# AdvancED

# External Review

# Muscogee County School District

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# Introduction to the External Review Process

Accreditation is a voluntary method of quality assurance developed more than 100 years ago by American universities and secondary schools, and designed primarily to distinguish schools adhering to a set of educational standards. Today the accreditation process is used at all levels of education, and is recognized for its ability to effectively drive student performance and continuous improvement in education.

Institutions seeking to gain or retain accreditation must meet AdvancED standards specified for their institution, demonstrate high levels of or improvement of student performance if applicable, and provide evidence of stakeholder satisfaction with the operation of the institution. The accreditation standards focus on conditions and processes within a system that impact student performance and organizational effectiveness. The power of AdvancED Performance Accreditation lies in the connections and linkages between and among the standards, student performance, and stakeholder feedback.

Institutions participate in an External Review by a team of highly qualified evaluators who examine the institution's adherence and commitment to the accreditation criteria. The External Review is the hallmark of AdvancED Performance Accreditation as it energizes and equips the leadership and stakeholders of an institution to achieve higher levels of performance and address those areas that may be hindering efforts to reach desired performance levels. External Review is a rigorous process that includes examination of evidence and relevant data, interviews with stakeholders, and observations of instruction, learning, and operations.

The AdvancED External Review Team used the AdvancED Accreditation Standards and Indicators and related criteria to guide its evaluation, looking not only for adherence to standards, but also for how the institution functioned as a whole and embodied the practices and characteristics of quality.

Using the evidence at their disposal, the AdvancED External Review Team arrived at a set of findings contained in this report. The report is presented in three sections: Findings, Conclusion, and Addenda.

# Part I: Findings

The Findings section presents the External Review Team's evaluation of the AdvancED Accreditation Standards and Indicators. It also includes Powerful Practices and Opportunities for Improvement identified by the External Review Team, observations of the Learning Environment, as well as Required Actions.

## Accreditation Standards and Indicators

Standards help to delineate what matters. They provide a common language through which an education community can engage in conversations about educational improvement, system effectiveness, and achievement. They serve as a foundation for planning and implementing improvement strategies and activities and for measuring success. AdvancED's Standards for Quality were developed by a committee comprised of effective educators and leaders from the fields of practice, research, and policy who applied professional wisdom, deep knowledge of effective practice, and the best available research to craft a set of robust standards that ensure excellence and continuous improvement. The standards were reviewed by internationally recognized experts in testing and measurement, teacher quality, and education research.

This section contains an evaluation of each of AdvancED's Accreditation Standards and Indicators, conclusions concerning Powerful Practices and Opportunities for Improvement related to each of the standards, and a description of the evidence examined by the External Review Team. Indicators are evaluated and rated individually by the External Review Team using a four-level performance rubric. The Standard Performance Level is the average of indicator scores for the standard.

### Standard 1: Purpose and Direction
Purpose and direction are critical to successful institutions. A study conducted in 2010 by the London-based Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) reported that "in addition to improving performance, the research indicates that having a sense of shared purpose also improves employee engagement" and that "...lack of understanding around purpose can lead to demotivation and emotional detachment, which in turn lead to a disengaged and dissatisfied workforce."

AdvancED has found through its own evaluation of best practices in 30,000 institutions around the world that a successful institution commits to a shared purpose and direction and establishes expectations for student learning aligned with the institutions' vision that is supported by internal and external stakeholders.  These expectations serve as the focus for assessing student performance and overall institution effectiveness.

| Standard | Standard Performance Level |
|---|---|
| | |

| The system maintains and communicates at all levels of the organization a purpose and direction for continuous improvement that commit to high expectations for learning as well as shared values and beliefs about teaching and learning. | 2.5 |
|---|---|

| Indicator | | Source of Evidence | Performance Level |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1.1 | The system engages in a systematic, inclusive, and comprehensive process to review, revise, and communicate a system-wide purpose for student success. | •District purpose statements - past and present<br><br>•Examples of communications to stakeholders about the district's purpose (i.e. website, newsletters, annual report, student handbook)<br><br>•Governing body policies, procedures, and practices<br><br>•Minutes from meetings related to development of the district's purpose and direction<br><br>•Documentation or description of the process for creating the district's purpose including the role of stakeholders<br><br>•Copy of strategic plan referencing the district purpose and direction and its effectiveness | 2 |
| 1.2 | The system ensures that each school engages in a systematic, inclusive, and comprehensive process to review, revise, and communicate a school purpose for student success. | •Examples of school purpose statements if different from the district purpose statement<br><br>•Examples of written stakeholder communications or marketing materials that portray the school purpose and direction | 3 |
| 1.3 | The school leadership and staff at all levels of the system commit to a culture that is based on shared values and beliefs about teaching and learning and supports challenging, equitable educational programs and learning experiences for all students that include achievement of learning, thinking, and life skills. | •Examples of schools' continuous improvement plans<br><br>•The district strategic plan<br><br>•Survey results<br><br>•Statements of shared values and beliefs about teaching and learning<br><br>•Statements or documents about ethical and professional practices | 3 |
| 1.4 | Leadership at all levels of the system implement a continuous improvement process that provides clear direction for improving conditions that support student learning. | •The district strategic plan<br><br>•Survey results<br><br>•The district data profile<br><br>•Agenda, minutes from continuous improvement planning meetings<br><br>•Examples of schools continuous improvement plans | 2 |

| *Powerful Practices* | *Indicator* |
|---|---|

1. The recently developed school district values and beliefs outlined in the Strategic Plan provide a baseline to guide district leadership.  **1.3**

