

What Happens When a School District Becomes Unaccredited?

Frequently Asked Questions

Under state law (Section 161.092), the State Board of Education has the authority to classify (accredit) public school districts. Under the standards of the Missouri School Improvement Program (MSIP), a school district may be given one of three ratings: Accredited, Provisionally Accredited, or Unaccredited. State law defines the consequences for a school district that becomes unaccredited. (A “provisionally accredited” district is still considered to be “accredited” and is not subject to penalty.)

May students transfer from an unaccredited district to another district?*

Yes, if another district will accept them. According to state law (Section 167.131), students in an unaccredited school district are eligible to transfer to an accredited district in the same or an adjoining county. Accredited districts, however, may accept or reject transfer students from an unaccredited district.

An unaccredited school district must pay the tuition and transportation costs for any student who elects to transfer to an accredited district. The unaccredited district may designate a single district to which students will be transported at its expense. Students who transfer to other districts would be responsible for their own transportation, but the unaccredited district would still be obligated to pay their tuition.

The student-transfer provision is one of the most serious consequences for a district that becomes unaccredited. If a significant number of students transfer to other districts, the cost of tuition and transportation could be devastating for the unaccredited district.

***Note:** A July 2010 Missouri Supreme Court Ruling may impact this interpretation of state law. See: Jane Turner, et.al. v. School District of Clayton, et.al. (SC 90236). A parent or guardian seeking to enroll a student under this statute should contact the school district where they will be seeking enrollment to determine how the district is implementing this ruling.

Does unaccredited status affect students’ diplomas?

This issue is not addressed by the law. Students who graduate from an unaccredited school district still receive diplomas. Presumably, they will have completed the coursework required by the state and met the local district’s requirements for graduation. As far as state education officials are concerned, the diploma of a student who graduates from an unaccredited school district is valid.

What about admission to college?

This issue is not addressed by the law. The unaccredited status of a school district should not have a negative impact on a student’s admission to a college or university. Higher education institutions typically consider multiple sources of information (transcript, ACT/SAT score, portfolio, recommendations, etc.) when determining whether to admit a student or award financial aid. Therefore, the fact that a student graduates from an unaccredited district should not disqualify the student from consideration.

However, higher education institutions set their own policies and criteria for admissions and awarding financial aid. Students who graduate from an unaccredited school district might face an obstacle when applying to some institutions.

What about eligibility for scholarships?

This issue is not addressed by the law. Students who graduate from an unaccredited school district should still be eligible for any scholarship for which they would otherwise qualify. An unaccredited rating reflects the performance of a school district, not the qualifications or accomplishments of any individual student. As far as state education officials are concerned, the unaccredited status of the school district should not disqualify a student from consideration for any scholarship or other financial aid.

What about eligibility for extracurricular activities?

This issue is not addressed by the law. The State Board of Education does not establish policies or rules regarding students' academic eligibility to participate in interscholastic sports and other extracurricular activities. Eligibility is governed by the rules of the Missouri State High School Activities Association (MSHSAA). Current MSHSAA bylaws allow students from an unaccredited school district to transfer one time to an accredited school district (with the unaccredited district paying tuition) and remain eligible for activities. When accreditation is regained, such students may transfer back to the home district and remain eligible.

When can the state “take over” an unaccredited school district?

State law defines several circumstances under which the State Board of Education may intervene in the governance and operation of a local school district. In most cases, a district must be unaccredited for two full school years before the state would have authority to intervene. This is what occurred, for the first time, in the Wellston School District in 2005. The law is Section 162.081, RSMo.

The same section of law authorizes the State Board of Education to intervene if a school district becomes bankrupt or is unable to function because of financial problems. This has occurred in the past with some small Missouri school districts. In cases such as this, accreditation status may or may not be a factor. State officials may intervene, immediately if necessary, to maintain school operations, assign students to other school districts, and protect the school district's assets.

Another section of law (Section 162.1100) specifically authorizes the State Board of Education to intervene in the governance of the St. Louis Public Schools, through the creation of a “transitional school district.” If the St. Louis school district becomes unaccredited, the law authorizes the creation of a three-person governing board to replace the local board of education. Under this law, there is not a two-year “grace period” for the school district to regain accreditation, as authorized in Section 162.081.