

National Lutheran School Accreditation

Virtual Validation Visit

Process Manual

Revised September 2021



MISSION, PURPOSE, VISION and VALUES

Mission

NLSA encourages and recognizes schools that provide quality, Christian education and engage in continuous improvement.

Purpose

- Help all Lutheran schools improve.
- Help all Lutheran schools evaluate themselves based on their unique purposes.
- Assure a level of quality for accredited Lutheran schools based on national standards.
- Give appropriate recognition to those schools that complete the process successfully.

Vision

The Great Commission of our Lord Jesus Christ, “Go and make disciples,” includes ministering to children. He also encourages, “Let the children come to Me.” Lutheran schools serve children and families by providing God-pleasing, quality learning experiences, adult-child relationships and nurturing environments.

National Lutheran School Accreditation (NLSA) provides a service that empowers schools to develop and improve high-quality, Christ-centered education through a voluntary process.

Values

- Lutheran Culture
- Educational Excellence
- Continuing Improvement
- Innovation

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INTRODUCTION OF THE VIRTUAL VALIDATION VISIT PROCESS

National Lutheran School Accreditation requires a site visit conducted by a team of qualified outside observers. The purpose of the Validation Team Visit is to verify that the Self-Study Report reflects the actual practices in place at the school. Through a review of documentation, interviews and observations, Validation Team members evaluate the school's compliance with the required Standards and makes recommendations for further improvement.

The school leader, Consultant and district officials work collaboratively to ensure that the Validation Team members are selected following NLSA procedures. Advanced communication and planning with district officials and the Team Captain is essential for the Validation Team to complete its work efficiently and effectively.

In a Virtual Validation Team visit, the role of everyone involved is amplified and must be more focused as all work will be done remotely and face-to-face interaction will not take place. As such, it is essential that each member of the accreditation process is aware of their specific role in the virtual process and how it may differ from that of an on-site Validation Team Visit. **Prior to serving in any role, each of the following should review the respective NLSA manual (where applicable) for a more detailed description of their role that is non-virtual specific.**

NLSA Virtual Validation Team Visit Policy

For schools with demonstrable extenuating circumstances, the National Lutheran School Accreditation (NLSA) leadership has developed the following policy and procedures for a virtual site visit to fulfil the requirements of an NLSA Validation Team Visit. All questions regarding this policy and its procedures are to be addressed to the NLSA Director, Dr. Rebecca Schmidt (Rebecca.Schmidt@lcms.org).

A Lutheran school is eligible to apply for a Virtual Validation Team Visit only if **all** of the following conditions are met:

1. The school is currently Accredited in Good Standing.
2. The school has been Accredited for more than one, 5-year Accreditation cycle (no first-renewal schools).
3. The school must use NLSA Options A, B, C, or D (see *NLSA Routes to Accreditation*) and not an accreditation process from another accrediting agency (COGNIA, WASC, Middle States or CCLE).

If a school is **unable** to meet all of the required conditions, the school must apply for an NLSA extension until they are able to hold an on-site Validation Team Visit. If **eligible** to apply for a Virtual Validation Team Visit, the school must comply with the following requirements:

1. The school must complete and submit to their district office the *NLSA Application for Virtual Validation Team Visit* no later than thirty (30) days prior to the scheduled Virtual Validation Team Visit date.
2. The school must complete the regular requirements as established for an on-site Validation Team Visit (Self-Study Report, collection of evidence and documentation, solicitation of surveys, and preliminary School Action Plan) no later than thirty (30) days prior to the scheduled Virtual Validation Team Visit. Written verification that all accreditation materials have been reviewed and are complete is required of the NLSA consultant and communicated to the district education executive and/or NLSA Commissioner and the Validation Team Captain.

The Role of the School Administrator

A meaningful and successful accreditation process requires exceptional leadership. However, the school accreditation process is not required to be administered by the school administrator. A highly effective teacher can coordinate the leadership of the process. With the support of the school leader, the teacher leader can facilitate the details of the accreditation process.