   The Strategic Plan was adopted by the board this fall. This plan is a comprehensive document that contains agreed upon district beliefs and values. Both district leadership and the board discuss these statements as being critical to the implementation of the Strategic Plan.  District leadership shared their ideas about how beliefs and values will be adhered to as action plans are developed. Shared beliefs and values are essential to building a collaborative learning community.

| *Opportunities for Improvement* | *Indicator* |
|---|---|

1. Formalize and abide by a comprehensive process to ensure systematic review and revision of the district's purpose and direction by all stakeholder groups.  **1.1**

   The district purpose was created in 2007; the purpose clearly focuses on student success.  Evidence indicates there is not a district process that ensures the mission and vision are systematically reviewed by all stakeholder groups. Interviews with stakeholders confirm communication of the mission and vision is inconsistent and understanding of the district purpose varies from group to group. A shared purpose and direction is critical to a collaborative learning community that works to increase student success.

### *Standard 2: Governance and Leadership*

Governance and leadership are key factors in raising institutional quality. Leaders, both local administrators and governing boards/authorities, are responsible for ensuring all learners achieve while also managing many other facets of an institution. Institutions that function effectively do so without tension between the governing board/authority, administrators, and educators and have established relationships of mutual respect and a shared vision (Feuerstein & Opfer, 1998). In a meta-analysis of school leadership research, Leithwood & Sun (2012) found that leaders (school and governing boards/authority) can significantly "influence school conditions through their achievement of a shared vision and agreed-on goals for the organization, their high expectations and support of organizational members, and practices that strengthen school culture and foster collaboration within the organization." With the increasing demands of accountability placed on institutional leaders, leaders who empower others need considerable autonomy and involve their school communities to attain school improvement goals. Leaders who engage in such practices experience a greater level of success (Fink & Brayman, 2006). Similarly, governing boards/authorities that focus on policy-making are more likely to allow school leaders the autonomy to make decisions that impact teachers and students and are less responsive to politicization than boards/authorities that respond to vocal citizens (Greene, 1992).

AdvancED has found through its own evaluation of best practices in 30,000 institutions around the world that a successful institution has leaders who are advocates for the institution's vision and improvement efforts.  The leaders provide direction and allocate resources to implement curricular and co-curricular programs that enable students to achieve expectations for their learning.  Leaders encourage collaboration and shared responsibility for school improvement among stakeholders.  The institution's

policies, procedures, and organizational conditions ensure equity of learning opportunities and support for innovation.

| Standard | | | Standard Performance Level |
|---|---|---|---|
| The system operates under governance and leadership that promote and support student performance and system effectiveness. | | | 2.0 |
| Indicator | | Source of Evidence | Performance Level |
| 2.1 | The governing body establishes policies and supports practices that ensure effective administration of the system and its schools. | •School handbooks<br><br>•District operations manuals<br><br>•Communications to stakeholder about policy revisions<br><br>•Staff handbooks<br><br>•Professional development plans<br><br>•Student handbooks | 2 |
| 2.2 | The governing body operates responsibly and functions effectively. | •List of assigned staff for compliance<br><br>•Governing authority minutes relating to training<br><br>•Proof of legal counsel<br><br>•Historical compliance data<br><br>•Governing code of ethics<br><br>•Assurances, certifications<br><br>•Governing authority training plan<br><br>•Communication plan to inform all staff on code of ethics, responsibilities, conflict of interest<br><br>•Governing authority policies on roles and responsibilities, conflict of interest | 2 |

| 2.3 | The governing body ensures that the leadership at all levels has the autonomy to meet goals for achievement and instruction and to manage day-to-day operations effectively. | •District strategic plan  •Stakeholder input and feedback  •Survey results regarding functions of the governing authority and operations of the district  •Social media  •Roles and responsibilities of school leadership  •Roles and responsibilities of district leadership  •Examples of school improvement plans  •Maintenance of consistent academic oversight, planning, and resource allocation  •Agendas and minutes of meetings  •Communications regarding governing authority actions | 2 |
| 2.4 | Leadership and staff at all levels of the system foster a culture consistent with the system's purpose and direction. | •Examples of decisions in support of the schools' continuous improvement plans  •Examples of collaboration and shared leadership  •Survey results  •Examples of decisions aligned with the district's strategic plan  •Examples of decisions aligned with the school's purpose statement  •Professional development offerings and plans | 2 |
| 2.5 | Leadership engages stakeholders effectively in support of the system's purpose and direction. | •Minutes from meetings with stakeholders  •Copies of surveys or screen shots from online surveys  •Survey responses  •Involvement of stakeholders in a school improvement plan  •Examples of stakeholder input or feedback resulting in district action  •Involvement of stakeholders in district strategic plan | 2 |

| 2.6 | Leadership and staff supervision and evaluation processes result in improved professional practice in all areas of the system and improved student success. | •Examples of professional development offerings and plans tied specifically to the results from supervision and evaluation<br><br>•Supervision and evaluation documents with criteria for improving professional practice throughout the system and student success noted<br><br>•Governing body policy on supervision and evaluation<br><br>•Representative supervision and evaluation reports<br><br>•Job specific criteria | 2 |
|---|---|---|---|

## *Opportunities for Improvement*                                                    *Indicator*

1. Establish agreed upon guidelines for operating responsibly and functioning effectively as a cohesive unit.                                                        2.2

   During External Review (ER) interviews, board members acknowledged a documented process for ensuring that board decisions and actions are in accordance with defined roles and responsibilities is not in place.  A review of board minutes and board interviews raises questions about conflicts of interest and adherence to a code of ethics.  Interviews with stakeholders also highlight this concern.  One stakeholder said; "Often board members seem more concerned about getting re-elected, than about making decisions that benefit all the students in our schools."

