of the Virginia Department of Education. Professional development is offered for staff at all grade levels. Alignment of the curriculum to meet the requirements of the IB program has been the focus of recent professional development. IB training continues for teachers of grades 11 and 12 and has expanded to the middle years program grades. Currently 18 teachers and administrators, including Islamic studies teachers, are pursuing IB certification through coursework at George Mason University.

### **Standard 6: Stakeholder Communication and Relationships**

The Special Review Team found through interviews that parents and stakeholders closely involved with ISA are supportive of the school and its teachings. Business and civic organizations with which the school has established outreach and community service ties recognize the school's efforts to foster goodwill and to act as good citizens of the community. A required component of the IB program is 30 to 60 hours of community service annually by each student. The school received support from the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors in its vote to allow a zoning variance to expand the school on an alternate campus. The Special Review Team reviewed invitations from the school to members of the Foreign Relations Committee of the US Congress and to the greater community to visit the school. The school conducted Arabic language classes for soldiers at Fort Belvoir.

However, tension still exists between the school and its local community, as many report a lack of transparency, concern for the content of the curriculum, and apprehension about the expanding school facilities.

### **Standard 7: Commitment to Continuous Improvement**

Data analysis used to inform instructional decisions and improvement planning was not evident. Individuals, such as the school counselor or school leadership, had pieces of data, but no comprehensive process of analysis to identify strengths and areas of need was observed. Identification of school goals for improvement, other than implementation of the IB curriculum, was not evident. A school improvement plan was not evident.

## **Accreditation Status Recommendation**

Based on inconclusive findings, the Special Review Team does not make an accreditation status recommendation at this time, pending a full and comprehensive Quality Assurance Review to be completed by April 1, 2011. In preparation for the full and comprehensive Quality Assurance Review visit, all Required Actions must be addressed and supported with evidence.

## Required Actions

Based on the findings, the Special Review Team includes the following required actions:

**Required Action 1:** Implement a process to establish the vision and mission of the school that includes the active engagement of internal and external stakeholders. Additionally, enact formal and consistent steps to communicate the vision and mission of the school to the greater community of business, political, and community leaders. The school may wish to consult outside, professional agencies to assess current community perceptions and identify areas where outreach is needed. Additional or alternate strategies for outreach are needed to garner a further understanding of the operation and purpose of the school. This thorough understanding is necessary to allow the school to focus its energies on the education of its students.

**Required Action 2:** Evaluate the Islamic Studies curriculum as part of a complete curriculum audit to ensure that it is comprehensive and rigorous as well as consistent with AdvancED Standards. As with other program areas of the school, curriculum should be in a written format and placed on a regular schedule for review and revision. Clear expectations for student learning should be defined and the curriculum should be designed to meet the needs of all students. Current, comprehensive curriculum is necessary to support a rigorous learning environment.

**Required Action 3:** Ensure that the school governance and leadership team be actively involved in the accreditation process. Additionally, it is required that the Director General and the full Board of Directors meet with the Quality Assurance Review Team during its visit in 2011. These individuals must be available for interviews and provide necessary information for the Quality Assurance Review Team.

**Required Action 4:** Develop and implement a comprehensive school improvement planning process to establish a school improvement plan focused on student learning that is supported by stated goals, interventions, measures, and action steps which clearly outline expectations. The school must demonstrate the use of data to inform the process. Stakeholders should be involved in the process of continuous improvement. School effectiveness and student performance will benefit from an active school improvement plan.

## Using and Acting On the Report

A copy of this report is sent to the Director General of the school. The institution shall use the report to guide its response to the findings and its improvement efforts. The institution is accountable for addressing the required actions identified in this report. Additionally, school officials are responsible for sharing the contents of the report with the school's board and the stakeholders. AdvancED is available to assist the institution in its improvement efforts.