

Florida Catholic Conference Accreditation Program

Policies and Procedures Manual for Early Education Programs

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Purpose of Accreditation

The purpose of the Florida Catholic Conference Accreditation Program is to provide early childhood programs and elementary schools with a systematic process of school improvement through the application of educational standards or criteria. The accreditation standards of the Florida Catholic Conference promote excellence in the total educational program and are appropriate to the mission of Catholic schools. The opportunity for continuous peer review and assistance at various stages ensures on-going school improvement that reflects best practices academically, while validating the unique purpose of teaching and living out the message of Jesus Christ according to the Catholic tradition.

In order to validate compliance with standards, each program/school in the Florida Catholic Conference Accreditation Program hosts an on-site accreditation visitation once every seven years. In addition to the visitation every seven years, each early education program hosts an annual one-day health, safety, and accreditation update visitation. A third year review is also conducted mid-way through the seven-year accreditation cycle.

Membership

All early childhood education and child care centers or programs, whether parish-based or on school property, fall under the auspices of their Diocesan Office of Catholic Schools. This includes any centers currently under the administrative oversight of Catholic Charities. Furthermore, each center is required to become a member of the Florida Catholic Conference Accreditation Program (FCCAP) and participate in the program's accreditation process. If a center holds a current national accreditation, the diocese will determine the next steps for that center.

The timeframe for participating in the FCCAP's accreditation cycle shall be determined by the program, school or center in consultation with their Diocesan Office of Catholic Schools and Florida Catholic Conference staff. A given center can retain oversight from Catholic Charities in conjunction with the Diocesan Office of Catholic Schools, if deemed appropriate by the key parties involved.

The early education program completes the application for membership in the FCC accreditation program. Annual dues are assessed on a per child basis each fall.

Continuous Improvement Process for Accreditation (CIPA)

In order to prepare for the visitation, the program/school undertakes an intensive and thorough evaluation with all of its stakeholders the year prior to the visitation. This assessment of mission and Catholic identity, governance and leadership, academic excellence, and institutional vitality will give the program/school community a clear picture of the current state of the program/school, as well as direction for the future.

Orientation to the CIPA

The diocesan and/or FCC accreditation personnel meet with the director from the program to prepare them for the Continuous Improvement Process for Accreditation (CIPA) and hosting the onsite visitation. The orientation includes an overview of the process, a brief review of the associated documents, an overview of the website use, and an overview of the Accreditation Standards, Benchmarks, and Indicators. Participants receive hard copies of the materials and access to them online.

The director orients the program's staff to the CIPA. Diocesan and/or FCC Accreditation personnel can assist with this, as needed. All staff members should be given copies or access to the associated documents.

A workgroup is then formed. Each program determines the makeup of this workgroup. It can include staff members, parents, and/or other stakeholders. This workgroup will meet over the course of the year to determine compliance with standards, benchmarks, and indicators. They will create an action plan, and prepare for the visitation.

Associated Documents for the CIPA

FCCAP Early Education Program Standards, Benchmarks, and Indicators is the guiding document of the accreditation process. Within the benchmarks other documents are mentioned. Programs are responsible for compliance with all benchmarks and documents.

The other documents used in the accreditation of the Early Education Programs are:

- Florida Office of Early Learning Standards: Florida Early Learning and Developmental Standards: Birth to Five and Florida Early Learning (2011) and Developmental Standards for Four-Year-Olds (2011)
- Florida Office of Early Learning Health and Safety Checklist for Nonpublic Schools
- Florida Catholic Conference Health and Safety Checklist

Preview Visit for the CIPA

Very early in the process a diocesan or an FCC Accreditation representative will do a preview visit to the program. The purpose of the visit is to assist the school in the CIPA process. The visitor will tour the program, do general reviews of personnel files, curriculum, plans, and health and safety checklists; briefly observe in all classrooms; and meet with the workgroup and/or director.

CIPA Work

The focus of the CIPA is determining the program's compliance with the benchmarks. Each domain should be studied as a whole to determine strengths and opportunities for growth. Each benchmark should be reviewed in detail, collecting evidence to determine compliance.

Much of the evidence used to show compliance with the benchmarks comes from the program's handbook, files, and facilities. If the director has not met with personnel from the diocesan office to review the program's policies, handbooks, and files, then the meeting should be scheduled very early in the process. A well-defined, robust, diocesan approved handbook is essential to the success of the accreditation process.

