



**VISITING TEAM REPORT**  
for

## **Westhill Institute SC**

Col. Prados de la Montana,

**Mrs. Mary Jo Gill**

*Head of School*

Westhill Institute SC

Domingo Garcia Ramos No. 56

Col. Prados de la Montana,

**Mr. Enrique Vargas**

*Accreditation Coordinator*

Westhill Institute SC

Domingo Garcia Ramos No. 56

Col. Prados de la Montana,

**Mr. John Marshall**

Mount Pisgah Christian School

9820 Nesbit Ferry Rd

Alpharetta, GA 30022

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# A History of SAIS Accreditation

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SAIS member schools are part of a remarkable history of quality assurance in education.

SAIS began its organizational life in 1903 as the "Mid-South Association of Independent Schools," providing training for teachers in private schools and some early public schools in the southeastern states. In 1953, another organization began as the Southern Association of Independent Schools, providing a forum for independent school administrators to work with public schools through SACS and to contribute to the larger interest in accreditation in the southeast. MAIS and SAIS merged in 1986 to form the present SAIS, with an emphasis on accreditations through SACS for independent schools and professional development for administrators, trustees, and teachers. Today, SAIS works to help both established and emerging schools approach these issues with creativity and innovation. Working at the state, regional, and national levels, SAIS serves and strengthens member schools through the promotion of the highest quality educational standards and ethical conduct.

The mission of SAIS is to provide leadership, accreditation services, and professional development resources that will strengthen member schools as they fulfill their missions. The focus of SAIS's interest when it began in 1953 was to develop and maintain relationships with the expanding organization of SACS in order to ensure significant input from independent schools into the exploding world of public school accreditation. The post-WWII years of baby booming, facility planning, teacher training, and legislative entitlement funding eclipsed the scope and role of private education in America close to the current level of service. Part of this history of negotiating standards in a predominantly public-school oriented world of education caused SAIS to embark on its own method of accreditation in the late '90s. The efforts resulted in the SAIS method of accreditation available to member schools.

SAIS has designed and implemented a significant program of accreditation to assist member schools as they develop and promote high quality education in this region. This method is based on a school's stated mission and its own unique approach to thorough and vigorous self-examination.

In today's world of accountability in schooling, accreditation serves as a critical component of a school's demonstrated effectiveness and ability to provide successful schooling for children. A school that is able to achieve accreditation demonstrates a commitment to a process that requires the school to meet a set of rigorous standards; to engage in a program of continuous school improvement; and to demonstrate quality assurance to its stakeholders through self-evaluation and peer-review. SAIS accreditation provides schools access to an integrated network of services and technical assistance that supports every school's ability to identify and meet its goals for improving student performance and the teaching and learning process.

SAIS accredited member schools are part of an international network of accredited schools that have demonstrated success in educating children. As such, SAIS accreditation is recognized throughout the world as a symbol of quality in education for students and teachers. To earn accreditation, schools must meet quality standards, be evaluated by an outside group of peer professionals, and implement a school plan focused on strategic improvement and student performance. Accreditation is voluntary and must be renewed each year.

# The Review

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A team representing SAIS conducted an on-site visit to review this school's self-study and standards compliance. The team was comprised of team members whose diverse independent school backgrounds provided an array of expertise. The visiting team sought the answers to these four critical questions within the framework of the school's self-study. The following pages contain the findings.

In conducting the on-site reviews, the visiting team was responsible for:

1. Assessing the adequacy of the self-study process;
2. Identifying strengths of the school deserving commendation;
3. Developing recommendations that may help to strengthen the programs of the school;
4. Assessing compliance with the standards of SAIS;
5. Developing a written report of the findings.

To fulfill the team's responsibilities, team members:

1. Reviewed documentation provided by the school;
2. Conducted interviews with board members, parents, school personnel, students, and community members;
3. Applied the standards for accreditation;
4. Developed a draft of commendations and recommendations;
5. Contributed to the content and focus of the written report;
6. Provided input as to the determination of accreditation.