If an administrator has chosen to host a Virtual Validation Team Visit, there is an added element of coordination and planning that rests on the administrator. Additional focus must be given to establishing the system of digitally sharing documents, setting up virtual meetings and walkthroughs, and working with the Team Captain to develop an effective Virtual Visit schedule given the time and location restraints. Communication and collaboration will be even more essential throughout the process. Administrators should familiarize themselves with the requisite *NLSA Administrator Manual* (EBA or EC) as each contains a more detailed explanation of the role and responsibilities of the school administrator.

The Role of the School Consultant

From the time of application, the Consultant informs, assists, directs, encourages and oversees the applicant school. The mission of a Consultant is to assist school leadership to ensure that the accreditation process is successful. They are an advocate of the school and represent NLSA to ensure that the school, with integrity, completes the process. Within this role it is the consultant's responsibility to determine the school's readiness for a Validation Team Visit and later work with the Team Captain who will lead the visit.

In a Virtual Validation Team Visit, the Consultant will most likely be more involved in the process as they work with both the school administrator to ensure that the school is fully prepared for a Virtual Visit as well as the Virtual Team Captain to establish a schedule and timeline that best fits the needs of the Virtual Visit process. As such, Consultants should be prepared for additional responsibilities in the weeks and months leading up to a Virtual Visit.

The Role of the Virtual Team Captain

The Team Captain is a critical stakeholder in the National Lutheran School Accreditation process. The Team Captain's work at the school must also be aligned with the purpose of NLSA. In collaboration with the members of the Validation Team, the Team Captain works to verify that the school's Self-Study is accurate and truthful. Additionally, the Team Captain ensures that school's action goals are realistic, measurable and attainable.

In the case of a Virtual Validation Team Visit, the Captain will be even more involved prior to the Virtual Visit as they are essential in ensuring that Team Members are prepared for their work and reviewing all of the school documentation in advance of the actual Visit. Additionally, Virtual Team Captains will be involved with working with the school to make sure that all documentation is available digitally and that all is in order to provide the best possible review of the school. As such, Virtual Team Captains should be prepared for additional responsibilities in the weeks and months leading up to a Virtual Visit as well as dedicating the entirety of the scheduled Virtual Visit solely to the focus of the review.

The Role of a Virtual Team Member

The work of the Validation Team is intensive, perhaps even more so during a Virtual Visit. During the visit, the Validation Team is called upon to determine a comprehensive view of the school to evaluate and prepare the Validation Team Report.

Virtual Validation Team Members are responsible for reviewing all school evidence and documentation *prior* to the scheduled two-day Virtual Validation Team Visit to verify that the Self-Study Report reflects the actual practices in place at the school. As a part of the work, Virtual Validation Team Members will virtually "visit" classrooms (where applicable) to validate student engagement in the teaching/learning environment, and through observation, assess whether Indicator ratings reported in the Self-Study Report reflect the actual practice at the school. Finally, Virtual Team Members will virtually interview and conduct focus groups with relevant school stakeholders to ensure that all questions are answered, and they have a full and complete picture of the educational practices of the school.

As such, Virtual Team Members should be prepared for additional responsibilities in the weeks leading up to a Virtual Visit, specifically regarding the review of school evidence and documentation.

SCHOOL PREPARATION FOR A VIRTUAL VALIDATION TEAM VISIT

General Preparation

In order for a school to host a successful *virtual* Validation Team Visit, there must be sufficient focus and planning given to the preparation for a Virtual Visit. A two-day Virtual Validation Team Visit must be scheduled with all Validation Team members, school and church administration, and school staff. This must include (but not be limited to) a virtual tour of the school campus, time for Validation Team members to interact with school administration and other individuals as necessary, and a virtual “room” for Team members to collaborate during the virtual Visit.

Additionally, virtual live interviews must take place with the following groups of stakeholders:

- Classroom Teachers
- Selected School Parents
- Pastor(s) (*as appropriate*)
- Governing Board (*or appropriate individuals*)
- Students (*as appropriate*)

Finally, schools should make classroom “observations” available to Team members for the review of live instruction (not required if technical or other limitations prevent such “observations”).