   Although the governing body participates in professional development, the documentation provided suggests that the focus is often on understanding legal requirements.  Some information was included to address roles and responsibilities of the governing body and its individual members; however, interviews and supporting documentation suggest that the training is not systematic.

2. Ensure a process is in place for timely decision making to make certain teaching and learning in classrooms is supported.                                          2.3

   During interviews, stakeholder groups discussed school board members' involvement in issues and decisions that affect the day-to-day operations of the district and schools. Both human and material resource allocations are sometimes delayed as schools wait for governance decisions.  Evidence compiled through artifacts and interviews indicates the governing body functions inconsistently at the governance level.  This has an adverse effect on organizational effectiveness.

## *Standard 3: Teaching and Assessing for Learning*

A high-quality and effective system has services, practices, and curriculum that ensure teacher effectiveness. Research has shown that an effective teacher is a key factor for learners to achieve to their highest potential and be prepared for a successful future. The positive influence an effective educator has

on learning is a combination of "student motivation, parental involvement" and the "quality of leadership" (Ding & Sherman, 2006). Research also suggests that quality educators must have a variety of quantifiable and intangible characteristics, which include strong communication skills, knowledge of content, and knowledge of how to teach the content. The school's curriculum and instructional program should develop learners' skills that lead them to think about the world in complex ways (Conley, 2007) and prepare them to have knowledge that extends beyond the academic areas. In order to achieve these goals, teachers must have pedagogical skills as well as content knowledge (Baumert et al, 2010). The acquisition and refinement of teachers' pedagogical skills occur most effectively through collaboration and professional development. These are a "necessary approach to improving teacher quality" (Colbert et al, 2008). According to Marks, Louis, & Printy (2002), school staff that engage in "active organizational learning also have higher achieving students in contrast to those that do not." Likewise, a study conducted by Horng, Klasik, & Loeb (2010), concluded that leadership in effective schools, "supports teachers by creating collaborative work environments." Institutional leaders have a responsibility to provide experiences, resources, and time for educators to engage in meaningful professional learning that promotes student learning and educator quality.

AdvancED has found through its own evaluation of best practices in 30,000 institutions around the world that a successful institution implements a curriculum based on clear and measurable expectations for student learning that provides opportunities for all students to acquire requisite knowledge, skills, and attitudes.  Teachers use proven instructional practices that actively engage students in the learning process.  Teachers provide opportunities for students to apply their knowledge and skills to real world situations.  Teachers give students feedback to improve their performance.

| Standard | | Standard Performance Level |
|---|---|---|
| The system's curriculum, instructional design, and assessment practices guide and ensure teacher effectiveness and student learning across all grades and courses. | | 2.5 |
| Indicator | Source of Evidence | Performance Level |

| 3.1 | The system's curriculum provides equitable and challenging learning experiences that ensure all students have sufficient opportunities to develop learning, thinking, and life skills that lead to success at the next level. | •Course or program descriptions<br><br>•Learning expectations for different courses and programs<br><br>•Student work across courses or programs<br><br>•Teacher evaluation criteria relating to prescribed instructional designs and proprietary practices<br><br>•Lesson plans<br><br>•Posted learning objectives<br><br>•Course, program, or school schedules<br><br>•Descriptions of instructional techniques<br><br>•Other: Survey results are at the school level | 2 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 3.2 | Curriculum, instruction, and assessment throughout the system are monitored and adjusted systematically in response to data from multiple assessments of student learning and an examination of professional practice. | •Lesson plans aligned to the curriculum<br><br>•Standards-based report cards<br><br>•Surveys results<br><br>•Program descriptions<br><br>•Curriculum guides<br><br>•Products – scope and sequence, curriculum maps<br><br>•Other:  Atlas is used for many of the curriculum documents and surveys are school surveys. | 2 |
| 3.3 | Teachers throughout the district engage students in their learning through instructional strategies that ensure achievement of learning expectations. | •Examples of teacher use of technology as an instructional resource<br><br>•Interdisciplinary projects<br><br>•Surveys results<br><br>•Teacher evaluation criteria relating to prescribed instructional designs and proprietary practices<br><br>•Authentic assessments<br><br>•Examples of professional development offerings and plans tied specifically to the results from supervision and evaluation<br><br>•Other: School level surveys; Teacher evaluation new | 3 |

| 3.4 | System and school leaders monitor and support the improvement of instructional practices of teachers to ensure student success. | •Recognition of teachers with regard to these practices<br><br>•Surveys results<br><br>•Peer or mentoring opportunities and interactions<br><br>•Documentation of collection of lesson plans, grade books, or other data record systems<br><br>•Curriculum maps<br><br>•Other: Teacher evaluation process new; School level survey results | 2 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 3.5 | The system operates as a collaborative learning organization through structures that support improved instruction and student learning at all levels. | •Calendar/schedule of learning community meetings<br><br>•Examples of improvements to content and instructional practice resulting from collaboration<br><br>•Common language, protocols and reporting tools<br><br>•Professional development funding to promote professional learning communities<br><br>•Agendas and minutes of collaborative learning committees<br><br>•Examples of cross curricular or program projects, interdisciplinary instruction, and classroom action research projects<br><br>•Evidence of informal conversations that reflect collaboration about student learning<br><br>•Peer coaching guidelines and procedures | 2 |
| 3.6 | Teachers implement the system's instructional process in support of student learning. | •Examples of learning expectations and standards of performance<br><br>•Examples of assessments that prompted modification in instruction | 2 |