The primary focus of the self-study process is to demonstrate the capacity of a school to meet the requirements for accreditation. A typical self-study consists of:

1. Analysis and response to accreditation standards;
2. Identification and demonstration of a continuous process of improvement;
3. Implementation of methods that provide for quality assurance

The study addresses four critical questions relative to each of the school's stated goals for improvement and mission fulfillment:

- **PROFILE:** Where is the school today? The PROFILE should include clear, comprehensive information reflecting current student performance data, stakeholder perspectives, community characteristics, and analysis of strengths and limitations in the areas of student learning and school performance.
- **VISION:** Where does the school want to go? The VISION is a clear, compelling purpose communicated through the school's vision and mission statements, beliefs, and core values.
- **PLAN:** What is the plan to get there? The PLAN should be based on an analysis of pertinent data, research of the best practices, and alignment with generally-accepted expectations for student learning at schools with similar missions.
- **RESULTS:** How will the school know when it has accomplished its plan? The RESULTS are documented evidence demonstrating successful implementation of strategies that resulted in accomplishment of the school's mission and student achievement gains related to the school's mission.

# Roster of Team Members

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## **Mr. John Marshall**

Mount Pisgah Christian School  
9820 Nesbit Ferry Rd  
Alpharetta, GA 30022  
(678) 336-3395  
jmarshall@mountpisgahschool.org

## **Team Members**

### **Ms. Nancy Coates**

American School of Puerto Vallarta  
Albatross 129, Marina Vallarta  
Puerto Vallarta, Jalisco, Mexico C.P. 48335  
ncoates@aspv.edu.mx

### **Ms. Mindy Gibbons**

Rosarian Academy  
807 North Flagler Drive  
West Palm Beach, FL 33401  
mindy@rosarian.org

### **Mr. Gary Paterson**

Atlanta International School  
2890 N Fulton Dr NE  
Atlanta, GA 30305-3155  
gpaterson@aischool.org

### **Ms. Jennifer Rundles**

Saint Mary's School  
900 Hillsborough St  
Raleigh, NC 27603-1689  
(919) 424-4066  
jrrundles@sms.edu

### **Dr. Kelley Waldron**

St. Andrew's School on the Marsh  
601 Penn Waller Rd  
Savannah, GA 31410  
waldronk@saintschool.com

# School Snapshot

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## Mission

### Mission

Westhill Institute inspires students to become critical thinkers and learners by developing ethical values and by transferring their knowledge in an inclusive environment to responsibly impact their community.

### Vision

Our vision is to inspire students to be contributing leaders in a rapidly changing, globalized world by developing intercultural understanding.

Because the mission/vision and belief statements are so vital to the enduring life of the school community, all decision-making, instructional planning, and development of school improvement goals, i.e. every facet of school life, is guided by the school's mission scope. The current version the school's purpose, as well as its vision for the future of this community of learners, is congruent with standards of academic scholarship as evidenced by Westhill's implementation of the authorized International Baccalaureate programs in each section. In addition, Westhill's ongoing implementation of learning outcomes from the Massachusetts Academic Content Standards (MACS), soon to be transitioned to the Common Core State Standards from the United States, is the direct result of that aspect of the school's mission that is defined by an emphasis on critical thinking skills and leadership in the global community.

Likewise, the Westhill student population is as diverse as it is multicultural. Students with all levels of academic challenge are part of the Westhill demographic as are students from more than 41 different countries, cultures, and ethnicities. The desire to form a diverse and multicultural community, with a rigorous international academic program, where children can find safe haven, has long been at the forefront of Westhill Institute's ongoing development as an educational and social institution.

## Brief History

Westhill Institute is an international American, coeducational, non-sectarian, private school serving students in grades Pre-K through Grade 12. The main campus is located in the Santa Fe region of Mexico City with a smaller facility in Lomas de Chapultepec on Monte Carpatos. Founded 24 years ago by Dra. Pilar Talayero y Tenorio (RIP) and her husband, Ing. & M.Ed. José María Riobóo Martín, the school has had a long-standing commitment to academic excellence, multiculturalism, and international mindedness. In addition to this global view on academic preparedness, Westhill Institute welcomes the participation of special needs children and their families in the various courses of study beginning with children in nursery school as young as age 2 and continuing through high school graduation in grade 12.