Virtual Team Captains will work with school administrators to establish a schedule that contains all of these elements of the Virtual Visit.

Week-by-Week Timeline

A general week-by-week timeline for the Virtual Validation Team Visit process is listed below. Please note, all steps recommended in the *NLSA Projected Timeline* documents (EBA and EC) should be followed as if the school were completing an on-site Validation Team Visit. Consult with your assigned consultant regarding specific deadlines before proceeding with the Virtual Visit process.

Eight Weeks Prior to Virtual Visit

- Consult with assigned NLSA Consultant regarding Virtual Validation Team Visit options
- Submit an *NLSA Virtual Validation Team Visit Application Form*
- Ensure that a current National Lutheran School Accreditation Application Form is on file in the NLSA National Office

Five to Seven Weeks Prior to Virtual Visit

- Establish, organize and refine online document repository (See “Sharing Documentation” below)

- Ensure that all documents are complete and ready for distribution to Validation Team members

Four Weeks Prior to Virtual Visit

- Digitally Share All Necessary Self-Study Materials to Virtual Validation Team Members and school Consultant (no less than one month in advance of scheduled Validation Team visit)

Three Weeks Prior to Virtual Visit

- Meet with Virtual Validation Team Captain to establish Virtual Visit schedule
- Communicate with relevant stakeholders regarding virtual interviews and focus groups

Two Weeks Prior to Virtual Visit

- Send reminders regarding shared documentation and virtual meeting schedules

One Week Prior to Virtual Visit

- Ensure that all technology needs are in working order and conduct a “dry run” of meetings and walkthroughs
- Meet with Virtual Team Captain regarding documentation and any questions

Week of Virtual Visit

- Pray for your Virtual Validation Team Members
- Ensure that All Schedules Have Been Shared and Meetings are Established
- Host Your Visit!

Sharing of Documentation

The following documents must be made available in a digital format or repository (Google Drive, Dropbox, etc.) for all members of the Validation Team to review no later than fourteen (14) days prior to the scheduled virtual Visit (30 days is recommended):

- Self-Study Report
- **All** evidence and required documentation as referenced in the Self-Study Report
- Stakeholder survey results (teacher, parents, students, etc.)
- Preliminary School Action Plan

Schools are responsible for establishing a digital repository that works best for their specific circumstances and the needs of the Virtual Validation Team. This may be any system that provides access to digital materials on any device that a Team Member may attempt to use (PC, Mac, Tablet, Phone, etc.). As such, the following systems are recommended by NLSA for schools to use as a digital repository:

- Google Drive
- Dropbox
- Microsoft Teams/SharePoint

This list should only serve as a recommendation and schools are able to use other systems as necessary. However, a digital repository is not an email exchange of documents, a flash drive mailed to Team Members, or a mailing of a hard-copy binder or other paper documentation. If a school is unable to establish an effective digital repository as described above, they should forgo a Virtual Validation Team Visit until an on-site visit is available as the digital repository of evidence and documentation is the cornerstone of a Virtual Visit.

Technology Preparation and Considerations

As indicated previously in the “Sharing of Documentation” section, schools are responsible for establishing the technology that is used to disseminate the evidence and documentation required by the NLSA Self-Study and Validation Team review processes. Also, schools should be prepared to host the video communication system that the Team Members will be using to collaborate with during their time together and will also use for their interviews and focus groups. Schools must be willing to invest in quality services (and requisite network and infrastructure needs) to fulfil the needs of a Virtual Visit and will more than likely incur additional costs as a result. NLSA recommends the following services for video collaboration:

- Zoom
- Google Meet
- Microsoft Teams

VALIDATION TEAM PREPARATION FOR A VIRTUAL TEAM VISIT

Pre-Visit Meetings and Preparation

Virtual Validation Team Visits will require additional preparation by Team Members in advance of the scheduled Visit dates.