| 3.7 | Mentoring, coaching, and induction programs support instructional improvement consistent with the system's values and beliefs about teaching and learning. | •Personnel manuals with information related to new hires including mentoring, coaching, and induction practices<br><br>•Records of meetings and informal feedback sessions<br><br>•Professional learning calendar with activities for instructional support of new staff<br><br>•Descriptions and schedules of mentoring, coaching, and induction programs with references to district and school beliefs and values about teaching and learning | 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 3.8 | The system and all of its schools engage families in meaningful ways in their children's education and keep them informed of their children's learning progress. | •List of varied activities and communications modes with families, e.g., info portal, online, newsletters, parent centers, academic nights, open house, early release days<br><br>•Parental/family/caregiver involvement plan including activities, timeframes, and evaluation process<br><br>•Examples of learning expectations and standards of performance<br><br>•Performance-based report cards<br><br>•Volunteer program with variety of options for participation | 3 |
| 3.9 | The system designs and evaluates structures in all schools whereby each student is well known by at least one adult advocate in the student's school who supports that student's educational experience. | •Other: Evidence indicates a commitment and informal structure with some formalized components; however, it varies from school to school. | 2 |
| 3.10 | Grading and reporting are based on clearly defined criteria that represent the attainment of content knowledge and skills and are consistent across grade levels and courses. | •Sample report cards for each program or grade level and for all courses and programs<br><br>•District quality control procedures including the monitoring of grading practices across all schools<br><br>•Policies, processes, and procedures on grading and reporting<br><br>•Sample communications to stakeholders about grading and reporting | 3 |

| 3.11 | All staff members participate in a continuous program of professional learning. | •Evaluation tools for professional learning<br><br>•District professional development plan involving the district and all schools<br><br>•District quality control procedures showing implementation plan for professional development for district and school staff<br><br>•Brief explanation of alignment between professional learning and identified needs | 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 3.12 | The system and its schools provide and coordinate learning support services to meet the unique learning needs of students. | •Data used to identify unique learning needs of students<br><br>•Training and professional learning related to research on unique characteristics of learning<br><br>•List of learning support services and student population served by such services<br><br>•Schedules, lesson plans, or example student learning plans showing the implementation of learning support services | 3 |

## *Powerful Practices*                                        *Indicator*

1. District level leaders have developed a design team to conduct an academic audit to improve professional practices and student success.      3.3

   District leadership indicate they are initiating an evaluation of current practices in curriculum and instruction.  This audit is in a beginning phase; however, district and school leadership stress the importance of developing a process to consistently monitor instructional practices to guarantee alignment with the district's beliefs and values.

2. Teachers involved with the new teacher induction and mentoring program emphasize the value of this program in supporting effective instruction.      3.7

   As stated in the Self-Assessment, the district engages staff in systematic mentoring, coaching, and induction programs.  System mentors serve as liaisons between building administrators and the district.  Induction teachers are paired with a lead teacher in their school to provide assistance and support.  The district reports a ninety to ninety-three percent retention rate.  In addition, the district provides training for new leaders, current leaders, and aspiring leaders.  Effective induction and mentoring is a critical support component for teaching and learning.

3.   The parent portal (Infinite Classroom) provides current information on student progress to students and parents.     3.8

The district reports they use the parent portal (Infinite Classroom) to provide information about student achievement and other information about curriculum and instruction.  Parents and students state they utilize the parent portal system on a regular basis and find it a valuable reliable information resource.  Effective communication between parents and teachers is an important element in supporting student learning.

*Opportunities for Improvement*                                                *Indicator*

1.   Create a system-wide professional development plan that supports the agreed upon district initiatives.     3.11

Evidence validates that staff members regularly participatie in professional development.  Staff report a strong appreciation for the opportunity to engage in professional development. The concern is that there is not a clearly articulated district-wide plan to focus professional development.

Teachers across the district report being overwhelmed.  School leaders express a desire for the district to focus professional development on the most important initiatives. In depth ongoing professional development on shared goals and initiatives will increase student achievement.

### Standard 4: Resources and Support Systems

Institutions, regardless of their size, need access to sufficient resources and systems of support to be able to engage in sustained and meaningful efforts that result in a continuous improvement cycle. Indeed, a study conducted by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (Pan, 2003) "demonstrated a strong relationship between resources and student success...both the level of resources and their explicit allocation seem to affect educational outcomes."

AdvancED has found through its own evaluation of best practices in 30,000 institutions around the world that a successful institution has sufficient human, material, and fiscal resources to implement a curriculum that enables students to achieve expectations for student learning, to meet special needs, and to comply with applicable regulations.  The institution employs and allocates staffs who are well qualified for their assignments.  The institution provides a safe learning environment for students and staff. The institution provides ongoing learning opportunities for all staff to improve their effectiveness.  The institution ensures compliance with applicable governmental regulations.