Internationally accredited since 1993 by the Texas Alliance of Accredited Private Schools (TAAPS) and since 1994 by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS/AdvancED), Westhill students participate in a rigorous course of study that has been designed to prepare them for university study in Mexico as well as in many other countries including the United States, Canada, Argentina, Columbia, the United Kingdom, Spain, Switzerland, Korea, Italy, and France. With a healthy multicultural mix of classmates from more than 41 countries represented in the student population, a Westhill education not only grooms students for academic and professional success but also provides each student with numerous daily opportunities to understand and value

the cultures and traditions of others. More than anything else, Westhill Institute is a true melting pot of cultures, religions, languages, and special moments when children experience the treasured idea that all people can, in fact, live together in peace and harmony through a cultivated understanding and authentic appreciation for diversity and international mindedness.

More than twenty years ago, the founders of Westhill Institute believed that the school should not only be a place of diversity and multiculturalism but also a community of learners that includes and embraces those children who may have special learning challenges. For these children, Westhill is a genuine haven of understanding and acceptance. With trained special needs counselors at each of the three school campuses, children with special learning requirements are nurtured and valued as an integral part of the diverse student population. Because of small class sizes (no more than 22 students per classroom) and a low student-teacher ratio (7.5:1), the academic programs and classroom teaching techniques can be modified and tailored to meet the individual needs of students from a wide range of achievements.

Today, Westhill Institute has a Pre-Kindergarten campus (Monte Athos), two elementary and kinder campuses (Monte Carpatos and Santa Fe) and one middle and high school campus (Santa Fe) with 931 students in grades Pre-Kinder to 12. As mentioned above, 41 countries are represented in the student population with 54% of all students holding Mexican nationality. In addition, Westhill is proud of its longstanding cooperative relationship with the United States Embassy in Mexico. As a result that relationship, 122 students (13% of the student population) are United States citizens and a representative of the U.S. Embassy serves on the Westhill Institute Board of Directors. And finally, 33% the student population are citizens of one ore ore of the following countries: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Chile, Czechoslovakia, China, Costa Rica, Columbia, Canada, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Spain, France, Guatemala, Honduras,India, Ireland, Egypt, Italy, Turkey, Pakistan, Peru, Palestine, Portugal, Salvador, Sweden, Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Japan, Kuwait, Korea, Malaysia, and Nicaragua.

To provide instruction for these 931 students, Westhill Institute employs 149 teachers and administrators. Of these, 25% are foreign nationals who represent the United States, Canada, the Cameroon, the United Kingdom, France, Haiti, Honduras, Korea, and Nicaragua. Foreign teachers provide an invaluable international and culturally diverse perspective to the subjects that they teach. Students learn to see an issue, an event, or an interpretation from multiple viewpoints and, as a result, are very often more open to accepting the reasoned positions and well-founded opinions expressed by their classmates.

## **Leadership**

Westhill Institute SC is a for-profit professional corporation governed by a board of directors. This board of directors in composed of the executive committee and additional school-wide representatives. Th executive committee is made up of the board president, vice-president, recording secretary, Westhill's Head of School, United States Embassy representative, and one parent representative. Additional representatives who regularly attend board meetings include the director of school improvement, two elementary principals, the middle and high school principal, the three technical directors, and Parent/Teacher Association officers.

Representation on the board of directors is self-perpetuating. When a board member retires or moves from the city, the board president, in consultation with other board members, appoints additional persons to fill whatever vacancies may occur. The board of directors hires the Head of School. The Head of School is in charge of the day-to-day operation of the school supported by the director of school improvement, the finance director, and section principals. The Head of School consults regularly with the president of the board of directors and, in conjunction with the board of directors and the director of school improvement, the head of school participates in long-term review, planning, and school improvement strategies. The section principals supervise the program coordinators, deans of students, kinder coordinators, support staff, and instructional staff.

Weekly meetings are held with the head of school and the leadership team that includes the director of school

improvement, section principals and assistant principals, and kinder coordinators. During these meetings, the leadership team discusses specific problems, relative to students or teachers, that may have arisen over the course of the previous week and collaboratively determines workable solutions. In addition, the leadership team meetings have been designed to maintain a strong focus on the successful implementation of the school improvement plan. Moving forward with a collective mindset that values and implements continuous school improvement is the first priority of the leadership of Westhill Institute.