Team Captains will schedule Team Member Orientation video meeting(s) in the weeks prior to the Virtual Visit to make introductions and familiarize the group with the Virtual process. (*Reference Addendum #4 in Team Captain Manual*)

Additional meetings should be scheduled prior to the Visit after the school has shared their evidence and documentation in order for Team Members to collaborate with each other and work through what the school has submitted. As each Virtual Validation Team member is assigned the responsibility of reviewing, rating and responding in writing to at least one of the Standard areas, Team members are instructed to read the entire Self-Study Report with a focus in their assigned Standard area(s). They are to assign a whole-number rating that reflects their initial impression of the school's compliance in the Standard. This initial rating serves as a starting point for the work of the Team. Additionally, team members are expected to come to the Virtual Validation Team Visit prepared to share reviews of the Standard areas.

Review of School Documentation

As is the case with an on-site Validation Team Visit, Virtual Validation Team Members are responsible for reviewing the accreditation documentation supplied by the school in order to validate a school's compliance with the established NLSA standards. Team Members should be prepared to spend considerable time reviewing what the school submits in order to verify that the Self-Study Report reflects the actual practices in place at the school. As schools will be supplying these documents in advance of the visit in digital format, and as there will be limited time during the two-day Virtual Visit, it is essential that the Virtual Validation Team reviews all documentation thoroughly to determine if there are any missing documents or if anything is needed for clarification.

The following documentation will be supplied by the school through a digital repository for Virtual Validation Team Members to access:

- Self-Study Report
- All evidence and required documentation as referenced in the Self-Study Report
- Stakeholder survey results (teacher, parents, students, etc.)
- Preliminary School Action Plan

VIRTUAL VALIDATION TEAM VISIT PROCESS

Visit Timeline and Schedules

A two-day Virtual Validation Team Visit must be scheduled with all Validation Team members, school and church administration, and school staff. This must include (but not be limited to) a virtual tour of the school campus, time for Validation Team members to interact with school administration and other individuals as necessary, and a virtual “room” for Team members to collaborate during the virtual Visit.

Virtual live interviews must take place with the following groups of stakeholders:

- Classroom Teachers
- Selected School Parents
- Pastor(s) (*as appropriate*)
- Governing Board (*or appropriate individuals*)
- Students (*as appropriate*)

Schools should make classroom “observation” available to Team members for the review of live instruction (not required if technical or other limitations prevent such “observations”). This will allow for Virtual Validation Team Members to gain a complete understanding of the school and effectively validate the information contained in the evidence and School Self-Study.

The following is an example of a schedule for a Virtual Validation Team Visit that should only be used as a template and adjusted accordingly:

Day One

8:00 – 9:00am	Team Welcome and Review of Virtual Visit Schedule
9:00 – 10:00am	School Orientation with Administrator and Virtual School Walkthrough
10:00 – 12:00pm	Initial Team Rating of Standards
1:00 – 3:00pm	Classroom Observations and Virtual Live Interviews
3:00 – 3:30pm	After School Meeting with Faculty
4:00 – 6:00pm	Validation Team Meeting
7:30 – 8:30pm	Board or Governing Authority Members and Steering Committee Focus Group

Day Two

8:00 – 12:00pm	Final Interviews, Classroom Observations and Report Writing
1:00 – 3:00pm	Team Meeting and Validation Team Report Completion
3:00 – 4:00pm	School Administrator and Team Captain Meeting
4:00 – 6:00pm	Team Meeting (Verify Concerns and Legitimacy of Recommendations)
7:00 – 8:00pm	Virtual Exit Report with Faculty, Staff and Invited Guests

Virtual Interviews and Focus Groups

Schools who have elected to host a Virtual Validation Team Visit will need to establish virtual interviews and focus group meetings in order to give Team Members a holistic view of the school. As such, virtual live interviews must take place with the following groups of stakeholders:

- Classroom Teachers
- Selected School Parents
- Pastor(s) (*as appropriate*)
- Governing Board (*or appropriate individuals*)
- Students (*as appropriate*)

In order to effectively facilitate these virtual meetings NLSA recommends the following services for video collaboration:

- Zoom
- Google Meet
- Microsoft Teams

Virtual School Walkthrough

As the Virtual Validation Team members will not be able to physically walk through the halls of the school and observe classrooms, students and teachers, the school must provide an opportunity for a virtual “walkthrough” of the school. This can be done “live” or recorded depending on the technology considerations of the school. However, it is recommended that this be done live if possible and during the school day so that Team Members are able to ask questions of the “tour guide” (school administrator is preferred) and also see the school as if it were an on-site visit.