| Standard | Standard Performance Level |
|---|---|
| The system has resources and provides services in all schools that support its purpose and direction to ensure success for all students. | 2.38 |
| Indicator | | Source of Evidence | Performance Level |

| 4.1 | The system engages in a systematic process to recruit, employ, and retain a sufficient number of qualified professional and support staff to fulfill their roles and responsibilities and support the purpose and direction of the system, individual schools, and educational programs. | •Assessments of staffing needs<br><br>•School budgets or financial plans for last three years<br><br>•Survey results<br><br>•Documentation of highly qualified staff<br><br>•District budgets or financial plans for the last three years<br><br>•School survey results | 2 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 4.2 | Instructional time, material resources, and fiscal resources are sufficient to support the purpose and direction of the system, individual schools, educational programs, and system operations. | •Examples of school schedules<br><br>•District strategic plan showing resources support for district<br><br>•Alignment of district budget with district purpose and direction<br><br>•Examples of school calendars<br><br>•Alignment of school budgets with school purpose and direction | 3 |
| 4.3 | The system maintains facilities, services, and equipment to provide a safe, clean, and healthy environment for all students and staff. | •Example school records of depreciation of equipment<br><br>•School safety committee responsibilities, meeting schedules, and minutes<br><br>•Policies, handbooks on district and school facilities and learning environments<br><br>•Example systems for school maintenance requests | 2 |
| 4.4 | The system demonstrates strategic resource management that includes long-range planning in support of the purpose and direction of the system. | •District strategic plan showing the areas of budget, facilities, quality control, and other strategic systems<br><br>•Survey results<br><br>•Policies, handbooks on district and school facilities and learning environments<br><br>•Evaluation results of the effectiveness of the district strategic plan or indicators of changes resulting in the evaluation of the effectiveness of the strategic plan | 2 |

| 4.5 | The system provides, coordinates, and evaluates the effectiveness of information resources and related personnel to support educational programs throughout the system. | •Evaluation procedures and results of education resources<br><br>•Data on media and information resources available to students and staff<br><br>•Survey results<br><br>•District education delivery model intended for school implementation including media and information resources to support the education program | 3 |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 4.6 | The system provides a technology infrastructure and equipment to support the system's teaching, learning, and operational needs. | •Brief description of technology or web-based platforms that support the education delivery model<br><br>•District quality control procedures that monitor the effectiveness of technology services at the district-level and school-level<br><br>•Assessments to inform development of district and school technology plans<br><br>•Brief description of learning management systems or data management systems that support the effective use of student assessment results, school effectiveness, and district effectiveness<br><br>•District technology plan and budget to improve technology services and infrastructure for the district-level and school-level<br><br>•Policies relative to technology use at the district-level and school-level | 3 |
| 4.7 | The system provides, coordinates, and evaluates the effectiveness of support systems to meet the physical, social, and emotional needs of the student population being served. | •Examples of improvements made to education program and delivery models based on results of program effectiveness evaluations<br><br>•Schedule of family services, e.g., parent classes, survival skills<br><br>•Social classes and services, e.g., bullying, character education<br><br>•Student assessment system for identifying student needs<br><br>•Agreements with school community agencies for student-family support<br><br>•List of support services available to students | 2 |

| 4.8 | The system provides, coordinates, and evaluates the effectiveness of services that support the counseling, assessment, referral, educational, and career planning needs of all students. | •Description of referral process<br><br>•Budget for counseling, assessment, referral, educational and career planning | 2 |
|------|------|------|------|

### *Powerful Practices*                                                    *Indicator*

1. The district recently invested in an up-to-date district-wide technology infrastructure.  One of the goals is to efficiently record student achievement data.                                                                 4.6

    The district has a three (3) year technology plan.  In interviews, both district and school personnel discuss that the recent commitment to updating the technology infrastructure is a critical element in the development of a comprehensive assessment system.  Utilization of technology tools is an important component to gathering and interpreting student assessment results.

### *Opportunities for Improvement*                                         *Indicator*

1. Develop quality control procedures for ensuring a clean and healthy environment in all schools to ensure equitable learning environments.                        4.3

    Evidence reviewed by the External Review (ER) team indicates a difference between schools in achieving this indicator. The ten schools visited by the ER team were observed to be clean, healthy learning environments for students and staff.  Several schools ranked as exceptional in this area.  However, stakeholder interviews highlight a concern that all schools in the district are not held to the same standard.  Community members and school level leadership indicate there is a wide variation in the learning environments provided for students.  The ER team found little evidence supporting in depth quality control procedures such as the monitoring of maintenance schedules for schools.  Improvement plans necessary to improve conditions were not evident.  An equitable learning environment for all schools and all students is inherent in this indicator.

2. Create written district plans, with procedures, for monitoring compliance expectations for counseling, assessment, referral, and educational and career planning.                                                                     4.8

    The system demonstrates a referral process for counseling, assessment, referral, and educational and career planning; however, the processes and procedures to evaluate the effectiveness of these support services does not appear to be systematic and systemic.  Effective support services require ongoing reliable methods for evaluating the success of these programs in meeting student needs.

## *Standard 5: Using Results for Continuous Improvement*

Systems with strong improvement processes are moving beyond anxiety about the current reality and focusing on priorities and initiatives for the future. Using results, that is, data and other information, to guide continuous improvement is key to an institution's success. A study conducted by Datnow, Park, & Wohlstetter (2007) from the Center on Educational Governance at the University of Southern California indicated that data can shed light on existing areas of strength and weakness and also guide improvement strategies in a systematic and strategic manner (Dembosky et al., 2005). The study also identified six key strategies that performance-driven systems use: (1) building a foundation for data-driven

decision making; (2) establishing a culture of data use and continuous improvement; (3) investing in an information management system; (4) selecting the right data; (5) building school capacity for data-driven decision making; and (6) analyzing and acting on data to improve performance. Other research studies, though largely without comparison groups, suggested that data-driven decision making has the potential to increase student performance (Alwin, 2002; Doyle, 2003; Lafee, 2002; McIntire, 2002).