As is the case with any quality school, the leadership functions must inevitably result in an improved levels of teaching and learning - as evidenced by the curriculum and the assessment tools used to measure the success of the programs of study. In this regard, the Steering Committee for the SAIS accreditation process holds a firm belief that a description of the school's curriculum and assessment tools should be an indispensable part of the description of leadership at our school.

## Self Study

Westhill Institute has been an internationally accredited school since 1994. In effect, the accreditation process for Southern Association of Independent Schools (SAIS) began at the conclusion of the last SACS/AdvancED review essentially because the leadership team of Westhill Institute fully supports and implements the process of continuous school improvement.

Accreditation and school improvement planning have played an essential role in the development of the current school and its programs. The most recent SACS/AdvancED five-year accreditation was awarded to Westhill Institute in 2010. In the 2010 accreditation, the SACS/AdvancED Quality Assurance Review (QAR) team awarded commendations in two areas:

1. High levels of student and parent satisfaction are generated due to the school's focus on inclusion, values, teacher dedication, and recent school improvement initiatives.
2. The school provides and maintains a safe and superior facility for use by all stakeholders that facilitates student learning and a culture of pride in the school.

The QAR team further identified five (5) required actions for improvement over the course of the five-year period of accreditation:

1. Develop, adopt, and implement a set of board-adopted policies.
2. Develop a comprehensive Pre K-12 assessment system to effectively inform instruction and curriculum development and to meet the needs of all students. In addition, to provide professional development to maximize teachers' understanding and use of data.
3. Develop a comprehensive Special Needs Curriculum to assist all students at Westhill Institute with learning challenges
4. Generate and analyze data and develop a plan to improve the retention rate of all staff members including foreign-hire teachers.
5. Create a marketing plan to create community awareness of Westhill Institute, its programs, facilities, and inclusive environment.

Westhill Institute submitted an Annual Progress Report to SACS/AdvancED in 2012 detailing the progress the

school made in compliance with the five required actions. AdvancED issued the following responses to the Annual Progress Report:

Board Policy Manual: judged completed in June 2012.

Comprehensive Pre-K to 12 Assessment System and along with professional development opportunities for teachers to help them maximize the use of data: judged completed in June 2012

Comprehensive Curriculum for Special Needs Students: judged completed in June 2012.

Teacher Retention Plan: judged completed in June 2012

Westhill Institute Marketing Plan: judged completed in June 2102.

### **Current Self Study Process**

Specific preparations for the Southern Association of Independent Schools (SAIS) accreditation visit began in the fall of the 2013-2014 academic year, after the administrative staff and board president and vice president attended an SAIS accreditation workshop in Atlanta, Georgia. The current head of school, Mary-Jo Gill joined the staff of Westhill Institute in January of 2015 and worked cooperatively with the out-going head of school in order to determine specific areas in which school improvement was needed. For the next six months, Miss Gill explored all areas of school life: classroom instruction, school events, teacher preparedness, parent/teacher conferences, staff meetings, PTA events, and many other dimensions of the Westhill community. Included in these areas of consideration for school-wide improvement were the results of the Measures of Academic Progress assessments (MAP) over several exam administrations as well as the results of stakeholder surveys distributed through Algenbaix, the school's online academic records and student services platform. As a result of this analysis, Miss Gill produced a report for school improvement that was submitted to a school improvement committee composed of teachers, staff, students, administrators, and a board representative. These stakeholder representatives thoroughly and comprehensively analyzed all aspects of the report. Suggestions were made by the stakeholder representatives and these changes were made to the report, in areas where the suggestions were reasonable and appropriate to the overall improvement of student learning and success at our school.

The school improvement committee has since transitioned into the SAIS Steering Committee, with some additional stakeholder representatives added. The Steering Committee has reviewed the School's Response to Standards and Indicators as well as the School Snapshot. As was the case with the School Improvement Plan (SIP), suggestions and modifications were submitted and accepted in appropriate areas.

