



External Review

Meriwether County School System

Dr. Tim Dixon, Superintendent
2100 Gaston St
P.O. Box 70
Greenville, GA 30222-2847

Dr. Joyce A Fulford, Lead Evaluator

Date: March 17, 2013 - March 20, 2013

Copyright ©2015 by Advance Education, Inc. AdvancED grants to the Institution, which is the subject of the External Review Team Report, and its designees and stakeholders a non-exclusive, perpetual, irrevocable, royalty-free license and release to reproduce, reprint and distribute this report in accordance with and as protected by the Copyright Laws of the United States of America and all foreign countries. All other rights not expressly conveyed are reserved by AdvancED.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction to the External Review Process	1
Findings	2
Accreditation Standards and Indicators	2
Learning Environment	14
Conclusion	15
Summary of the External Review	15
Required Actions	18
Addenda	21
Next Steps	21
Celebrating Accreditation	21
About AdvancED	21

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.

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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Interviews •District purpose statements - past and present •Documentation or description of the process for creating the district's purpose including the role of stakeholders •Minutes from meetings related to development of the district's purpose and direction •Accreditation Report 	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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Accreditation Report •Interviews •Superintendent's Overview 	2
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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Interviews •District Change Team (DCT) minutes 	3

External Review

Meriwether County School System

Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Interviews•Accreditation Report•Examples of schools continuous improvement plans•Superintendent's Overview, Comprehensive LEA Improvement Plan (CLIP)	3

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.			2.67
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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Interviews •Review of board policies 	3
2.2	The governing body operates responsibly and functions effectively.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Proof of legal counsel •Interviews •Governing authority policies on roles and responsibilities, conflict of interest 	3
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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Interviews •Accreditation Report 	2

External Review

Meriwether County School System

Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
2.4	Leadership and staff at all levels of the system foster a culture consistent with the system's purpose and direction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Interviews•Accreditation Report	3
2.5	Leadership engages stakeholders effectively in support of the system's purpose and direction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Interviews	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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Interviews•Representative supervision and evaluation reports	3

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.			2.25
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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Interviews •Observations •Posted learning objectives •Descriptions of instructional techniques •School Improvement Plans 	2

External Review

Meriwether County School System

Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Common assessments•Interviews•Teacher evaluation criteria relating to prescribed instructional designs and proprietary practices	2
3.3	Teachers throughout the district engage students in their learning through instructional strategies that ensure achievement of learning expectations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Teacher evaluation criteria relating to prescribed instructional designs and proprietary practices•Interviews•Accreditation Report•Observations	2
3.4	System and school leaders monitor and support the improvement of instructional practices of teachers to ensure student success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Supervision and evaluation procedures•Interviews•Observations	2
3.5	The system operates as a collaborative learning organization through structures that support improved instruction and student learning at all levels.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Agendas and minutes of collaborative learning committees•Interviews•Evidence of informal conversations that reflect collaboration about student learning	2
3.6	Teachers implement the system's instructional process in support of student learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Interviews•Samples of exemplars used to guide and inform student learning	2
3.7	Mentoring, coaching, and induction programs support instructional improvement consistent with the system's values and beliefs about teaching and learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Interviews•District Change Team minutes, Better Seeking Team minutes	2
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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•List of varied activities and communications modes with families, e.g., info portal, online, newsletters, parent centers, academic nights, open house, early release days•Interviews	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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Accreditation Report•Interviews	3

External Review

Meriwether County School System

Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Interviews•Sample report cards for each program or grade level and for all courses and programs•Policies, processes, and procedures on grading and reporting	3
3.11	All staff members participate in a continuous program of professional learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•District professional development plan involving the district and all schools•Interviews•Professional learning sign-in sheets	2
3.12	The system and its schools provide and coordinate learning support services to meet the unique learning needs of students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Interviews•Observations	2

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.			2.88
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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Accreditation Report •District budgets or financial plans for the last three years •School budgets or financial plans for last three years •Interviews •Documentation of highly qualified staff 	3
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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Interviews •Alignment of school budgets with school purpose and direction •Alignment of district budget with district 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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Interviews •Accreditation Report 	3
4.4	The system demonstrates strategic resource management that includes long-range planning in support of the purpose and direction of the system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Interviews •Accreditation Report •Observations 	2