AdvancED has found through its own evaluation of best practices in 30,000 institutions around the world that a successful institution uses a comprehensive assessment system based on clearly defined performance measures.  The system is used to assess student performance on expectations for student learning, evaluate the effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, and determine strategies to improve student performance.  The institution implements a collaborative and ongoing process for improvement that aligns the functions of the school with the expectations for student learning.  Improvement efforts are sustained, and the institution demonstrates progress in improving student performance and institution effectiveness.

| Standard | | | Standard Performance Level |
|---|---|---|---|
| The system implements a comprehensive assessment system that generates a range of data about student learning and system effectiveness and uses the results to guide continuous improvement. | | | 2.8 |
| Indicator | | Source of Evidence | Performance Level |
| 5.1 | The system establishes and maintains a clearly defined and comprehensive student assessment system. | •Brief description of technology or web-based platforms that support the education delivery model<br><br>•Evidence that assessments are reliable and bias free<br><br>•Other: Components of assessment are in place and being aligned. | 3 |
| 5.2 | Professional and support staff continuously collect, analyze and apply learning from a range of data sources, including comparison and trend data about student learning, instruction, program evaluation, and organizational conditions that support learning. | •Examples of use of data to design, implement, and evaluate continuous improvement plans and apply learning<br><br>•Survey results<br><br>•List of data sources related to district effectiveness<br><br>•Examples of data used to measure the effectiveness of the district systems that support schools and learning<br><br>•Examples of changes to the district strategic plan based on data results<br><br>•List of data sources related to student learning, instruction, program effectiveness, and conditions that support learning | 3 |

| 5.3 | Throughout the system professional and support staff are trained in the interpretation and use of data. | •Training materials specific to the evaluation, interpretation, and use of data<br><br>•Documentation of attendance and training related to data use<br><br>•Other: SALT data report | 2 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 5.4 | The school system engages in a continuous process to determine verifiable improvement in student learning, including readiness for and success at the next level. | •Examples of use of results to evaluate continuous improvement action plans<br><br>•Agendas, minutes of meetings related to analysis of data<br><br>•Evidence of student readiness for the next level<br><br>•Evidence of student growth<br><br>•Description of process for analyzing data to determine verifiable improvement in student learning | 3 |
| 5.5 | System and school leaders monitor and communicate comprehensive information about student learning, school performance, and the achievement of system and school improvement goals to stakeholders. | •Minutes of meetings regarding achievement of student learning goals<br><br>•Executive summaries of student learning reports to stakeholder groups<br><br>•Sample communications to stakeholders regarding student learning, conditions that support learning, and achievement of school improvement goals<br><br>•Examples of district marketing tools and websites that cite student achievement results or that make promises regarding student achievement | 3 |

| *Powerful Practices* | *Indicator* |
|---|---|
| 1. Schools utilize data to monitor student learning and communicate information regarding student achievement and conditions that support learning to external stakeholders through a variety of methods.<br><br>At the school level, artifacts and interviews support an increasing use of available assessment data to monitor student learning. Teachers and administrators at all levels discuss the difference this is making in classroom instruction. Parents voice support for this shift. When all stakeholders focus on increasing student success, students benefit. | 5.5 |

| *Opportunities for Improvement* | *Indicator* |
|---|---|

1. Develop a formal district-wide comprehensive assessment protocol that outlines criteria, policies, and procedures to clearly define and align the process for monitoring and administering state and local assessments.

   5.2

   Components of a comprehensive assessment process that align with a district curriculum and instruction plan are apparent. However, the team did not find district policies and procedures that structure and clarify an ongoing overarching protocol for this process. Interviews with teachers validate the need for clarifying district expectations. An aligned curriculum, instruction, and assessment district system ensures resources are allocated to improving student achievement in all schools.

2. Formalize district-wide procedures for training staff and utilizing assessment results.

   5.3

   Interviews with professional and support staff indicate that professional development does occur frequently; however, there was little evidence regarding coordinated ongoing procedures for the comprehensive and rigorous training of all staff related to interpretation and use of data. Consistent, planned staff development in the interpretation and use of student assessment data is a key component to increasing student success.

# Learning Environment

Every learner should have access to an effective learning environment in which she/he has multiple opportunities to be successful. The Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (ELEOT) measures the extent to which learners are in an environment that is equitable, supportive, and well-managed. An environment where high expectations are the norm and active learning takes place. It measures whether learners' progress is monitored and feedback is provided and the extent to which technology is leveraged for learning.

Observations of classrooms or other learning venues are conducted for a minimum of 20 minutes per observation. External review team members conduct multiple observations during the review process and provide ratings on 30 items based on a 4 point scale with 4=very evident, 3=evident, 2=somewhat evident, and 1=not observed. The following provides the aggregate average score across multiple observations for each of the 7 learning environments included in ELEOT.

**Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (ELEOT)**

| *Environments* | *Level* |
|---|---|
| Enter the Equitable Learning Environment value from the Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (ELEOT). | 2.5 |
| Enter the High Expectations Environment value from the Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (ELEOT). | 2.7 |
| Enter the Supportive Learning Environment value from the Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (ELEOT). | 2.9 |
| Enter the Active Learning Environment value from the Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (ELEOT). | 2.9 |
| Enter the Progress Monitoring and Feedback Environment value from the Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (ELEOT). | 2.5 |
| Enter the Well-Managed Learning Environment value from the Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (ELEOT). | 3.1 |
| Enter the Digital Learning Environment value from the Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (ELEOT). | 2.2 |

# Part II: Conclusion

## Summary of the External Review

In off-site and on-site review sessions, the AdvancED External Review Team examined artifacts and evidence provided by the institution. During the on-site portion of the review, the team reviewed additional artifacts, collected and analyzed data from interviews, and conducted observations.

Muscogee County Schools District in Columbus, Georgia designated a District coordinator to plan during the summer of 2012 for the AdvancED external review in October 2012.  The planning began with a conference call in June with the Lead Evaluator and several individuals in district leadership positions. There were several challenges to overcome in planning the review.  The superintendent, two board members, and several key district and school leadership positions changed over the summer.  However, a framework for the review and a draft schedule were developed.