The current self-study process, like all school planning and improvement efforts, has been mission driven. With the advent of the International Baccalaureate programs in all sections, the leadership team, board of directors, and other stakeholder groups though it necessary to revisit the school's mission in order to maintain progress in all dimensions of school life. Therefore, the mission, vision, and belief statements were reviewed in 2013 and modifications were made in order to reflect the school's ongoing emphasis on academic rigor and improved multi-cultural understanding among all members of the Westhill community. The self study process has been conducted with this revised mission as its driving force. The Westhill SAIS Steering Committee is confident that all dimensions of the school community have been taken into consideration in forming this plan.

Thus the School Improvement Plan developed using these data from six months of professional observation of school life, school-wide assessment tools, and stakeholder satisfaction surveys. The three (3) areas identified for school-wide improvement are as follows:

- Teaching and Learning
- Curriculum
- Leadership



In November of 2015, the school sent the Value Narrative Survey from SAIS to all Westhill stakeholders in a effort to garner additional evidence to further enhance the accuracy of the school improvement plan. The steering committee as well as additional parents, administrators and members of the board of directors will analyze these results and incorporate the most salient suggestions into the overall strategic plan for improvement.

## **Improvement**

A brief summary of the 2015 - 2018 Westhill Institute School Improvement Plan is included here:

### ***Teaching and Learning***

- Develop an environment in which all students understand that the school's academic, social, and extra-curricular programs are guided by the mission and vision as established by the stakeholder community. In addition, the school will continue to develop a learning environment in which the values and belief statements of Westhill are incorporated into all student work and activities.
- Implement an internal teacher training program in order to enable the professional staff to improve teaching methodology, resource use in the classroom, and to integrate the IB programs with additional international learning objectives as established by the Common Core State Standards in the United States.
- Establish an enabling and appropriately used learning environment in which classrooms are occupied 100% of the time for teaching and learning and have up to date technology resources

### ***Curriculum***

- Develop and implement a vertically aligned, progressive, and international curriculum that integrates the International Baccalaureate program, the Common Core State Standards, and the SEP/UNAM requirements.
- Review and update the assessment and evaluation policies of the school so that there is more accountability and inclusion is the overall assessment process. This includes better use of the data from Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) exams, PSAT and other formative and summative assessments.

### ***Leadership***

- Improve the overall management of Westhill Institute by encouraging and training the school leadership (principals, coordinators) to work with teachers and students, in classroom settings, to improve the learning environment and student progress.
- Improve the policies and practices of teacher recruitment, retention, and professional development.
- Develop a thriving and growing business model for Westhill Institute so that there is an increase in the number of students enrolling in each grade level, and to make the school more efficient as a business. This increase in efficiency will result in additional educational resources for students and teachers.

- Improve both internal and external communication among all stakeholders in the Westhill community by insuring more transparent, effective, accurate, and multi-directional opportunities for everyone to communicate with each other.

***NOTE: The complete version of the school improvement plan has been attached in the files section here.***

# Introduction

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## Introduction and Overview of the Visit

The visiting team found a school community highly motivated to participate in the SAIS accreditation process. All constituent groups were open, very eager to help and cooperate, and provided the visiting team valuable insight into the school's culture and aspirations. The 80-page self-study was nothing less than a detailed work of art on the state of the school. It is extremely professional and insightful and should be required reading for any new trustee or administrator. This document is thorough and well-written, laying out the response to standards and indicators, providing evidence and defining the school's ambitious improvement plan.

Over the course of three days, the team met with the board of the school and representative groups of parents, students, administrators and teachers. The School's steering committee and administrators answered questions about the school's self-study process and the three overarching goals for school improvement. The visiting team also visited classrooms and observed teachers and students and ate lunch with them. The interviews with various stakeholders reinforced the school's positive culture. All groups mentioned the caring, supportive family atmosphere of the school. It was clear that the founding vision of an inclusive learning environment for all students was still valued and evidenced within the school community. Guided by the steering committee, the various groups felt that they were involved in the school improvement process and that the process was collaborative, even though all recognized that the Head of School was the expert and primary author of the SIP.