External Review

Meriwether County School System

Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
4.5	The system provides, coordinates, and evaluates the effectiveness of information resources and related personnel to support educational programs throughout the system.	•Interviews	3
4.6	The system provides a technology infrastructure and equipment to support the system's teaching, learning, and operational needs.	•District technology plan and budget to improve technology services and infrastructure for the district-level and school-level •Observations	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.	•Interviews •Student assessment system for identifying student needs	3
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.	•Accreditation Report •Interviews •Response to Intervention pyramid, Superintendent's Overview	3

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.			2.4
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
5.1	The system establishes and maintains a clearly defined and comprehensive student assessment system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Interviews •Accreditation Report 	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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Examples of data used to measure the effectiveness of the district systems that support schools and learning •Interviews •State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS), School Improvement Plans, Data rooms at schools 	2

External Review

Meriwether County School System

Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
5.3	Throughout the system professional and support staff are trained in the interpretation and use of data.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Professional learning schedule specific to the use of data•Interviews	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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Interviews•Agendas, minutes of meetings related to analysis of data•Evidence of student growth•School Improvement Plans, College and Career Ready Performance Index K-12	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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Accreditation Report•Interviews	2

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

<i>Environments</i>	<i>Level</i>
A. Equitable Learning Environment	2.0
B. High Expectations Environment	2.200000047683716
C. Supportive Learning Environment	2.4000000953674316
D. Active Learning Environment	2.4000000953674316
E. Progress Monitoring and Feedback Environment	2.0999999046325684
F. Well-Managed Learning Environment	2.5
G. Digital Learning Environment	1.7999999523162842

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.

The External Review Team was on-site for four days. The team provided a wide range of perspectives to the district. This was the first district visit under the new standards for four of the team members. The team was well prepared for the visit having spent time studying the district self-assessment documents prior to the visit.

Meriwether County Schools' leadership and staff prepared the Accreditation Report in preparation for the visit. The district made available several documents to the team during the visit.

The district is a small rural county district located mid-way between Atlanta and Columbus, Georgia. Geographically it is one of the largest counties in Georgia, however, the population is approximately 22,000. There is no major industry in the county, with most residents working outside of the county. There are seven schools in the district. Two high schools, two middle schools, and three elementary schools serve 3,187 students in grades PK-12. The student population is 59.8% Black, 37.7% White, and 2.5% Other. The district has had a declining enrollment for several years. The district has had an overall reduction of 91 staff members with 75 of those positions being teachers. The county is rated as "consistently poor" and all students are provided free meals. The district is a Race to the Top (RT3) district, and Greenville High School received a School Improvement Grant (SIG) that has increased technology within the school.

During the visit the team interviewed four board members, 20 district and school administrators, 63 teachers, 31 support staff, 31 parents and community members and 59 students for a total of 208 stakeholders. The team visited four schools and observed in 24 classrooms completing the ELEOT tool in each.

The exit report was presented by the Lead Evaluator at an open meeting of the Board. All members of the Board were present. The Board is highly supportive of the accreditation process as evidenced by their participation in the external review visit.

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.

"Meriwether County School District is committed to do whatever it takes for all students to aim high, achieve, graduate, and succeed," is the mission statement of the district. It is visible within the central office and the schools have developed mission statements that are aligned to the district statement. It was evident during interviews that the district lives up to "whatever it takes" by providing extra opportunities for students to learn. Teachers provide flexible grouping for re-teaching of skills. The

mission statement is three years old and was developed by the District Change Team (DCT) with input from the Better Seeking Teams (BST) at the building level. The mission statement is reviewed annually by the DCT and BST. Interviews with staff, parents, and community members revealed that not all stakeholders are represented in the review or have a good understanding of the mission statement. The district has a continuous improvement process that is followed at the district level. It was not clear that this same process is consistently followed in all schools or support areas. The district will benefit greatly by developing processes for monitoring the implementation of continuous improvement efforts to ensure consistency across all levels.

The district governing body recognizes its role in governance and policy development. Several references were made in regard to following the chain of command in day-to-day operations and decision making. The board reviews policies annually. While the district has developed a Comprehensive LEA Improvement Plan (CLIP), per Georgia requirements, for academic goals, it does not have a comprehensive strategic plan that encompasses finances, facilities and operations. This type of long range planning that is communicated to all stakeholders will provide a blueprint for current and future decisions especially in the face of declining financial resources.

