

## CASE STUDY

# District Accreditation: Falmouth Public Schools, Maine

## District Overview

Falmouth Public Schools pursued district accreditation through the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) to strengthen alignment across its schools and ensure a coherent educational experience for students from kindergarten through graduation.

District accreditation encourages schools within a district to engage in a shared process of reflection, self-assessment and planning aligned with common standards. Through this process, districts complete a collaborative self-reflection, engage with a peer review team, and develop a district-wide growth plan to support continuous improvement.

For Falmouth, the process was not simply about meeting accreditation standards. Instead, district leaders framed it as an opportunity to clarify shared goals, strengthen collaboration, and establish common language across all grade levels.

## Establishing a Shared Foundation

One of the first and most important steps in the process was developing a unified mission, vision, and set of student learning outcomes for the district.

District leaders viewed this work as an opportunity to define what success should look like for students throughout the entire K-12 experience. This included creating a Portrait of a Graduate — a set of aspirations describing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions students should develop by the time they leave the district.

The process intentionally involved a wide range of stakeholders, including:

- Teachers from each school
- Students

- School board members
- Community representatives

Early engagement of these groups helped ensure that the mission and vision reflected the community's priorities and created a shared language that could guide future decisions. The resulting mission focused on "Navigating Creative Pathways to courageous, compassionate, and fulfilling lives," became a unifying framework that educators could reference across grade levels and disciplines.

## Organizing the Self-Reflection Process

To guide the work, the district established a district-wide working group that included representatives from each school.

Rather than centering the conversation on accreditation requirements, district leaders focused discussions on deeper questions about the district's identity and goals:

- Who do we want to be as a school system?
- What experiences do we want students to have from kindergarten through graduation?
- How well are our current practices aligned with those aspirations?

The NEASC Standards for Accreditation served as a helpful framework for reflection and self-assessment, but leaders consistently emphasized that the work belonged to the district itself.

As the superintendent noted, the district repeatedly reinforced a core message: the process was being undertaken for the benefit of the district and its students, not simply to satisfy an external accreditation requirement.

## Leveraging Existing Leadership Structures

One strategy that proved particularly effective was integrating the reflection process into existing teacher leadership structures rather than creating new committees.

Instead of forming separate accreditation teams at each school, the district worked with:

- Department chairs
- Grade-level team leaders
- Existing leadership teams

These groups were asked to facilitate conversations within their regular meetings around key questions tied to teaching and learning. Examples included:

- How effectively are students engaged in interdisciplinary learning?
- How are we supporting student voice in classrooms and school decision-making?
- What evidence demonstrates that these practices are occurring?

This approach had two major benefits:

1. Authentic professional dialogue: Teachers were able to engage in meaningful conversations about their instructional practices.
2. Efficient evidence gathering: Insights from these discussions contributed directly to the district's self-study and reflection process.

Embedding the work in existing structures helped ensure that accreditation was not perceived as an additional burden, but rather as a natural extension of ongoing professional collaboration.

## Navigating Challenges

Like many districts, Falmouth encountered challenges throughout the process.

### Maintaining School Identity

Each school within the district had its own culture and identity. Elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools often approach teaching and leadership differently.

District leaders recognized that successful implementation required acknowledging and respecting these differences while still working toward greater alignment.

For example:

- Elementary staff tended to be ready to begin implementing initiatives quickly once expectations were clear.
- High school educators often wanted a deeper understanding of the purpose and rationale behind changes.

Providing tailored communication and support helped ensure that each group could engage meaningfully in the process.

## **Leadership Continuity**

Another potential challenge involved leadership transitions. Because district accreditation represents a shift in how schools think about alignment and collaboration, new administrators may not immediately share the same understanding of the process.

To address this risk, district leaders emphasized the importance of building strong commitment across the leadership team, including principals, assistant principals, and central office staff, so that the work would remain consistent even if personnel changed.

## **Recognizing Uneven Progress Across Schools**

The self-study process sometimes reveals differences in performance between schools. In some areas, certain schools demonstrated particularly strong practices, while others were still developing. Rather than framing this as a deficit, the district viewed it as an opportunity for shared learning.

When evaluating standards, leaders adopted a cautious approach: if a practice was not consistently present across all schools, the district would rate itself conservatively. At the same time, the report highlighted examples of strong practice that could serve as models for others. This approach fostered constructive conversations and helped identify areas where collaboration and professional learning could support improvement.

## Outcomes and Impact

District leaders observed several meaningful outcomes from the accreditation process.

### **A Shared Language Across the District**

Perhaps the most significant outcome was the development of a common language around learning, teaching, and student outcomes.

With a shared mission and set of goals, educators across grade levels could engage in richer conversations about instructional practices and student experiences.

### **Stronger Professional Development Alignment**

The district also used insights from the reflection process to shape professional development priorities.

For example, the district identified student voice as an area for growth. This focus informed professional learning opportunities and helped educators explore how students could play a more active role in their own learning.

### **A Stronger K-12 Identity**

The shared mission helped strengthen a sense of community across the district. Students, families, and staff began referencing the district's guiding statement in conversations and events. Even younger students embraced the district's identity, reinforcing the idea that all learners were part of the same journey. Rather than viewing schools as isolated units, educators increasingly saw student learning as a continuous trajectory from kindergarten through graduation.

## Lessons for Other Districts

Falmouth's experience highlights several lessons for districts considering district accreditation.

1. **Frame the work as your districts work.**  
Accreditation should support the district's goals, not drive them.
2. **Build a shared foundation early.**  
A clearly articulated mission, vision, and student outcomes can serve as a powerful unifying force.
3. **Engage the entire community.**  
Including teachers, students, families, and community members strengthens ownership of the process.
4. **Integrate the work into existing structures.**  
Leveraging current leadership teams helps ensure that reflection is authentic and sustainable.
5. **Use differences between schools as opportunities for learning.**  
Highlighting strong practices can encourage collaboration and improvement across the district.



### Looking Ahead

For Falmouth Public Schools, district accreditation was more than a compliance exercise. It served as a catalyst for deeper reflection, stronger alignment, and a clearer shared purpose.

By grounding the process in collaboration and focusing on the experiences of students across the entire K-12 continuum, the district strengthened both its educational program and its sense of community