Additionally, schools may grant Virtual Validation Team Members access to classrooms through the use of video observation technology (Zoom, Swivl, Facebook Live, Google Meet, etc.) so that they are able to “observe” classrooms. This should be done with strict consideration given to student security and privacy and is recommended but not required of a Virtual Validation Team Visit.

Exit Team Report

The Validation Team will complete the Validation Team Report electronically and submit it to the school as per the normal NLSA requirements. A live virtual exit report session must be scheduled and made available to the school at the completion of the work of the Validation Team.

The final task of the Virtual Validation Team is to provide a brief oral exit report (virtual presentation) for the faculty and other individuals invited by the school. The Virtual Team Captain leads the report, and often, the team members participate in the presentation. Outstanding strengths of the school are highlighted as the report is general in nature and only serves to outline the forthcoming written report. The Virtual Team Captain shares the report summary. Should there be major deficiencies (conditions that may have a severe effect on the quality of education, the ministry of the school and/or endanger the health and safety of the school population), the Virtual Team Captain will share these deficiencies. The only specific recommendation given during the exit report is the overall recommendation for or against accreditation.

A one-page report summary will be left with the school at the conclusion of the Exit Report. If there are questions related to specific recommendations or concerns, these may be answered in the fully-documented report that the school will receive within two weeks. The Virtual Validation Team Exit Report concludes the work of the Team Members.

Provisional Accreditation Recommendation

Once a school has hosted a Virtual Validation Team Visit, they will be automatically recommended for Provisional Accreditation until the mandatory on-site follow-up visit is completed (See “Mandatory On-Site Follow-Up Visit” below). If the on-site review is not completed prior to the next regularly-scheduled National Accreditation Commission (NAC) meeting, the school will be recommended for the accreditation status of Provisional Accreditation pending the completion of the on-site review. Once the on-site review is completed, the responsible District Accreditation Commission will report their findings in written format to the National Accreditation Commission (NAC) for review and subsequent recommendation for Accreditation in Good Standing (if no other Provisional Recommendations were made by the Virtual Validation Team or on-site review) at the next regularly scheduled NAC meeting for the remainder of the school’s accreditation cycle.

AFTER THE VIRTUAL VALIDATION TEAM VISIT

Mandatory On-Site Follow-Up Visit

Once the Virtual Validation Team Visit process is complete, the school has one calendar year (365 days) to complete the following:

1. A one-day, on-site review consisting of:
 - a. Virtual Validation Team Captain
 - b. **One** of the following two individuals:
 - i. District Education Executive
 - ii. NLSA District Commissioner
2. Submission of an updated final School Action Plan to the District Accreditation Commission containing the recommendations of both the Virtual Validation Team Visit and the on-site review.

If the on-site review is not completed prior to the next regularly-scheduled National Accreditation Commission (NAC) meeting, the school will be recommended for the accreditation status of Provisional Accreditation pending the completion of the on-site review.

Failure to complete these steps within one calendar year will result in the invalidation of the Virtual Validation Team Visit and the Provisional Accreditation will be revoked at the next regularly-scheduled National Accreditation Commission (NAC) meeting.

The Role of the District

Upon completion of the on-site review, the responsible District Accreditation Commission will report their findings in written format to the National Accreditation Commission (NAC) for review and subsequent recommendation for Accreditation in Good Standing (if no other Provisional Recommendations were made by the Virtual Validation Team or on-site review) at the next regularly scheduled NAC meeting for the remainder of the school's accreditation cycle.