The District Coordinator worked with schools in late summer to input school data into ASSIST.  The district Executive Summary, Self-Assessment, and Assurances were completed; however, the External Review team notes that evidence indicates these documents did not have broad stakeholder input as they were completed.  During interviews, most internal stakeholders were not aware of the AdvancED standards.

The ten member External Review (ER) team composed of five out-of-state and five in-state educators communicated and utilized the Muscogee workspace before the formal review.  The ER team shared preliminary information Sunday evening, October 21, 2012.  The team continued to review evidence from Sunday evening through Wednesday, October 24, 2012.  The exit report was presented to the board, district personnel, and external stakeholders at a formal board meeting Wednesday, October 24, 2012. This district is one of the first districts in the United States to have a review under the new AdvancED procedures.

Throughout the review, the ER Team interviewed seventy-two administrators, one hundred and twenty-two teachers, thirty-six support staff, seventy-one parents and community members, forty-two students, and nine board members for a total of three hundred and fifty-two stakeholders.

Tuesday, the ER Team visited ten of the fifty-eight district schools.  Schools were carefully preselected to provide a representative sample of district schools.  The ER team appreciated the candidness of the different stakeholder groups during interview sessions and their insight into how to improve the educational process for all students in district schools.

Using the evidence collected, the team engaged in dialogue and deliberations concerning the degree to which the institution met the AdvancED Accreditation Standards and Indicators.

The ER team notes the significant climate of uncertainty throughout the district and the consistency with which stakeholders indicate the multitude of changes and increasing responsibilities seem overwhelming to them.  The five required actions were developed collaboratively by the ER team after an in depth

review of evidence gathered by the ER team.  The required actions are interrelated and artifacts, interviews, and observations support the creation of these actions.

This is a summary of the rationale for the five required actions.  First, the absence of a systemic district shared purpose and direction is evident throughout the district.  Thus, the learning community does not have a focus to center their work.  Second, the result of limited adherence to effective research based governance and leadership practices impacts the capacity of all schools to provide effective services and instruction to all students. Third, ambiguity about a clearly articulated, implemented, and monitored district/school improvement process is a barrier to equitable, transparent utilization of district resources.  Fourth, evidence highlights difficulties with communication links among stakeholders as an additional barrier.  Streamlining procedures for communication and ensuring avenues are user friendly and two way is essential to building shared decision making and responsibility by all stakeholder groups.  Finally, focusing instruction and professional development is difficult given the number of initiatives in the district.

During the on-site review, members of the External Review Team evaluated the learning environment by observing classrooms and general operations of the institution. Using data from these observations, the team evaluated the quality of instruction and learning that took place classified around seven constructs or environments: equity, high expectations, support, engagement, progress monitoring and feedback, management, and use of technology.

The External Review (ER) Team utilized the Effective Learning Environment Observation Tool (ELEOT) to conduct twenty minute observations in classrooms in ten district schools.   The team observed the learning environment of students from eighty-two classrooms and scored the environments for seven components or environments.

The seven environments are scored utilizing a four point scale with 4=very evident, 3=evident, 2=somewhat evident, and 1=not observed.  The following scores are aggregate average scores in the eighty-two classrooms:  Equitable Learning Environment -2.5, High Expectations Environment-2.7, Supportive Learning Environment 2.9,Active Learning Environment-2.9, Progress Monitoring and Feedback Environment-2.5, Well-Managed Learning Environment-3.1, and Digital Learning Environment-2.2.

The discussion by the ER team as they shared their observations supports findings of the ER review of artifacts and stakeholder interviews.  First, school personnel are dedicated to ensuring that learning environments support effective teaching and learning.  Second, there is a notable difference between the school environments which underlines the overall concern about equity.

The ER Team appreciates the friendly hospitality and the professional attitude towards continuous improvement demonstrated by all stakeholders.  The team valued interviewing the entire board.  The superintendent and school improvement coordinator were instrumental in planning and coordinating the review.   The Team extends encouragement and support to the district's continuing school improvement process and recognizes the dedication and hard work of district and school personnel.

The ER Team has completed a comprehensive review of artifacts, interviews, and observations and will

relay those findings to AdvancED.  The five required actions are designed to support increasing student success in all district schools.  Based on findings from the review of evidence, the ER Team recommends that Muscogee County Schools District be accredited, pending further review and final action by the AdvancED Accreditation Commission.

## Required Actions

1. Establish and consistently monitor a formalized framework for becoming a school system rather than a system of schools by implementing, with fidelity, a process such as the AdvancEd standards for school improvement.

   Primary Indicator or Assurance:  1.4

   The district has many of the components of a district/school improvement framework. However, stakeholders express the need for formalizing the process, outlining how the district and school plans should align, clarifying stakeholder involvement, and agreeing on a universal format with timelines for review and evaluation.  Currently, school stakeholders indicate district guidelines seem inconsistent and sometimes unclear.

   External Review team interviews with stakeholders and a review of evidence such as board meeting records raise concerns about the implementation of effective efficient processes to ensure equitable support of student learning and achievement in all schools.  For example, school level stakeholders discuss delays in receiving resources that they need for classrooms.  They say resource allocations are dependent on the current approval processes which seem to include extensive ongoing discussions before approval.  A district/school improvement process that is systematic, systemic, sustainable, and transparent would support increased student achievement and sustainable continuous improvement in all schools.

2. Communicate a formal, written action plan that articulates criteria and procedures that are implemented by district governance and leadership to model adherence to the district purpose and direction, ensure equitable district support to increase student achievement, and improve organizational effectiveness.