With the arrival of Mary-Jo Gill as Head of School in early 2015, the school embarked upon creating a school improvement plan to address internally identified areas for improvement. The areas for improvement were identified and informed through a process of extensive observation of classrooms, parent and stakeholder feedback, and data related to the business of the school. From these needs and observations, Ms. Gill led the development of an ambitious and comprehensive School Improvement Plan that focuses on the three main areas of Teaching and Learning, Curriculum, and Leadership. Within each of these areas, there are specific goals and outcomes that the school is working to achieve over a three year period. This School Improvement Plan formed the foundation for the school self-improvement plan.

In order to achieve this ambitious plan, with the support of Westhill Institute's Proprietor and Board of Directors, Ms. Gill has recruited and assembled a leadership team that has a shared vision for the school to help carry out this plan. Ms. Gill has worked to establish an infrastructure and accountability system to facilitate measurable progress towards these goals. The school has adopted externally validated curriculum and programming to meet the needs of an international school community as well as allow for quicker vertical alignment of teaching and curriculum. We commend the school and leadership on their ambition. In attempting to create a culture of professional accountability and excellence, the school may consider ways in which to incorporate faculty in the development of processes and implementation to facilitate true ownership and ensure long term success. The report below outlines the many accomplishments and much hard work of the school in its efforts to become the very best learning environment for its students. It was supremely evident that all stakeholders are invested in providing a superior educational program through all aspects of the school.

# Area 1

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## Title

Teaching and Learning

## Description

The school demonstrates a clear commitment to providing a positive learning environment for students of diverse backgrounds and experiences. This commitment is evident in all constituent descriptions of the school culture and day to day experiences of students. Since August of 2015, the administrative team has worked to create a mechanism to address teacher growth and accountability. With this focus, the administrative team has articulated a detailed professional development plan to support the growth expected of the teaching faculty that is in line with the vision, mission, and school improvement plan. The professional growth plan includes clear timetables and metrics of performance.

Importantly, the school has identified a need to incorporate the use of technology into the curriculum for the purpose of improving teaching and learning. In the past few years, the school has invested in infrastructure to be able to implement a technology plan to include the expansion of devices and technology resources in the school's campuses. The desire of the school is to enhance the teaching and learning goals through an increase in the use of technology in the classroom.

## Commendations

**The visiting team commends the school for the following:**

- Its dedication to the growth, improvement, and professional learning surrounding the IB program.
- Its commitment to student emotional and academic well-being.
- Its dedication to fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment.
- Its commitment to teacher collaboration, common planning time, and peer feedback in the elementary school.
- Its commitment to a singular vision of teaching and learning throughout the full administrative team.
- Its dedication to a high level of quality teaching and learning in observed lessons.
- Its foresight and planning involved in building a computer infrastructure that allows for expansion and utilizes quality industry-recognized network systems and components.
- Its establishment of human resources to best manage and implement the school's vision for expanding technology use in the school.

## Recommendations

**The visiting team recommends that the school consider the following:**

- Establishing more transparent lines of communication between administration and teachers.

- Validating teachers' commitment to growth and to include their voice in the whole school change process.
- Setting goals and expectations of faculty that are curriculum driven.
- Ensuring that students are aware of the horizontal progression of their learning to enable students to connect the instruction to their prior and future learning, for example: How does this connect to what I learned yesterday? How does it connect to what I will learn tomorrow?
- Undergoing a strategic review of the school's current use of technology to determine a plan for the continued use of current equipment and the opportunities for expansion in the various school campuses.
- Expanding and updating the resources in all libraries, including the updating of technology.

# Area 2

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## Title

Curriculum

## Description

The school recognizes the need to have a validated and rigorous curriculum through which they aim to move the school forward. They have identified the Common Core as the skeleton and aim to flesh it out using the IB continuum and SEP program to ensure the curriculum is aligned with the school's mission statement. They have been authorized to run the Diploma program for 4 years and the PYP for 3 years with the MYP expecting to be authorized in April 2016. These three components will allow them to remain competitive in their market while developing the skills that they value as important in their students. The school has embedded, within its curricular goals, data-driven markers to measure progress through the use of standardized tools such as MAP, PSAT and IB Diploma scores. The school has an articulated plan to meet the needs for students with academic and emotional and/or physical challenges which uniquely positions the school to be a leader in the local community.