The district is aligning the curriculum to Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (CCGPS) as well as the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) which establishes performance standards as readiness indicators for grades K-12. Teachers have participated in training programs as was evidenced by sign-up sheets. All district and school level leaders have participated in Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) training and follow those guidelines. The district has placed a high emphasis on Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) and Learning Focused Strategies (LFS) as instructional systems providing training in these areas. However, it was not evident that these instructional systems were implemented with fidelity in all classrooms. Essential questions were posted in classrooms by content area and related standards in bulletin board format, not all classrooms visited had an essential question aligned to the day's lesson posted in a prominent position. While differentiation of instruction is discussed within the district, most classrooms that were observed had students working in groups, but doing the same task. Data rooms were in all schools visited by the team. School improvement plans (SIP) were reviewed. However, little evidence was seen as to how student data is consistently reviewed in regard to adjusting SIP strategies or actions. Teachers indicated data is used to determine flexible grouping for re-teaching purposes. Little technology was in use during classroom observations. What use that was observed was in the form of power point presentations by the teacher or use as an overhead projector. Most activities observed dealt with lower order thinking skills. The team observed the use of worksheets, teacher lectures, and little to no collaborative group work, paired learning or use of thinking maps. Teachers indicated a need for more professional learning in these areas. The district has developed two Vertical Articulation Teams, each serving a high school and corresponding feeder schools. It was clear in interviews that these teams are not operating consistently, and that there is not a mechanism in place as yet to combine their work to make sure that all schools are providing equal and equitable educational opportunities. Internal and external communications need to clearly define expectations for instruction and learning expectations. The district and schools have made a concerted effort to engage parents in the educational process for their children. However, parents indicated a need for more information on how to help their children. Parents are very appreciative of the staff and administrators for all they do to support the students. The district provides induction sessions

throughout the school year for new hires. These are most appreciated by the new teachers. However, the district should investigate a more formal structure for mentoring at the building level to provide additional support. Interviews with stakeholders indicated teachers go the extra mile to provide additional learning opportunities for students especially if struggling. The Circle 60 grading policy provides for second chances to master content and improve grades. However, this policy is not understood by all stakeholders and is not consistently implemented. Professional learning opportunities are available to teachers and administrators, though it is not evaluated for effectiveness in informing instructional practices.

The district has seen declining enrollment since 2008. They have also had reduced funding from the state creating a reduction in staffing which includes 75 teachers. The district maintains seven schools. The district struggles to maintain positions and programs to support the district purpose. That said, the district leadership and staff work very hard to keep the district instruction current and focused on meeting the needs of the students. The buildings are well maintained. The district gives the "Cleanest Campus" award each year which encourages all members of the school community to keep the buildings in good condition. There is strong community pride in the schools. With diminishing resources and budgetary cuts, it is imperative that schools receive strong support for their efforts in achieving district goals. Through interviews with staff, at district and school levels, and a review of artifacts, it was clear that there are no policies and procedures in place for defining long range strategic plans for resources that support the direction of the district. This type of plan, developed with stakeholder input, will provide the district with guidelines for making future decisions in regard to the allocation of funds and evaluate the effectiveness of current programs and actions. The district has worked to increase their technology infrastructure. However, technology is not apparent in all buildings and the use is not consistent. The district is working diligently to provide all that is necessary for instruction. Developing monitoring and evaluation processes for all areas will allow the district to identify effective programs and to implement those programs district wide.

The district has a comprehensive assessment system in place that includes summative and formative assessments. School improvement plans indicated alignment of the assessments to school improvement goals. The district relies heavily upon the State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) for this information, which is not always clearly understood by all stakeholders. The district should develop a profile of the district that is clear and includes all elements of the district so as to identify target areas of need and to track progress in improving student learning and conditions that support learning. Data rooms are evident in the schools and teachers reported using the data to develop flexible groups for instruction. It was not clear that data are used to evaluate the effectiveness of continuous improvement efforts as outlined in each SIP. The district is in the process of aligning curriculum to CCGPS. New state assessments will be forthcoming, and the district recently changed to a new benchmark assessment system. It is imperative that the district have consistent use of benchmark and common assessment data to measure progress while in the process of establishing baseline and trend data from the state summative assessments. The district has a continuous improvement process in place; it was not clear as to how consistently this process is used across the schools and support areas. Formalizing this process and including more stakeholders will provide for more consistent results and stakeholder support.