   Primary Indicator or Assurance:  2.1

Evidence highlights that the effective efficient administration of the district and its schools is impacted by current practices in governance and leadership. Stakeholders at the school level indicate they are unsure about the future direction of the district. Policies exist; however, evidence indicates some policies have not been reviewed for ten years.

Stakeholders raise questions about whether these policies are being followed. For example, stakeholders at all levels voice concerns about the policy that says "policies and practices produce equitable and challenging learning experiences for all students." External Review team observations validate that implementation of this policy should be examined to ensure it is implemented systematically throughout the district and resources are allocated according to agreed upon guidelines.

There have been significant changes in key district leadership positions. Several district and school leadership positions were approved in late summer. Stakeholders report this delayed key school level decisions being made for the beginning of the school year.

An interim superintendent, who was previously a superintendent of Muscogee County Schools District, is now providing leadership until a new superintendent is selected after January 2013. Stakeholders say they are anxious and apprehensive about how the new superintendent will be selected. Board members, district leadership, and community members report district processes do not include up-to-date respected protocols that efficiently frame selection processes and provide for sufficient input before a decision is reached.

Transparent formal procedures and processes would provide a structure to be implemented with trustworthiness, consistency, and quality by all stakeholders. A shared purpose and direction along with up-to-date policies and regulations would provide a road map for practices that lead to organizational effectiveness and increased academic success for all students.

3. Embed a succinct district purpose and direction (vision and mission statement) that communicates the district values and beliefs, builds understanding for educating all students, and is implemented with fidelity.

   Primary Indicator or Assurance: 2.4

   The district recently developed and adopted a new strategic plan and clarified district beliefs and values. The district mission and vision were not updated when the strategic plan was created. During interviews and observations throughout the district, the External Review (ER) team found that stakeholders were aware that there was a district mission and vision; however, stakeholders were not familiar with the essence of the mission and vision. When asked about the current district purpose and direction, several stakeholders said, "I don't know anything about it." The ER team did not find the district mission and vision or a succinct purpose and direction posted in the central district office building or in most of the schools. An agreed upon shared purpose and direction would guide decision making and support building a collaborative learning community.

4. Conduct an analysis of current district-wide communication procedures and processes and develop a formal integrated district communication plan that is user-friendly for all stakeholder groups and provides avenues for meaningful two-way communications.

   Primary Indicator or Assurance: 2.5

Artifacts, interviews, and observations validate that the current district communication structure is often confusing and appears fragmented to both external and internal stakeholders. For example, all stakeholder groups report the district website is often not user-friendly. Parents and community members discuss the importance of developing not just school but also district avenues for their input and ideas. There was little evidence that student input is solicited at the district level. A well structured communication system would provide support for collaborative sharing of ideas and concerns among all stakeholder groups in all schools and increase organizational effectiveness.

5.   Design and implement written criteria and procedures to systematically use data to guide the adoption, implementation, and evaluation of district initiatives that include opportunities for internal stakeholder input and feedback.

Primary Indicator or Assurance:  3.2

Interviews with leadership, teachers, support personnel, parents, and community members highlight the significant number of initiatives being implemented. Parents and community members voice an opinion that teachers, "Although they are trying to do their best, they are overloaded." Leadership expresses the concern that federal, state, district, and school level initiatives/mandates sometimes seem to have a negative impact on teaching and learning in classrooms. Teachers indicate, "More gets added, but nothing ever seems to get taken away even though it is outdated." Careful attention, at the district level, to the process utilized to select, implement, and evaluate initiatives is a critical component of quality instruction and assessment.

# Part III: Addenda

## Next Steps

The institution should:

1. Review and discuss the findings from this report with all stakeholders.
2. Ensure that plans are in place to embed and sustain the strengths noted in the Powerful Practices section to maximize their impact on the institution.
3. Develop action plans to address the Required Actions made by the team. Include methods for monitoring progress toward the Required Actions.
4. Use the report to guide and strengthen the institution's efforts to improve student performance and system effectiveness.
5. Following the External Review, submit the Accreditation Progress Report detailing progress made toward addressing the Required Actions. Institutions are required to respond to all Required Actions. The Required Actions should be completed before the Accreditation Progress Report is submitted. The report will be reviewed at the state and national level to monitor and ensure that the system has implemented the necessary actions to complete the Required Actions. The accreditation status will be reviewed and acted upon based on the completion of the Required Actions and the resulting improvement.
6. Continue to meet the AdvancED accreditation standards, submit required reports, engage in continuous improvement, and document results.

## Celebrating Accreditation

Following the External Review, the Team submits the final report to AdvancED for review and for action by the AdvancED Accreditation Commission, which confers accreditation and upon the institution. Upon receiving its accreditation, the institution should share its achievement with internal and external communities.

## About AdvancED

In 2006, the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI), the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI), both founded in 1895, along with the National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE) came together to form AdvancED: one strong, unified organization dedicated to education quality. In 2011, the Northwest Accreditation Commission (founded 1917) joined NCA CASI and SACS CASI as part of AdvancED. AdvancED is the world's largest education community, representing 30,000 public and private schools and systems across the United States and in 75 countries worldwide and educating 16 million students. The Northwest Accreditation Commission joined the AdvancED network in 2011.

Today, NCA CASI, NWAC, and SACS CASI serve as accreditation divisions of AdvancED. Through AdvancED, NCA CASI, NWAC, and SACS CASI share research-based accreditation standards that cross state, regional, and national boundaries. Accompanying these standards is a unified accreditation process designed to help educational institutions continuously improve.