## Commendations

**The visiting team commends the school for the following:**

- Creating a comprehensive infrastructure for a robust articulation of the curriculum.
- Dedicating the professional working time for curricular conversations and the horizontal mapping of the curriculum to align the International Baccalaureate standards with the requirements from SEP, as well as a scaffolding of learning skills and capacities that should be embedded within the learning environment.
- Creating a format for horizontal articulation which is comprehensive in the various aspects of curriculum, moving past scope and sequence to assessment and methodology.
- Recognizing the need to create more vertical alignment to ensure that foundational skills and knowledge needed for success in the IB Diploma Program are integrated throughout the PYP and MYP programs.
- Embracing and integrating curricular changes.

## Recommendations

**The visiting team recommends that the school consider:**

- Partnering with established IB programs in order to facilitate peer visits and adopt best practices.
- Including faculty in developing goals to increase ownership in the process of curriculum development.
- Including intentional opportunities to engage and connect with the local community in curriculum planning.
- Encouraging the MYP and DP coordinators to develop a protocol and the institutionalization of collaborative meetings with teaching faculty in order to reflect and share best practices within the IB program.

# Area 3

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## Title

Leadership

## Description

The challenges in recruiting and retaining talented, experienced English-speaking and IB-trained administrators and teachers cannot be underestimated. It is daunting and requires a dedicated fulltime human resources professional. Nonetheless, Westhill will only reach its potential when it has more stable retention of faculty and can boast a number of longstanding, highly qualified teachers who have stature and a voice in the school community. Great schools are measured in large part by the longevity of their teachers, and the lack of a strong faculty voice is a weakness, long-term, for a school that seeks to be recognized for academic excellence.

On the positive, the school has already taken steps for improvement with the leadership team and management systems throughout the various campuses. The new Head of School has assembled a strong team of administration and staff that are mission-driven and aligned with the school's vision for growth and development. The school has developed a three-year plan to address the needs of management and to improve accountability and consistency throughout the leadership team.

## Commendations

**The visiting team commends the school for the following:**

- The bold vision, generosity, and courage of the Board Chair and owner of the school to pursue excellence in providing children with a superior education to prepare them for the challenges of a complex and changing world.
- Expanding the scope of its teacher recruitment efforts around the world to find teaching talent.
- Investing significant time and resources in training its teachers in the IB curriculum.
- The leadership of a focused, experienced and visionary Head of School eager to raise the bar of faculty excellence with a sense of urgency and a plan for evaluating teachers using standards and metrics.
- The hiring of several experienced administrators who are committed to the vision of IB.
- Creating a masters program for WI teachers with the University of Alabama.
- The work that has already been completed in a very short amount of time to improve the school's leadership team.

## Recommendations

**The visiting team recommends the school consider the following:**

- Adding a full-time college counselor as a member of the administration in order to strengthen the commitment to a central pillar of the mission.
- Continuing to support the growth and development of its leadership team by providing ongoing professional development opportunities and encouraging administration and staff to build personal learning networks to

enhance their professional talents and strengths.



# Area 4

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## Title

Additional Comments

## Description

In the opinion of the visiting team, the relationship between the school and the university has both strong benefits but drawbacks. Management, financial and information systems are shared. The university - the parent in the relationship - has provided administrative depth and a financial cushion for the young and growing school over the years, and yet, the team heard from school personnel that the added layer of bureaucracy can inhibit progress and the development of institutional clarity. The fact that budgetary decisions are not shared or pushed down into the school organization is understandable from a "top down" financial control standpoint, but of course this inhibits the development of administrative and faculty leadership to take ownership and drive meaningful program growth. As the Board gains confidence in the school's new administrative leadership, the visiting team would encourage the adoption of independent school best practices in the area of budgets, though we acknowledge that a proprietary school operates at the discretion of the owner.

In addition, Westhill is to be commended for pursuing a bold new strategic direction in adopting the IB and hiring a strong head of school with experience in the IB and British educational system. However, the visiting team recognizes that the school is now undertaking several major strategic directions at once: an American curriculum, the traditional Mexican curriculum to adhere to SEP requirements, and the IB. In addition, the school seeks to serve a wide range of students, domestic and international, and especially children with special needs. This is a daunting challenge for a young school with an administration and faculty that has little experience at Westhill. The visiting team applauds the intentional focus on hiring highly qualified staff and teachers with experience in English and the IB, and encourages the school is to stay the course. High faculty turnover is a necessary fact at this time in the school's evolution, although holding onto talented new hires is critical for this compelling new vision to be realized.