The workgroup should start with one domain. (If the program has a large staff then multiple workgroups could be formed to study each domain.) Each benchmark is reviewed and evidence collected. Surveys should be administered to all staff members and parents. The results must be analyzed. Determine the level of compliance based on the evidence and survey analysis where appropriate. Health and safety checklists are reviewed/completed as specified in the benchmark 14.1.c. Evidence can be hard copy, electronic, and/or observable. Three areas of strength and three opportunities for growth should be noted in each domain. (Use the Domain Summary Template)

Action Plan

Once the review of benchmarks is complete, the workgroup compiles all of the noted strengths and opportunities for growth. The opportunities for growth are prioritized. From this an annual goal is written and one to two long-term goals (3 to 5 years) are written. These become the action plan for the Program. The action plan includes the following for each goal: goal statement; evidence that will be used to prove success of the goal; steps that will be taken to achieve the goal (include who will be doing the step, what the timeline is, and any resources needed)

Accreditation Visitation

The purpose of the Accreditation Visitation is validation of the school's compliance with the benchmarks and validation of the action plan. The visitation team gives the Early Education Program and the FCC Accreditation Committee feedback on these issues. The visitation will take place over two days.

In order for the visitation to be beneficial for all parties involved, a professional atmosphere must be maintained. The visitation team members are representatives of the Florida Catholic

Conference Accreditation Program (FCCAP) and the National Council for Private School Accreditation (NCPSA). A team member's attitude, attire, and comments must be professional in all circumstances. Comments, suggestions, and recommendations should be as objective, as possible, based on best practices and research. The goal of the visitation is to validate the CIPA work. Thus, the team members are at the school in an official capacity to assist the FCCAP in its mission to help schools provide excellent Catholic education.

Preparing for the Visitation

The director of the early education program consults with the diocesan schools office to determine that the CIPA work is complete and the program is ready for the visitation. The FCC accreditation office will contact the diocesan schools office and the early education program to arrange for the visitation. The FCC accreditation office will compile a team to do the visit. The size of the team and the length of the visit will depend on the size of the early education program. It will be at least a two person team over a two day period.

The visitation team chairperson will contact the diocesan schools office to discuss the visit and any diocesan expectations. The chairperson will contact the early education program to set up the schedule and discuss the particulars of the visit. The chairperson will give team members their assignments and the schedule.

The Visitation

The team reviews the CIPA documents and evidence, completing the visitation team's response sheets for the benchmarks and health and safety checklists. Each classroom is observed for 15 to 20 minutes. The team meets with the pastor, staff, and parents to validate compliance with specific benchmarks and regulations. The team reviews the survey results. The visitation team meets with the director to give a brief closing report before the end of the visit. The chairperson sends the final report to the FCC accreditation office.

Accreditation Status

The FCC accreditation committee reviews the visitation report and determine the accreditation status of the early education program.

Full Accreditation – the early education program meets the accreditation standards. The program completes an annual report for continued accreditation and hosts annual on-site visits.

Accreditation with Conditions – the early education program is accredited for one year with a specific list of conditions that must be met during that school year. A follow up visit is scheduled to determine compliance with the accreditation standards. The FCC accreditation committee reviews the new report and determines if the program receives full accreditation, is put on probation or if accreditation is withheld.

On Probation – the early education program does not meet the accreditation standards for full accreditation or accreditation with conditions. A plan is put in place that the early education program must follow in order to gain full accreditation status. The FCC accreditation office monitors the program's compliance with the plan. A follow up visit is scheduled to determine compliance with the accreditation standards. The FCC accreditation committee reviews the new report and determines if the program receives full accreditation or if accreditation is withheld.

Accreditation Withheld – the early education program does not meet the standards for accreditation. The FCC accreditation office meets with the diocesan schools office to determine the next steps for the early education program.

Annual Report for Continued Accreditation

Once an early education program has received its initial accreditation, an annual report for continued accreditation (ARCA) is completed each school year under the direction of the FCC accreditation office.

Annual Site Visit

The FCC accreditation office schedules the annual site visit with the early education program. During the one day visit the evidence for the FCC and OEL health and safety checklists are validated. The classrooms are observed. Files are reviewed. The facility and grounds are checked for safety compliance. Action plan evidence and updates are reviewed. The visitor meets with the director to give a brief exit report. The visitor sends the full annual site visit report to the FCC accreditation office.

Third Year Conference

A third year review is also conducted mid-way through the seven-year accreditation cycle. The format of the third year conference is determined by the FCC accreditation office in consultation with the diocesan schools office.

Appeal Process

An appeal of an unfavorable decision concerning an early education program's accreditation status must be made to the FCC Accreditation Committee within three months after the decision. A letter with supporting evidence must be submitted to the FCC Accreditation Committee and a copy sent to the diocesan superintendent. The Committee will review the evidence and make a decision. An appeal to this decision may be made to the FCC Schools Executive Committee within 30 days. A final appeal may be made to the episcopal moderator of the FCC Accreditation Program within 30 days.

