

KESA – A Systems Approach to School Improvement: Part One

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The Kansas Education Systems Accreditation (KESA) is the approach the State of Kansas uses to accredit the public school districts across our great state. There are MANY moving parts when it comes to accreditation, so I do NOT want to wear you down with pages of minutia here. Of course, if you have ANY questions about any of this, please do NOT hesitate to give me a holler. I will share a cup of coffee with you and wax poetic about the discreet pieces of KESA and how it impacts us, but for today's message I am intending to give you a 30,000 foot view of what is taking place with this work.

The FIRST piece of information for you to digest is WHY accreditation matters in the first place. Boiled all the way down to pudding, accreditation is the process and then status the state uses to provide funding to its public schools. Bottom dollar, public schools are funded through a taxation process, thus making it a public concern. The accreditation process “proves” to the tax payers that a particular school district is focusing on the “right” sorts of work so as to prepare her students for life beyond the school walls. Said another way, this is the process used to ensure we are helping to create future Kansas citizens who will contribute to society and the lifestyle we enjoy here.

In the olden days, accreditation would look at things like square footage of the classrooms and how many books were in the library. It was basically a process of looking at objectively “provable” facts about the school, and then it focused on test scores and a whittled down list of “Quality Criteria” (information for another time). While those sorts of information were and are important, we now know there are many other factors in a school system that play a more important part in helping to prepare our students for the world in which they will function throughout their lives. Now, we look much more at the academic and social/emotional growth of our students. Obviously, this, in and of itself, is a challenge, but I would MUCH rather be involved in helping a person hone his thinking skills than spending time on one test score or on physical plant issues that really are not as important as the actual learning taking place.

A SECOND fact to know about KESA is this is now a multi-year process (5 years) that looks at the entire district instead of the individual buildings. Prior to three years ago – when KESA went into effect – each and every building in Kansas would face an accreditation determination EVERY year. There are over 1,700 individual school

buildings in Kansas, so you can only imagine the process that was used back in the day was glancing at best. The sheer number of buildings that exist in Kansas made it impossible for those who were performing the accreditation determinations to dig deep into the results of any building. There was simply too much to be done. So, that old system promoted surface level work that did NOT lead to long-lasting important efforts to help our students grow. By looking at the district level and by going to a multi-year approach, KESA focuses attention where it needs to be directed.

In my next piece of writing, I will dig into more of the details of the system and how it impacts life here in the Land of the Longhorns. It is all good work and is actually pretty exciting to me, but I am unabashedly an education nerd. J