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 team observed students in 24 classrooms in two elementary schools, a middle school and a high school. Each classroom observation was 20 minutes in length. Team members were specifically looking for differentiated learning, use of essential questions, HOTS, and FLS as targeted by the district. The Well-managed Learning environment scored at 2.5. Students, in most classrooms, were on task and transitions were quick with little guidance necessary from teachers. Students knew what was expected of them. Active Learning was rated at 2.4. Again in most classrooms students were engaged in the tasks assigned to them. Students in several classrooms were collaboratively working in groups. At 2.4, the Supportive Learning environment indicated students felt safe in classrooms and several students indicated they received help when it was needed. Technology was rated at 1.8. There was little technology available in the classrooms and what was there was not used by students in the majority of the classes observed. When technology was used it was more for projecting information on what to do.

During the team's visit it was evident that the district's purpose of doing "whatever it takes is a priority." Interviews with different stakeholders indicated that teachers are willing to provide extra learning experiences for students struggling to master the curriculum. The district has worked to identify and implement an instructional system to increase student learning and success at the next level. It was clear to the team that there is both internal and external stakeholders' interest in being more involved in the decision making process and to know and understand more about the district and its efforts to improve student learning. It was evident during the review visit, that Meriwether County Schools have dedicated personnel who work diligently at providing good educational experiences to students.

The team was received warmly and was provided support for its work during the visit.

The AdvancED External Review Team recommends that Meriwether County School District be awarded accreditation for a period of five years.

Required Actions

1. Develop and implement a systemic and systematic process to review, revise, and communicate a system-wide purpose for student success that includes all stakeholder groups.

Primary Indicator(s) or Assurance(s):

1.1

Interviews with staff and parents, a review of District Change Team (DCT) minutes, and survey results, indicated not all stakeholders were represented in the review and revision process. Parents and community members were unable to address the district purpose. While these groups indicated strong support for the schools, those interviewed did not have a sense of the purpose and direction of the district. Involving all internal and external stakeholder groups in the discussion regarding purpose, direction, and shared values and beliefs builds understanding of what the district and schools are trying to accomplish and further develops support for efforts to improve student learning as well as conditions for learning.

2. Develop, implement, and evaluate a strategic and systematic process to involve both internal and external stakeholders in the decision making process.

Primary Indicator(s) or Assurance(s):

2.5

The district has a decision making process in place that uses the DCT, BST at the school level, and grade/department level discussions. Through interviews with staff, parents, and community members, it was evident not all decisions went through this process, especially those that have impact on the work of the internal stakeholders. Having a formalized, documented process that clearly defines the scope of decisions to be made through the process allows for appropriate stakeholder involvement and develops understanding and support.

3. Design and implement a systemic and systematic monitoring process to ensure the district's instructional processes, higher order thinking skills and Learning Focused Schools strategies, are effectively and consistently implemented to improve student learning.

Primary Indicator(s) or Assurance(s):

3.6

The district has invested in these two instructional processes to improve student learning. Teacher interviews and observations did not indicate that these two instructional systems are being implemented in all classrooms. A monitoring process, consistently implemented across all schools, will identify where additional support may be needed in the way of professional learning or other resources. Further discussion regarding these instructional systems will help to develop more teacher support and allow for analysis of data in regard to their effectiveness in increasing student learning.

4. Develop, implement, and evaluate a systemic long-range plan to provide, manage, and sustain resources to support the purpose and direction of the district.

Primary Indicator(s) or Assurance(s):

4.4

Through interviews with staff at district and school levels and a review of artifacts, it was not evident that clear policy and procedures are in place by which all stakeholders participate in and define a long range plan for resources supportive of the direction of the district. With diminishing resources and budgetary cuts, it is imperative that the district have a long-range plan to identify and provide resources necessary to support the schools in their efforts in achieving district and school goals.

5. Design, implement, and evaluate systemic and systematic procedures to monitor and communicate information regarding student learning, school performance, and achievement of district and school improvement goals.

Primary Indicator(s) or Assurance(s):

5.5

Data are used at the district and school level, however, through interviews with stakeholders, review of information on district website, review of district and school improvement plans, and review of DCT and BST minutes, it was not evident a monitoring process was in place as to when and how this data is used to make adjustments to improvement efforts. Continuous improvement is an on-going process that requires periodic analysis of data to determine if improvement efforts are effective in increasing student learning, school performance, program effectiveness, and achievement of district and school goals. This information needs to be communicated to stakeholders in clear, concise, understandable language so as to support improvement efforts.

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.