Arguably, Westhill is in the process of completely reinventing itself as a school that values at its core an international curriculum and serving a 21st Century international student population with a wide range of abilities. This reinvention will require an extraordinarily gifted and dedicated team of educators to execute the vision over the next several years. The visiting team believes the current leadership team in place forms the nucleus to accomplish this bold vision for Westhill.

Last, the school has very ambitious plans to grow its existing enrollment over the next several years, to roughly 1,500 total students according to the Board Chair and owner. This is an admirable goal and the facilities on the Santa Fe campus can accommodate significant growth. Importantly, though, the visiting team found the area of marketing, branding and admission significantly under-resourced relative to leading schools in the Tri-Association as well as independent day schools in the United States. Most schools of the size of Westhill would have a marketing and communications team dedicated to updating the website and social media, providing additional messaging to parents and alumni, and reaching out to the local community.

## Commendations

**The visiting team commends the school for the following:**

- Emphasizing campus safety and security in a school community where these values are the highest priority

for well-educated, affluent parents.

- Installing mission-aligned banners and statements throughout the school buildings, including in hallways and classrooms. They are attractive and reinforce the positive values the school has embraced, especially it is embraces the IB Curriculum.
- The classrooms, especially in the lower and preschools, that are full of attractive displays and art on the walls that bring alive the curriculum, teacher personality, and the mission and core values of the school.
- Using parent surveys to strengthen community relations and goodwill, to listen to key stakeholder feedback, and to enhance market-informed administrative decision making.
- Holding weekly all-school meetings on the Santa Fe campus to build all-school community and enhance school spirit. The visiting team thoroughly enjoyed being part of this opening assembly and it was clear that the students were excited about the SAIS team visit.
- Promoting a five-year Westhill veteran into the part-time position of marketing coordinator. That said, there is a pressing need to elevate marketing and communications on the website and via electronic communication to serve current parents as well as articulate the value of WI to the broad community of Mexico City.

## Recommendations

**The visiting team recommends that the school consider the following:**

- Renovating the existing buildings on the Santa Fe campus by adding a comprehensive heating system to enhance the learning environment.
- Establishing a starter program to strengthen connections with Westhill alumni, especially those in Mexico City, for the purpose of advancing Admissions and marketing efforts, enhancing faculty recruiting and drawing upon their professional expertise for the benefit of student learning and vocational educational.
- Continuing to utilize the Tri-Association benchmarks to assist its decision making in all areas of school life with an eye to adopting best practices.
- Examining the efficacy of the current SPED program in meeting the demands created by growing enrollment and the adoption of a more rigorous curriculum.

# Summary and Conclusion

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## Summary

The visiting team would like to thank the entire leadership of Westhill Institute and especially Director of School Improvement and accreditation coordinator Enrique Vargas for hosting our very special visit. Everyone with whom the team met was gracious and cooperative, and there is no question that securing SAIS accreditation is a high priority for the school, from Board Chair Jose Maria Rioboo Martin and Head of School Mary-Jo Gill to the faculty, staff and young students with whom we had the pleasure to visit. There was tremendous attention to detail and measurement in the school's self-study and palpable enthusiasm for the benefits of SAIS accreditation to enhance the future of what the team believes is a wonderful school.

The enthusiasm for the school among students and teachers was evident in all the team's meetings and the words used to describe the school included inclusive, united, cohesive, ambitious, open-minded, friendly, caring, warm, welcoming, diverse, never boring, wonderful and community.

As we heard from numerous constituents, the ambitious current vision of Westhill is inspiring and the visiting team believes the future for the school is very bright.

## Conclusion

The visiting team finds:

1. That Westhill Institute is in full compliance with all standards of the SAIS and AdvancED/SACS accreditation process.
2. That the self-study conducted by the school meets the standard of quality and thoroughness required by the SAIS accreditation process and answers the four critical questions as outlined in the Accreditation Guidebook.
3. That the school is unanimously recommended for SAIS and for AdvancED/SACS accreditation.